

“In the Embrace of Absolute Life”

A Reading of Christology and Selfhood in Michel Henry’s “Christian Trilogy”

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Abstract

Michel Henry (1922-2002) was a leading 20th century French philosopher in the school of phenomenology. The final three books of his career focus on explicitly Christian themes and texts, and these books are now known as his “Christian trilogy”. This essay focuses on this trilogy in an exposition of Henry’s Christology, his concept of the Self, and how Christology and selfhood relate to each other. The exposition of Henry’s thought on this issue is stated in the following thesis, broken into three sections: 1) God always reveals *himself as Christ* 2) who reveals the Truth of the Self, 3) this revelation being identical with salvation. Said again, 1) God’s Revelation is always God’s self-revelation in Christ, and is never separate from 2) the human condition of the Self as a Son of God, and this condition is never separate from 3) salvation. Revelation, selfhood, and salvation. This essay is largely expository but several constructive attempts are made to apply Henry’s philosophy of Christianity to key theological themes, namely atonement, pneumatology, and ecclesiology.

Introduction

Christology and Selfhood after Individualism

The particularity of Jesus Christ has long plagued me as a difficult but infinitely compelling question. In Christianity we have a particular figure, Jesus Christ, who attains universal significance through the texts of the New Testament and the ensuing tradition of practice and theological reflection carried through centuries by the Church in the power of the Holy Spirit. This universal significance is a truly authentic universality: “Through him *all things* were made.”¹ No area of life or existence remains untouched by the significance of Christ.

With the protestant Reformation and the modern philosophical “turn to the subject,” western reflection on Jesus Christ increasingly focussed on the interior and individual dimension of the believer’s personal relationship to Christ; a relationship, the theological argument goes, that must be centred on faith, not works; a faith that recognizes the deep and radical sin in a believer’s life and acknowledges that nothing but the pure sacrifice of Christ on the cross could reconcile the sinful human person with the holiness and perfection of the creator God. The introspective spiritual autobiographies of protestant theologians and pastors like John Bunyan give evidence to this strong theme in 16th century.²

The individual focus of the meaning of Jesus has largely carried through to the protestant traditions of today. However, western theologians, both catholic and protestant, have been challenging this interpretation with biblical and theological resources for understanding the political implications of Jesus Christ and the community of the church that seeks to follow him across time and space. The protestant and philosophical “turn to the subject” of modernity, they

¹ John 1:3.

² Bunyan, *Grace Abounding*.

suggest, problematically evades the forces of community, tradition, narrative and politics that are constitutive of selfhood or subjectivity. The “turn to the subject” must thus be overcome by reflection on the political and universal significance of Jesus Christ: we need to refuse the temptation to individualize and interiorize our relationship with Christ, a temptation which leaves the social and political sphere devoid of the gospel, free to be colonized by various secular or modern proposals for the shape of common life.³

There is much I sympathize with in this theological position, a position that seeks to take seriously the political implications of Christology, that acknowledges the divergent theological root of modern thought from the classical Christian tradition, and that desires to reinvest the church with a comprehensive vision for the peace of Christ based on scripture and tradition, not merely the modern subject. My sympathy for such a position, though, leaves me with a further question: who comes after the modern subject? How do we relate the meaning of Jesus Christ to the spiritual life of an individual after such rigorous theo-political critiques of the subject? Is the subject subsumed and absolutely relativized by this theo-political vision? Or is there a new way to think about the subject and spirituality that does not slip back into the individualism of a self-founded subject? And how might Christology contribute to such a discussion?

I suggest that inquiry into the meaning of Christ after the individualist turn to the subject has been overcome is an important line of philosophical and theological investigation. At the heart of the Christian tradition is a human subject, a living person: Jesus Christ. My faith, doubt, and questions swirl around this figure, as all of Christianity’s ensuing doctrines, scriptures, and practices spring from reflecting on the experience of Christ. The focal point of my Christological

³ See, for example, Douglas Harink, *Paul Among the Postliberals: Pauline Theology beyond Christendom and Modernity*.

question has to do with this post-enlightenment/modern theory of the subject. What does Christ have to do with each individual? What role does he play? Salvific? Creational? Exemplary?

Enter Michel Henry (1922-2002). Henry was an important French philosopher in the latter half of the 20th century, focussing his research within the philosophical tradition of phenomenology. Phenomenology is a philosophical approach to experience. It aims to arrive at a description of pure experience by relativizing, or “bracketing out”, second-order scientific and disciplinary approaches. Instead of these disciplinary approaches, phenomenology deals with the disclosure of the experiences *themselves*, articulating not merely the content of experience but the “how” of experience, that is, transcendental conditions for experience; not merely *phenomena* but *phenomenality*.⁴ What is meant by “pure experience” is a theme of major disagreement among phenomenologists. Henry is often described, both by himself and others, as a “radical” phenomenologist, pushing the limits of what can properly be circumscribed within the limits of pure experience.

Can the inquiry into the meaning of Christ, Christology, find a home within a philosophical approach that attempts to arrive at a description of pure experience? Wouldn't questions of God generally and Christ in particular be excluded from phenomenology? As one text summarizes this point in Edmund Husserl:

God is never immediately the object of intentional consciousness because God does not ‘appear’ as a thing in the world upon which my intentional gaze might rest, but instead appears as precisely other than the world and transcendent to it. Consequently, when I bracket out everything that is not immediately presented to intentional consciousness, God gets excluded as a transcendence that does not belong to the immediate, immanent mental process, which is exclusively the object of phenomenological focus after the reduction.⁵

⁴ This point is laid out with clarity in Simmons and Benson, *The New Phenomenology: A Philosophical Introduction*, 41.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 86-87.

Henry's radical approach to phenomenology suggests otherwise. At the end of his career, Henry wrote three books on Christianity, taking the New Testament texts as phenomenologically rich material and using these texts to explore and expand upon a major question of phenomenology: not *what* do we experience, but *how* do we experience? How do phenomena appear? How does appearance itself take place? While largely descriptive in nature, this description of the "how" of phenomena is certain not devoid of normative implications, such as what it means to be human (philosophical anthropology) and how we ought to act (ethics). In these final works, Henry creatively attempts to inscribe God/Christology into the very heart of human experience, along with such normative themes as philosophical anthropology and ethics, these being topics I will take up in detail through this study.

This is a study of Henry's Christology. His Christological formulations are the focal point of the investigation, the source of my reflection upon "subjectivity after individualism". The thesis that I will explore will be broken into three sections: 1) God always reveals *himself as Christ* 2) who reveals the Truth of the Self, 3) this revelation being identical with salvation. Said again, 1) God's Revelation is always God's self-revelation in Christ, and is never separate from 2) the human condition of the Self as a Son of God, and this condition is never separate from 3) salvation. Revelation, selfhood, and salvation. While Henry ultimately articulates the unity of these three themes, the project of thought depends on approaching them in distinction from each other even as I also pursue the articulation/performance of their unity. The task before me is to articulate an Henrian approach to this three-fold formulation.⁶

⁶ The title for this essay comes from a passage in Henry's *Incarnation*, a passage relating Christ to restoration and salvation. This phrase, "in the embrace of absolute Life," captures, I think, the unity of every aspect of his project, unifying the themes of Christology, selfhood, salvation, and ethics. Each one of these themes, and others, in Henry could be appropriately explicated by reference to this phrase: "[R]estoration is possible only if it is the Word himself who is incarnated in this flesh, which has become sinful and mortal, so that out of its destruction the Word itself emerges and with it our generation in Him, in the embrace of absolute Life." Henry, *Incarnation*, 234.

This essay will be largely expository. I am very compelled by Henry's Christological and anthropological proposals and I do at times defend him against criticisms or offer his position as a helpful alternative to what might be lacking in another. However, despite these moves, I do not claim to be offering a thorough defense of Henry's position either philosophically or theologically; my aim is rather one of understanding and exposition with an eye to discerning what may be amenable to Christian theology through Henry's Christology, as evidenced in my brief excursions into the atonement, pneumatology, and ecclesiology – all topics Henry never addresses in detail.

To my eye, it appears that Henry offers a way into my research question, a question that is scholarly, but more importantly, existential: what does Jesus Christ have to do with *me*? Who am I in relation to Christ? Henry's approach is dense, and I can claim to have done little more than scratch the surface, not least because I have focussed on his more accessible writings, thus largely excluding his most technical phenomenological work from my investigation. There is a beauty and elegance to his approach, an approach which cuts to the heart of the living individual and radically re-establishes the human condition as being a Son of God. Henry's treatment of this Sonship is highly specific and complex. Still, at a fundamental level, it is a simple yet radical claim in the face of contemporary reductionist or pessimistic accounts of the human person as determined by material processes or by an innate violence or nihilism. It is out of my Christian commitment to this vision of Sonship that I undertake the task of exploring its elucidation in the complex and profound writings of Michel Henry.

I

Michel Henry's Concept of Revelation

No account of Michel Henry's conception of Revelation or, indeed, of the contours of his thought in general, can neglect his all-important distinction between "The Truth of the World" and "The Truth of Life". The foci of the first two chapters of *I Am the Truth* neatly mirror this distinction and the rest of the book's discussion depends heavily on this initial analysis. In order to engage Henry's concept of Revelation I will perform a critical summary of these first two chapters while also drawing freely on Henry's earlier writings. This chapter will be the most exegetically sustained of the present study in order to ground and contextualize my engagement with Henry's Christology in the following two chapters. The current task is to engage in Henry's conception of Revelation, which I do by 1) summarizing his critique of the "Truth of the World", 2) approaching Revelation-in-Christ as Henry's counter proposal to this "Truth of the World, 3) connecting Henry's notion of Revelation with his earlier political and cultural critiques in order to show how Christology can now be seen as a crucial force within those critiques and, finally, 4) concluding with some brief comments on Henry and Scripture.

1.1. The Truth of the World

What is "the world," for Henry? It is important to establish from the outset that Henry, as I will show in more detail below, is making use of a *specific* vocabulary. "World", then, designates something specific, not merely any and all common uses of the term. It designates a specific mode of phenomenality, that is, not *what* appears but *how* appearance itself appears, how it is that anything in its very appearing appears at all. There is thus a specific "Revelation" which is appropriate to the phenomenality and truth of the world. The critique of "world" that

Henry launches is broad and sweeping. My summary of Henry's argument in Chapter 1 of *I Am the Truth* concerning "the truth of the world" consists of the following ten points:

- 1) In the truth of the world "what is true is what shows itself."⁷ In the world we predicate "true" of a proposition when the proposition (ultimately) "refers back to the prior truth of a state of things" (12). Anything that (a) is true (i.e. "what" is true), whether a sensible truth (such as the darkening of the sky) or an intelligible truth (such as the equality of all radii in a circle) refers back to this (b) prior self-showing (i.e. "how" it is true).
- 2) "It follows," Henry goes on to claim, "that the concept of truth is twofold, designating both [a] what shows itself and [b] the fact of self-showing" (13).⁸ There is a split between (a) *what* is true and (b) *how* it is true: "the fact of something showing itself [= b] has nothing to do with what shows itself [= a]" (13).
- 3) Because (b) the *how* of self-showing "has nothing to do" with (a) *what* shows itself, Henry argues that there is a complete *indifference* between these two dimensions of truth: "The fact of self-showing [b] is as indifferent to what shows itself [a] as is the light to what it illuminates" (13). This "fact of self-showing,

⁷ Henry, *I Am the Truth*, trans. S. Emmanuel, 12. Hereafter, page references to this work will appear in parentheses in the text. Henry is not clear here that he is speaking of "the truth of the world" as opposed to "truth in general". However, I read the *entire* first chapter of *IATT* as discussing "the truth of the world." I don't think that there is "truth in general" for Henry. From the very beginning of chapter 1 Henry discusses truth as a division between the "what" and the "how," and he clearly states in chapter 2 that "*It is only when the truth is understood as that of the world, when it makes everything seen by playing it outside itself, that the division in the concept of Truth, the difference between the truth itself and what it shows – what it makes true – is produced*" (24). Therefore, whenever Henry references such a division within truth I understand him to be referring to the "truth of the world."

⁸ The word Henry uses which is translated as "fact" is "le fait," which has resonances of meanings beyond the English word "fact," which merely suggests a proposition. "Le fait" might be more accurately translated as "act," so that this "self-showing" is not merely a "fact" but also an "act": thus, "(f)act". I will not adjust the subsequent translation, but it is important to keep such resonances in mind. See Henry, *C'est Moi la Vérité*, 22.

considered in itself and as such – that is the essence of truth” (13).⁹ While (a) different “truths” may differ from each other, they all, intelligible or sensible, share this essence of truth, that they show themselves through (b) the indifferent fact of self-showing.

- 4) This *indifferent* fact of self-showing is the “light of the world.”¹⁰ Henry writes, “The light into which things come in order to show themselves in their quality as phenomena is the light of the world. The world is not the set of things, of beings, but the horizon of light where things show themselves in their quality as phenomena. The world thus does not designate what is true but rather Truth itself” (14). “The world,” then, is a type of phenomenality; phenomena appear outside, that is, “placed before” and in front of us (“outside” consciousness), and this “outsideness... is the world as such, its truth” (15). And here, again, we encounter the division in the truth of the world between: (a) what appears (the phenomenon) and (b) how it appears (the world’s phenomenality, the “outsideness” that is the world).
- 5) In this division, there is more than a mere “indifference”; rather, the difference between (a) what is true and (b) the truth itself renders the “what is true” (a) as

⁹ It is here that there appears to be a commonality between the truth of the world and the truth of Christianity, since Henry does write that the Truth of Christianity “concerns not what shows itself but the *fact of self showing*” (23, emphasis added). However, the “world” and “Christianity” *immediately* diverge because they have different understandings of what this “self-showing essence” of truth consists of. It is a merely a nominal commonality, if even that, since Henry may have simply mistakenly used similar terminology for two descriptions of truth that he intended to keep utterly separate.

¹⁰ Interestingly, Jesus uses these words of himself in John 8: 12: “I am the light of the world”. This shows how Henry’s phenomenological appropriation of the New Testament texts are not necessarily wholly attentive to the use of the term “world” in the scriptures; his selective use of the New Testament portrays “the world” always in opposition to Christ, neglecting passages such as this one.

“forsaken,” “abandoned,” and *unsupported, unguarded, unloved, and unsaved* (16) by (b) the Truth itself – i.e. what makes (a) “what is true” (b) “true”.

- 6) The (b) World where (a) what is true shows itself is not a “thing” nor the sum of things: “the world ‘is’ not, but unceasingly intervenes as a horizon that unceasingly takes shape, but only on the condition of a power that unceasingly projects the horizon” (16). And Henry goes on: “The ‘world’s truth’ is nothing other than this: a self-production of ‘outsideness’ as the horizon of visibility in and through which every thing can become visible and thus become a ‘phenomenon’ for us” (17). Every (a) “*thing*” that shows itself is projected *against* this (b) “horizon,” and thus placed “opposite us, a phenomenon” (17). Whether that power is “nature,” as for the Greeks, or “consciousness,” as for modernity, what is consistent is that (a) what is true is (b) placed-before, outside, or shows-itself (17).
- 7) Henry makes this whole formulation of the world and its truth identical with *time*: “Time and the world are identical” (17). The horizon of outsideness *is time itself*, as phenomena appear *in* time, that is, in the “expanses of externality”, the “three temporal ‘ek-stases’” of past, present, and future which “are not fixed but slide into each other, from the future to the present and to the past, thus constituting a continuous flux that is the flow of time” (18). In the truth of the world it is only within this horizon of sliding temporal ek-stases that anything “shows itself,” becomes visible. But the fluid nature of this (b) horizon (i.e. time itself) means that (a) what is true within it is *instantly* and always withdrawn: time is always-already passing away.

- 8) Everything that is made seen, made visible, made to show itself in time is thereby rendered utterly empty, completely cast “outside itself at every instant” (18). This casting outside is not merely “a simple transfer of the thing from one place to another” (18). No, this outsideness is constitutively, consistently, and irrevocably outside; a thing cannot pass from this outsideness into presence: “this coming-into-appearance in the ‘outside-itself’ of the world signifies that it is the thing itself that finds itself cast outside itself. It is fractured, broken, cleaved in two, stripped of its own reality – in such a way that, now deprived of that reality that was its own, emptied of its flesh, it is no longer outside itself, in the world’s Image, but just its own skin, a simple image, in effect, a transparent film, a surface without thickness, a piece of naked externality offered to a gaze that slides over it without being able to penetrate into it or reach anything but empty appearance” (18).
- 9) This “coming-into-appearance as coming-into-the-world” withdraws Being from everything that shows itself, “making of this Being its contrary, a sort of naught of itself, depriving each thing of its substance in order to deliver it to us, but in the form of an appearance foreign to reality, and foremost to the reality that ought to be its own, which this coming-into-appearance can make seen only by destroying that reality” (18). Thus a thing that appears in the temporal ek-stases of time is always-already “emptied of its being, already dead,” because these sliding temporal ek-stases of time are always already the light of the “outside”, never arriving in presence: “*In time there is no present, there never has been one, and there never will be one*” (19, emphasis original).

10) The truth of the world is thus *self-undermining*. In its very manner of having truth show itself in the outsidedness of the world, the world never provides appearance, because appearance in the world is also always a disappearance: “things being given outside themselves, being deprived of themselves, being emptied of themselves in their very appearing, never give their own reality but only the image of that reality that annihilates itself in the moment they are given” (19). What is “seen” or is “visible” in the “outsideness” of the world is, paradoxically, not “seen” or “visible” at all; its appearance is withdrawn by the very power of the world that purports to make it present, that is, the power of “indifferent self-showing”. Henry concludes this chapter in a way that implicitly illustrates his conviction that this entire preceding analysis of “the Truth of the World” represents what he calls a “philosophy of Christianity” by interpreting and then quoting 1 Corinthians 7.31: “It is not that a thing would first be present and then later would pass away. From the beginning this thing was passing away. At no moment did it cease being this nothingness... ‘For, indeed, the form of this world is passing away’” (20).

Thus goes the basic progression of Henry’s description of the truth of the world. We can begin to see how his specific definition of the world and its truth takes shape, as Henry clearly rejects defining the world as a totality of things or even a merely ontologically “neutral” space where specific objects can appear or show themselves. Rather, the world designates a particular form of *phenomenality*, it is a form of *how things appear*, of how appearance itself occurs— always in an “outsideness.” This form of appearance and concept of truth is, on Henry’s view, thoroughly disastrous, withdrawing being and presence even as it initially purports to confer such qualities. I

now turn to consider Henry's discussion of the "Truth According to Christianity," that is, the Truth of Life. It is significant that Henry's Christology begins to emerge forcefully in *I Am the Truth* when the truth of Life is fully articulated as a robust alternative to the truth of the World.

1.2. The Truth According to Christianity: Christ

The second chapter of *I Am the Truth* is at pains to rigorously and completely distinguish and separate the truth of the world from the truth of life; Henry writes "*the Truth of Christianity differs in essence from the truth of the world*" (23; emphasis original) and "the truth of the world and the truth of Christianity contrast with each other *on all points*" (24; emphasis added).

The discussion of the truth of Life in Henry opens up onto his Christology. His Christological concept of the "First Living" becomes a central theme in chapter four of *I Am the Truth*.¹¹ At this point I want to offer a reading of Henry's proposal for the "truth of life," showing how he uses the Christian concepts of Revelation and Christology to complete his description. This will only be a brief introductory discussion. Later on it will be imperative to acknowledge how closely Henry ties Christology to the meaning of each self, each ipseity. For now, an introductory treatment will allow us to return to Henry's critique of the truth of the world in modern scientism and politics.

¹¹ Much of Henry's earlier work bears a close resemblance to the descriptions of Life he makes in *I Am the Truth*, but this Christological element of the "First Living" receives a full treatment in his Christian Trilogy not found earlier. For an example of this earlier work, see Henry, *Material Phenomenology*, trans. Scott Davidson, pg. 38. Michelle Rebidoux has suggested that this turn to Christianity is Henry's attempt alleviate the danger of solipsism in his phenomenology of life. See Rebidoux, "C'est Moi le Principe et la Fin: The Mysterious Middle of Michel Henry's Christian Phenomenology of Life," 11-14. My own approach is to suggest that Henry did not have a problem of solipsism in his early work, evidenced by his earlier exploration of inter-subjectivity in the third essay of *Material Phenomenology*, but that he instead found a necessary resource in the New Testament to aid in his phenomenological project. I will have occasion to address Henry's treatment of inter-subjectivity in a later chapter.

What is “the Truth according to Christianity”? The answer is nothing other than the *God* of Christianity. The word “God” erupts into Henry’s text soon after his following uncompromising claim:

It is the first decisive characteristic of the Truth of Christianity that it in no way differs from what it makes true. Within it there is no separation between the seeing and what is seen, between the light and what it illuminates. And this is because there is in that Truth neither Seeing nor seen, no Light like that of the world. (24)

This then leads to this remarkable formulation:

God is that pure Revelation that reveals nothing other than itself. God reveals himself. The Revelation of God is his self-revelation. If by chance “the Revelation of God” were addressed to people, this would not consist in the unveiling of a content foreign to its own essence and somehow transmitted to a few initiates. To reveal Himself to people could only signify for God that he gives them a share of his eternal self-revelation. Christianity is nothing other, truly, than the awe-inspiring and meticulous theory of this givenness of God’s self-revelation shared with man. (25; emphasis original)

This is a strong statement that echoes the insistence of protestant reformed theology, such as that of Karl Barth,¹² that God is not subject to “appearing” or being revealed within a neutral criterion of ‘reason’ or a certain quality of affective ‘experience’. It resonates with Barth’s question to Emil Brunner during their exchange on the possibility of natural theology: Barth asks how there could possibly be *true* knowledge of God that is not *saving* (i.e. grace-imparting) knowledge.¹³ While Henry is more interested in Revelation *itself* than knowledge, we can see how he would formulate a similar question to Barth’s, challenging any notion that God as encountered in the New Testament, that is, in Life, could allow for a separation between God’s Revelation and God

¹² It is worth noting that Karl Barth’s notion of revelation developed in the early sections of the *Church Dogmatics* has some strikingly similar formulations to Henry’s, though they are eventually taken in a different direction. I quote a pertinent passage from §8: “God reveals Himself. He reveals himself through himself. He reveals Himself. If we wish really to regard the revelation from the side of its subject, God, then above all we must understand that this subject, God, the Revealer, is identical with His act in revelation, identical also with its effect”. Barth, *Church Dogmatics Volume 1: The Doctrine of the Word of God*, 296.

¹³ See Barth, “No! Answer to Emil Brunner,” 82.

himself, or a separation between the *true* Revelation of or about (the Will, Nature, or reality of) God and the *saving* Revelation of God.¹⁴ For Henry there is no “natural reason” that could grant access to a partial, incomplete, or un-saving experience of Life/God.¹⁵ Indeed, *thought* cannot gain the slightest access to God’s Revelation. “Quite the contrary,” Henry writes, “it is only when thought defaults, because the truth of the world is absent, that what is at stake be achieved: the self-revelation of God – the self-phenomenalization of pure phenomenality against the background of a phenomenality that is not that of the world” (27). This act of God giving to people “a share of his eternal self-revelation” results in the fullness and presence of life itself, a beautiful and compelling suggestion that both phenomenologically and theologically cuts to the heart – and brings us to the heart – of the Christian tradition.

And what is the heart of the Christian tradition if not Christ himself? In chapter 4 of *I Am the Truth*, Henry constructs an account of the relation between the Father and the Son, the first and second persons of the Trinity (in traditional theological language). What I will focus on here is *how* Henry brings together his phenomenology of life with Christology.

To answer this question, we should first return to chapter 2, where Henry asks the following question regarding the truth of Christianity, this being that form of truth in which the “what” and the “how” of truth are identical:

¹⁴ Because Henry takes a route towards a Revelation of participation there results the possibility of a certain brand of pantheism slipping in. Of course, this is not a pantheism of equating the totality of “things” in the universe with God himself, since Henry clearly states that there is no life in such a totality of “things” made visible only by the truth of the world. However, there is certainly a blurring and conflation between creature and creator, such that Henry prefers to dispense with traditional language of creation, dismissing it as the truth of the world, and opting for the notion of *generation*. The term “life” becomes univocal, as Henry states in chapter 6: “*Life has the same meaning for God, for Christ, and for man*” (101, emphasis original). We will have the opportunity to revisit this later and define more carefully what Henry means by creation and why he dismisses it. For a helpful treatment of the theme of generation in Henry, see Rivera, “Generation, interiority and the phenomenology of Christianity in Michel Henry,” 205-235.

¹⁵ Henry suggests that Life and God share the same essence: “To the extent that Life is more than man understood as living, it is from Life, not from man, that we must begin. From Life means from God, since according to Christianity, the essence of Life and that of God are one and the same” (51).

Where is a self-revelation of this sort achieved? *In Life, as its essence, since Life is nothing other than that which reveals itself* – not something that might have an added property of self-revealing, but *the very fact of self-revealing, self-revelation as such*. Everywhere that something like a self-revelation is produced there is Life. Everywhere there is Life, this self-revelation is produced. If, then, the Revelation of God is a self-revelation that owes nothing to the truth of the world, and if we ask where such a self-revelation is achieved, the answer is unequivocal: in Life and in Life alone. Therefore we are in the presence of the first fundamental equation of Christianity: God is Life – he is the essence of Life, or if one prefers, the essence of Life is God (27).

God, then, as Life itself, is self-revelation as such, relating to and generating God's self without any gap, without any distance. The revealing and the revealed, the affecting and the affected, the appearing and the appeared, the experiencing and the experienced – in Life, the former and latter of these sets of terms do not differ from each other. "Life is a self-movement," Henry writes in chapter 4, "that is self-experiencing and never ceases to be self-experiencing in its very movement – in such a way that from this self-experiencing movement nothing is ever detached – nothing slips away from it, away from this self-moving self-experience" (56). A term like 'self-revelation' or Henry's many variations on that theme should therefore be understood in a double-
"double sense": God reveals himself (i.e. is not revealed by something exterior to himself) and God reveals himself *as himself* (i.e. does not reveal an exterior representation of himself).¹⁶

Henry's articulation of the generation of Christ from the Father launches from this interior dynamic of self-revelation and self-experience. His formulation, which I quote interspersed with comments, is as follows: "This is what 'to experience oneself' means: to

¹⁶ Henry puts it like this: "We do have access to life. Where? In Life. How? Through Life. That it is only in Life and through it that we can accede to Life implies a decisive presupposition: it is Life itself that comes forth in itself... life is self-revelation. Within life, it is life itself that achieves revelation; and itself that is revealed" (55). It is perhaps important to note that Henry never, to my knowledge, says that "God reveals himself only *to himself*". While he is often close to affirming such a proposition, the formulation is never quite precisely that. This resists saying that the human person must *be God* in order to have God revealed to them. So while God offers to humans an eternal-share of his self-revelation, this is not equivalent to saying that he shares his self-revelation only with himself; asymmetry remains crucial for Henry on both the ontological and phenomenological levels.

experience what is, in its flesh, nothing other than that which experiences it. This identity between experiencing and what is experienced is the original essence of Ipseity” (56).

The “original essence of Ipseity” is thus determined within itself, not by an exteriority. This is important in reflecting on what it means to be human. While Henry does have a theory of intersubjectivity, he is here questioning and suggesting an alternative to theories of self-hood that define ipseity completely by context, as a product of culture, tradition, biology, or materiality. The original essence of ipseity is, according to Henry, unmediated by such contextual factors.

Henry continues,

And now this, too, can no longer escape us: In the process of self-generation of life, that is, the process whereby life comes into its own, is crushed against itself, experiences itself and enjoys itself, an essential Ipseity is implicated as the condition without which and outside of which no process of this sort could ever be produced. Ipseity is not simply a condition of the process of life’s self-generation: it resides within it as the very way this process is achieved. (56)

Self-experience is not possible except by an Ipseity, an “essential Ipseity.”¹⁷ Life is self-experience, and in order for there to be self-experience, there must be a self. If Life is a ceaseless process of self-experiencing, if life is eternal, then there is an eternal Ipseity, not as a result of self-experience but as the condition for it, eternally generated by Life’s self-experience. We will recall that Henry affirms the identity of the essence of Life and the essence of God. If this essential ipseity in which Life accomplishes itself in an eternal generation is the eternal mode and condition for the self-experience of Life, then this ipseity is also eternally within God himself – the First Living, the Son of the Father. “The Father,” Henry writes,

– if by this we understand the movement, which nothing precedes and of which nobody knows the name, by which Life is cast into itself in order to experience itself, this Father eternally engenders the Son within himself, if by the later we

¹⁷ Henry defines ipseity as follows: “‘Ipsity’ denotes the fact of being oneself, the fact of being a Self.” Henry, *Incarnation*, 19.

understand the First Living in whose original and essential Ipseity the Father experiences himself.¹⁸ (57)

Thus is introduced, into the very heart of Henry's career-long project of a phenomenology of life, the familiar theological and Biblical language that the Christian Church has been using for two thousand years: the Father and the Son, the first and second persons of the Trinity. This movement of generation is named "birth" by Henry and is decisively located *only* in life: "in the world, according to Christianity, no birth is possible" (59). We will have occasion to return to the implications this has for the birth of human persons, who are only born by "*the repetition of [Christ's] transcendental Arch-Birth within the Father*" (68).

I will later expand on Henry's articulation of the relationship between Christ and each living human person, but for now we have explored enough to make some initial reflections before tying his phenomenology of life and its correlative Christological reflection back into his earlier critiques of science and politics. First of all, Henry is not offering a comprehensive theological Christology, working through the well-known dilemma of "the Jesus of history, the Christ of Faith."¹⁹ While Henry may appear to neglect the historical dimension of Christology his fundamental approach I suggest, need not be taken to preclude this dimension. While his

¹⁸ Kevin Hart critiques Henry on this point. He writes, "Even if we accept that 'Life's generation cannot come about without generating within itself this Son as the very mode in which this process takes place,' it is doubtful that this statement can stand as a viable account of the relations between the Father and the Son. It bespeaks a process theology without theodicy, a binarian doctrine of God in which the Son is a mode of the Father. If Life is God, rather than (or as well as) the other way around, we lose all sense of agency in the deity and all sense of the Kairos of the Incarnation." Hart, "Without World: Eschatology in Michel Henry." 175.

This is a legitimate critique, as one may wonder if the person of the "Father" is best described as "all-powerful Life," as Henry does in *Words of Christ*: "This is the life which alone has the power to give life to itself and consequently of giving it to all the living. *Christ calls this all-powerful Life 'the Father.'*" Henry, *Words of Christ*, 40, emphasis added. What about the "ipseity" or "selfhood" of the Father to whom Jesus prays? However, we must remain attentive to Henry's frequent attacks against life as a blind, impersonal, and universal force, such as found in the romanticism of philosophers like Hegel and Schopenhauer. See Henry, *I Am the Truth*, 49.

¹⁹ Kevin Hart accuses Henry of opting exclusively for the latter, as Henry gives little to no attention to Jesus' historical context and deeply rooted Jewishness. "Henry does not wish to rejoin Jesus and Christ [...] the Jesus of history falls out of focus for him by dint of philosophical methodology and our relation with Christ is more surely aligned with gnosis than with faith". Hart, "Without World," 185.

reflections may be appropriated for theological Christology (as I intend to do), his approach is intentionally philosophical-phenomenological. The phenomenological point he is trying to make is that if the self-affection²⁰ of life is phenomenologically prior to being-in-the-world, then there must be an eternal ipseity implicated in that eternal process of self-experience. However important the historical context of an individual may be, it is ultimately not phenomenologically sufficient to account for the self-hood of an individual. A phenomenological analysis of our experience of ourselves reveals that self-affection is non- or more than-historical/contextual. This is not to say that it is self-*founding*, as Henry's analysis of self-hood will show. The main point is the "negative" one that the life of the living human person escapes final determination by historical-contextual factors.²¹

Can this be phenomenologically grounded without recourse to theological fideism?

Michelle Rebidoux suggests not, as she writes that Henry's articulation of an eternally begotten Arch-Ipseity is "without question a *theological* assertion."²² Rebidoux argues that Henry makes such a move in order to address the threat of solipsism, since unqualified self-affection seems to offer no room for anything outside or beyond the self. Now, it may be true that Henry's Christological moves do allow for a new approach to inter-subjectivity within his phenomenology of life, but does that necessarily make it a purely theological assertion? Why

²⁰ This term, "self-affection" is a central concept in Henry's thought. I will return to it in some detail in chapter 2. For now, a simple definition will suffice: self-affection entails the reality of being affected by nothing exterior, nothing foreign: "What affects in the case of self-affection is the same as what is affected." Henry, *I Am the Truth*, 105.

²¹ Rowan Williams makes a similar point when he writes "[w]hat needs to be said of Jesus is that his power to remould the image of human being, his liberty in re-constituting the boundaries of human vocation and identity, is not limited by the history of which he is the inheritor or the society of which he is a member. Without ceasing to *be* an inheritor of that history and a member of that society, he acknowledges as his 'limit' only the will of the God he calls Father: his liberty is itself a function of his obedience. So Jesus shares the creativity of God, yet not as a 'second God', a separate *individual*: he is God *as* dependent – for whom the metaphors of Word, Image, Son are appropriate." Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 200), 140.

²² Rebidoux, "*C'est Moi la Principe et la Fin*," 9, emphasis original.

should theological data not be made available for phenomenological appropriation? I take this position from J. Aaron Simmons who writes “phenomenology and theology are separated, but only because of the variant sources of authority to which they appeal – and not because of the content of one or the other.”²³ Henry is certainly resistant to natural theology in the traditional sense of truth about the True God being available to the reasoning human intellect. His approach is not a case of human reason arriving at a fully formulated Christological formulation. Rather, Henry takes the experience of Life to be appropriately accounted for and articulated by recourse to a phenomenological approach to the New Testament and what Henry takes to be the New Testament’s witness to Christ as the eternal Son of the Father.

To conclude this initial immersion in Henry’s phenomenological Christology let me return to *revelation*, the main theme of this chapter. What can Christian theology learn from Henry thus far? That by attending, first and foremost, to the experience of the living, which we always-already are, we are *implicated and involved in* Revelation. The Revelation of God in being infinitely far from constituting a neutral, objective observation or set of propositions, is *always* involved within a singular ipseity, which is Christ, the First Living. If Life is self-affecting and eternally begets an ipseity within itself as its eternal condition, and if self-affection is the “essence of ipseity,” as Henry put it, then any Christian approach to Revelation which takes the New Testament seriously has to refuse recourse to any notion of objectivity divorced from a primordial subjectivity. This is not for the sake of claiming a glib “truth is subjective” in an individualist sense.²⁴ Rather, it is an invitation to involve our own selves, our very Life, in

²³ Simmons, “Continuing to Look for *God in France*,” 27.

²⁴ Henry makes precisely this point in his political-economic book *From Communism to Capitalism*. He writes: “Naturally, the term ‘subjective’ should not be understood here in the trivial sense in which ‘everything is subjective’ would mean ‘everything is relative,’ or that everything depends on each person’s way of seeing things: ‘for each his or her own truth.’ Instead of referring to the various ways in which an individual can think or to one’s own point of view on things, subjectivity constitutes the most essential reality of this individual, one’s metaphysical

every approach to God that is made, in theology, prayer, worship, or Christian community because *that is phenomenologically how Life, that is, God, comes into, and knows, Godself, in a singular ipseity.*²⁵ This is *prescriptive* because it is first faithfully *descriptive* of Life; in Life is implicated a First Living, an essential ipseity, which the New Testament names as Christ. God, as Life, eternally realizes himself in and as a living being, Christ himself. As Henry himself puts it: “No Life without a Living. Not a Living without Life” (60). The singularity of the First Living affirms and celebrates every *other* singular Living as “Sons within the Son,” to which I will return in a subsequent chapter.

1.3. Henry’s Critique of Science and Politics

I now want to briefly link these insights that bleed from the phenomenological into the theological to Henry’s earlier critiques of science and politics in two of his more popular works, *Barbarism* and *From Communism to Capitalism*. This serves my discussion of Revelation in two ways. First, by showing how Henry’s treatment of Revelation and Christology in *I Am the Truth* resonates back through this earlier work I advance the position that the Revelation of Life is always implicated in the human spheres of science, culture, and politics. Second, by examining these realities and Henry’s discussion of them I work out with more clarity Henry’s notion of Revelation in general. I do not intend to defend or condemn Henry’s position with respect to the claims of doctrinal orthodoxy here; rather, I want to remain attentive to what Henry’s approach to Revelation and Christology might mean practically, especially as the Christian church

or ontological condition. It is one’s being, inasmuch as this being is life.” Henry, *From Communism to Capitalism*, 15.

²⁵ In *Words of Christ* Henry writes “Inasmuch as he is actually the Word [*Verbe*], *Christ is nothing other than the knowledge God has of himself.*” Henry, *Words of Christ*, 90.

confronts the twin realities of scientism and the nation-state politics of both the communist and capitalist streams.

Henry's critique of science is articulated in some detail in the third chapter of *I Am the Truth*. The more rigorous and well-known formulation, however, emerged in the 1987 work *Barbarism*.²⁶ This will help to clarify the practical import of Henry's critique of the truth of the world with which this chapter began.

We will recall that, for Henry, the truth of the world is predicated upon a split between what is true and what makes it true. This mirrors the modern split between the subject and the object, which is where, Henry suggests, modern science launches, resulting in the exclusion of sensibility and the inclusion of mathematical and geometrical abstraction. For Galileo, Henry's paradigmatic villain of modern science, "it remains possible to go beyond the relativity of subjective appearances and to display a true being of the world, a world in itself."²⁷ This scientific reductionism inaugurated by Galileo aggressively attempts to reduce subjectivity to the realm of objective fact, a move that Henry takes to be *barbaric* because it eliminates the self-affective essence of human selfhood – thus eliminating Life itself.

We *are* alive, though. In our lived lives we cannot escape sensibility for a realm of pure ideality or intelligibility. Not only that, but both sensibility *and* intelligibility are grounded in the self-affectation of Life itself. It is nothing sensible or idealistically intelligible that allows us to sense and intuit: "*knowing how to move the hands, knowing how to turn the eyes – this knowledge of life is not objective in any sense; it does not have an object because it does not contain in itself the relation to the object and because this relation is not its essence.*"²⁸

²⁶ *Barbarism* was the only of Henry's books to appear on the best-seller list in France. Davidson, "Translator's Preface," pg. 15.

²⁷ Henry, *Barbarism*, 7.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 12, emphasis original.

Subjectivity eternally escapes from the confines of scientific truth; the knowing-how of any human action, whether sensible or intelligible, is entirely bound to self-affection. Ultimately, Barbarism, the attempt to eliminate subjectivity, can never completely do so because it is the self-affection of subjectivity which allows for the work of science and technology to get off the ground in the first place: “the geometrical and mathematic determinations used in the sciences are idealities and thus presuppose the subjective operation that produces them.”²⁹

The problem Henry sees is that Barbarism becomes increasingly effective at subjecting subjectivity to objectivity, using the subjective source of action in order to increase its sphere of control and abusing the powers of subjectivity to eliminate subjectivity itself from the ‘true’ realm of knowledge and reality. Henry describes this paradox: “On the one hand, science is a mode of life that belongs to absolute subjectivity. On the other hand, each of the operations of scientific subjectivity is carried out through the putting out of play of this subjectivity, so that it can focus on the being that is there in front and that is taken as the only ‘real’ and ‘true’ being.”³⁰

Let us consider technology. The essence of technology, for Henry, is a radically practical, immanent, and subjective knowledge, and “tools” are “originally nothing but an extension of the immanent subjective Body.”³¹ However, with Barbarism and its objectifying of the human person and human knowledge, technology is no longer understood as a subjective extension of the living flesh, but an abstracted ideal, eliminating the subject by harnessing the subjective source of action (that nonetheless cannot ultimately be eliminated). The abstractions of Barbarism simultaneously harness and destroy living, subjective action. And this is what makes the Barbarism of the objective-scientific world-view a co-conspirator with the pervasive

²⁹ Ibid, 8.

³⁰ Ibid, 63.

³¹ Ibid, 45.

ideologies of the nation-state and its “two figures of the same death”:³² communism and capitalism.

Economic reality is one of the abstractions of Barbarism, perhaps the most aggressive; subjective human action, which constantly resists quantifiable measurement, is reduced to an abstraction: money. What makes capitalism so effective, Henry claims, is that it has found a way to harness the productive power of human subjectivity. In exchange for a salary, the capitalist does not gain something else of equal value, but instead has now harnessed the creative force *behind* value: “*living labor power*.”³³

Now, it *appears* that capitalism honours the individual to a far greater extent than Marxist communism. Marxism reduced the living individual to a system of class structure, but because the living individual is the source of production, political Marxist regimes were doomed to fail from the outset. The abstraction to class structures fails to successfully account for or repress the life of living individuals, and so these living individuals eventually burst the seams of the Marxist abstractions, as in the collapse of the Eastern bloc in late 1980s. Capitalism, however, is merely another form of abstraction, the abstraction of subjective living labour to objective economic value; there is nothing about the experience of shovelling gravel for an hour that translates into “fifteen dollars” – this is only possible through a severe abstraction from living labor to an objective equivalent.³⁴ What makes capitalism different from communism is that where communism abstracts the living individual within class and societal structures, capitalism abstracts to harness the living labor power of the individual, and this power is the foundation for producing surplus value, an essential component of the capitalist principle of economic growth.

³² Henry, *From Communism to Capitalism*, 11.

³³ *Ibid*, 71.

³⁴ Henry writes: “*economic reality is not a reality: it is neither the reality of the living individual nor the reality of the material world.*” *Ibid*, 59.

As Scott Davidson puts it: “Since capitalism is always in search of increased profits, this leads to increased pressure to exploit labor power more and more.”³⁵

This is an admittedly brief and incomplete summary of Henry’s complex arguments, but it serves well enough to turn our attention back to Henry’s Christology and account of Revelation. Henry shows us how a certain understanding of these key Christian themes can be put in the service of both critiquing modern ideologies of objective-scientific epistemology and both capitalist and communist economics. The truth of Christianity differs in essence from the truth of the world, where both of these ideologies reign. God is a pure self-Revelation transcendentally accomplished in the essential ipseity of Christ, the First Living, the Arch-Son of God. This self-experience is the original essence of ipseity. In Christianity, the Revelation of God is entirely and utterly implicated and incarnated in a singular ipseity, one not reducible to abstractions of objective-scientific truth, class structures, or economic (un)reality. Christian Revelation challenges and critiques such abstractions, not by offering an alternative abstraction of its own (as in the claims and counterclaims of communism and capitalism, for example) but by phenomenologically acknowledging the resistance of self-hood through Christ to being reduced to the truth of the world.

Christianity, then, on Henry’s phenomenological interpretation, offers resources for resisting the violent and barbaric abstractions of the modern/postmodern milieu. Henry is right to notice that “Life” is grounded in something more than abstractions, that the original essence of ipseity is self-affection, and that the ground of this phenomenological insight is found in the New Testament: Absolute Life must be an experience of self-affection, and Henry’s argument is that both the phenomenology of Life and the New Testament reveal Christ as that transcendental

³⁵ Scott Davidson, “Translator’s Introduction,” xi.

ipseity inhabiting Absolute Life as the First Living. If the Revelation of Christ as the knowledge and experience of God is capable of offering salvation, then the resistance of Christianity to the abstractions which Henry critiqued earlier in his career would ground itself not through a qualitatively similar proposal of an abstraction in the truth of the world (as in the ultimate similarity between communism and capitalism), but by returning to Life as such, to self-experience that is transcendently accomplished in Christ. An Henrian approach to science would certainly celebrate and rejoice in the thrill of discovering scientific truth, but would never take scientific truth itself as the explanatory tool to account for that “thrill” – for such a “thrill”, Henry would say, teaches itself, reveals itself. An Henrian approach to politics would not reject the organizing structures of political life, but would remain infinitely attentive to the local, particular, and singular, as opposed to the abstractions that take place in both communism and capitalism³⁶.

Human culture is the culture of Life, Henry says; “‘Culture’ refers to the self-transformation of life, the movement by which it continually changes itself in order to arrive at higher forms of realization and completeness, in order to grow.”³⁷ The prescriptive power of Henry’s phenomenology is to say that if life is to be desired and pursued, then political structures must serve the coming-into-itself of Life, its unfolding in living individuals. This does not preclude the importance of intersubjectivity, for, as I will explore later, a living individual always has life given to them in the infinite self-affection of God in Christ. *Every living*

³⁶ I suspect that Henry and William Cavanaugh would have over-lapping interests here. Cavanaugh’s theological-political project is partially aimed at critiquing the simple-space created by the nation-state, “simple” in that the relationship that dominates all others is between the nation-state and the individual. This simple relationship eliminates the complexity of allegiances to local institutions, such as the church. Henry, though, would likely argue more in favor of the living individual as the locus for society, while Cavanaugh would lean in favor of the community of the Church as that locus, at least for Christians. See especially chapter 1 of Cavanaugh, *Migrations of the Holy*.

³⁷ Henry, *Barbarism*, 5.

individual receives life in this way from this source, and this life is recognizable in the other, not by analogy or conceptual comparison, but by something *authentically shared in experience*; the experience of finding oneself self-affected, receiving it a pure gift and recognizing that same gift in the other. These remarks are somewhat premature, as inter-subjectivity will be the focus of a later chapter section, but I name them here simply to indicate the sort of political life towards which Henry's notion of Life/God as self-Revelation might gesture.

1.4. Conclusion: Revelation and Scripture

Scripture is an unavoidable dimension of any Christian discussion of "Revelation". Henry does not neglect this discussion, but engages it extensively in chapter 12 of *I Am the Truth* as well as in an earlier essay, "Speech and Religion: The Word of God".³⁸ For Henry, the truth of Scripture is revealed by the condition of the human being as a Son of God. Scripture is not Revelation in a straightforward sense of words that are similar to any other human word but then happen to be from God, such that God arbitrarily establishes his word through a collection of commands, stories, histories, letters, poems, propositions, etc... No, there is an infinite qualitative difference that separates normal human speech from the speech of God, the word of Life. Scripture itself, then, is not "enough" to constitute Revelation. Instead, Henry writes in a beautiful turn of phrase that "The one who listens to this word of Scripture knows that it speaks true, *since inside him the Word that establishes him in Life listens to itself*" (230).³⁹

³⁸ Henry, "Speech and Religion," 217-241.

³⁹ A similar sentiment is found in Hans Urs Von Balthasar's book, *Prayer*: "The word of God addressed to us always presupposes a word of God within us, insofar as we have been created in the word and cannot be detached from this context." Von Balthasar, *Prayer*, 26.

His point about scripture, then, is that there *must be* something “other” than the scriptures, other than their accurate reference to historical fact, which renders them “true” or “revelation”. In his essay “Speech and Religion: The Word of God” he writes:

There exists another Word besides that which, composed of linguistic terms, forms the substance of the Scriptures. This other Word differs by nature from all human words; it includes neither linguistic terms nor significations, neither signifier nor signified; it does not have a referent; it does not come from a speaker properly speaking; and it is not addressed to some interlocutor, to anyone, whoever he might be, who would exist before it – before it has spoken.⁴⁰

The “Truth” of the Scriptures is the Word of Life, which for Henry is Revelation of God in Christ (cf. Deuteronomy 30:19, 32:47, and John 1:4).

The scriptures are often studied without any transformative effect, without any deep sense of their *truth*; they are read as objective, historical artefacts of a Jewish sect that grew into a worldwide religious practice. To know that the scriptures are “true” in the scriptural sense of “truth” is to say, as Henry does, that the scriptures “say that we are the Sons. Now Sons and filiation are found only in Life.”⁴¹ Life, as Henry has shown us, “is the Archi-Revelation as self-revelation, as autoaffection.”⁴² And Henry concludes the essay: “By saying: ‘You are the Sons’ the Word of the Scriptures points away from itself and indicates the place where another word speaks.”⁴³ I suggest that an appropriate expansion of this discussion would draw on the Holy Spirit as that inner source of inspiration that listens to itself in the scriptures. In fact, one of Henry’s few references to the Holy Spirit consists of precisely this point: “The Word of Christ inasmuch as it is that of the Word is hence the only source that opens the understanding of these texts and who grounds their intelligibility. Only the Spirit permits us to know the Spirit.”⁴⁴ Thus

⁴⁰ Henry, “Speech and Religion,” 218.

⁴¹ Ibid, 222.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid, 239.

⁴⁴ Henry, *Words of Christ*, 120.

we are returned again to Henry's central insight: revelation is an interiority without exteriority. Revelation is not an exterior truth, whether propositionally/epistemically *known* or existentially *moved* towards. Instead, in God's Revelation there is no distinction between *how* it is revealed and *what* is revealed. Our Life itself, prior to being-in-the-world, is a participation in God's own essence of self-affection, an essence which transcendently implicates Christ as the first Living in which Absolute Life (the Father) comes into itself. In the scriptures this auto-affective revelation is revealed to us not exteriorly but *interiorly*, the Spirit in us united with the Spirit in the text to the point of there being no division between the two.

The main aim of this chapter was to introduce Henry's notion of Revelation vis-à-vis his important distinction between the truth of the Word and the truth of Life. Revelation is nothing other than Life itself. If we are alive, we are, so to speak, living *in* Revelation. It is this phenomenological point regarding the experience of life as self-affection in every living individual that Henry finds in the New Testament. Connecting Henry's philosophy of Christianity and his Christology back to his earlier more social-political works can help to see the concrete implications of his phenomenological explorations. God always reveals himself, and reveals himself as an ipseity, Christ. Our subjectivity, then, is not something to escape; it is not an obstacle or limitation to truth. Rather, if Truth is Life, as Henry says (126), it is the very avenue in which Life (God-in-Christ) generates life (ours).⁴⁵ But what sort of 'knowledge' is appropriate to knowing ourselves, our own lives as generated or engendered by God? It is to this question of self-knowledge in Henry that we now turn.

⁴⁵ As Paula D'Arcy puts this spiritual wisdom: "God comes to you, disguised as your life." Qtd. in Rohr, *Falling Upward*, 66.

II

Henry's Approach to Selfhood in Christ

Self-knowledge is intimately connected with knowledge of God.⁴⁶ However, based on Henry's rigorous distinction between the truth of life and the truth of the world, self-knowledge has an infinite qualitative difference from other forms of knowledge, notably scientific knowledge, and also knowledge based on the hermeneutic principle that "history does not belong to us; we belong to it."⁴⁷ It is this hermeneutic approach to self-knowledge that Henry will want to question, first with respect to Christology and then, via Christology, with respect to the human condition as a whole.

This chapter will proceed as follows. First, I expand the analysis of Henry's Christology that I began in chapter 1. The previous chapter focussed largely on the internal relationship between the Father (absolute Life) and the Son (the essential Ipseity, the First Living, the Arch-Son): that is, it focussed on the Christological formulation of Christ the Son's relation to the Father. This chapter will expand on two additional dimensions: first, *how* Christ appears, importantly reflected on in chapter five of *I Am the Truth*. Second, Henry's treatment of the Chalcedonian formulation that expresses Christ as being of two natures yet one person. These two points will allow us to draw Christology closer to Henry's important analysis at the heart of *I Am the Truth*, in chapters 6 and 7, which are respectively entitled "Man as 'Son of God'" and "Man as 'Son Within the Son'". Christology is never about understanding an abstract definition

⁴⁶ John Calvin makes such a claim in his opening of the *Institutes*. See Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 4.

⁴⁷ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 288-289. Gadamer will go onto claim that "To be historically means that knowledge of oneself can never be complete. All self-knowledge arises from what is historically pregiven" Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 313. Henry would argue that Gadamer is thinking of self-knowledge in terms of the truth of the world, which *constitutively* cannot be complete, because there is *nothing* "complete" in the truth of the world; in the outside of the world, all things, including the self, are cast out of themselves, emptied of their own reality. There is, however, a completeness of self-knowledge, albeit a qualitatively different type of "knowledge", that occurs in Henry's "Life": the recollection of oneself as a Son of God.

of Christ; it is always accompanied with self-knowledge, that is, with recognizing ourselves in Christ. The second section of this chapter, then, shows how seamlessly this Christology flows into a philosophical anthropology that is bound neither to biological determinism nor hermeneutical historicism. To this end, we will return to Henry's key concept of self-affection. Furthering this line of argument, I expand on two key theological notions that Henry takes up within the dynamic of self-affection: faith and predestination. I close this second section with some pointers towards my own development of an Henrian theory of the atonement and Christ's suffering on the cross. This exploration naturally opens onto a discussion of the flesh, the third and final section of this chapter. Throughout his Christian trilogy, particularly in his book *Incarnation*, Henry draws parallels and connections between our own flesh and the flesh of Christ, thus allowing for a high Christology which is not flesh-denying but flesh-affirming to the utmost degree.

2.1. The Appearance of Christ

How does Christ appear? How do we have *access* to Christ? Henry begins chapter 5 of *I Am the Truth* ("The Phenomenology of Christ") with a phenomenological analysis of birth and generation. This continues to expand on Henry's initial claim made in chapter 4, that the "identity between experiencing and what is experienced is the original essence of ipseity" (56). If this is indeed the original essence of ipseity then, as Henry rightly identifies in the Gospel genealogies and in Christ's words about himself, we must overcome those analyses of ipseity and birth that would claim to understand them purely historically or materially. The original essence of ipseity, the meaning of the human self, cannot be accounted for purely by its context or physical matter – cannot be accounted for by the indifferent light of the world. As Henry

writes, “*In the truth of the world any man is the son of a man, and hence also of a woman. In the Truth of Life any man is the son of Life, that is to say, of God himself*” (70, emphasis original). In *Words of Christ* Henry similarly argues that for human beings, “Christ’s Word accomplishes *the substitution of a divine genealogy for a natural genealogy.*”⁴⁸

The designation of the human person as a “son of God” within a divine genealogy is a radical claim. The “substitution” of a divine genealogy in place of a natural genealogy speaks to Henry’s proposal that, inscribed into the heart of human experience, there is a deep unity with ourselves that is simultaneously a deep unity with God,⁴⁹ such that the essence of our self-hood and ipseity cannot be reduced to external factors, certainly a challenge to materialist determinism as well as the historical emphasis of Gadamerian hermeneutics. Henry’s writes magnificently of how Christ relates to each person:

If Christ is not merely the transcendental Arch-Son immersed in an eternal symbiosis with the Father, if in people’s eyes he stands as an emblematic and radiant figure who causes them to tremble within, it is because this figure is that of their own true condition as Sons. Thus Christ’s discourse about himself, consisting in the radical elucidation of the state of Son, suddenly outstrips its initial and ‘proper’ domain – the autarchic enjoyment of divinity, the self-sufficient system of Life and of the First Living – in order to rebound upon the entire human condition and to place it in a light that no kind of thought, no philosophy, no culture or science had dared project onto it before (71).

How, then, does Christ “appear”? Christ’s appearance is never separate or external from our appearance to *ourselves*, to a discovery of the human condition which we ourselves inhabit and which inhabits us, a condition which we ourselves are. Christ appears to us *in life* and as life itself. Thus, the way that leads to Christ is Christ himself: “*the path that leads to Christ can only be the repetition of his transcendental Arch-Birth within the Father*” (60).

⁴⁸ Henry, *Words of Christ*, 41, emphasis original.

⁴⁹ This is a phenomenological, not an ontological unity; I will address Henry’s treatment of ontology and “being” below.

This upheaval of a human genealogy for one that is divine therefore also makes up an entirely new definition of birth and engendering: “*Birth does not consist of a succession of livings, in each of whom life is presupposed, but rather consists in the coming of each living into life out of Life itself.*” No birth can be understood except on the basis of the Life and its own essence – on the basis of Life’s self-generation as its self-revelation in the essential Ipseity of the First Living” (77, emphasis original).

Joseph M Rivera, in his study on the notion of “generation” in Michel Henry, suggests that “For Henry, generation is a substitute for and at odds with the traditional theological notion of creation.”⁵⁰ This, however, I take to be a misinterpretation. Henry is working with a *specific* vocabulary and makes clear what he means by “creation” in contradistinction to “generation” or “engendering” when he comments on the first chapter of Genesis:

This is the meaning of the thesis that “God created man in his image”: that he gave man his own essence. He did not give it to him as one gives an object to someone, like a gift passing from one hand to another. He gave him his own essence in the sense that, his own essence being the self-engendering of Life in which is engendered the Ipseity of all the living, then in giving his own essence God gave man the living condition, the happiness of experiencing himself in this experiencing of self that is Life and in the radical immanence of this experiencing, where there is neither “outside” nor “world.” To engender means everything except to create, *if creation refers to the creation of the world, the phenomenological opening up of a first “Outside” where the entire reign of the visible is revealed to us.* (103, emphasis added)⁵¹

Here we are given a clearer sense of the sort of creation that Henry is rejecting, a phenomenological ‘outside’ where experience is determined by transcendence separated from immanence, by the human person looking for itself *outside* of itself, cast into the exteriority and emptiness of the world, where even the way the self relates to itself is through a process of

⁵⁰ Rivera, “Generation,” 208.

⁵¹ For more on Henry’s phenomenological interpretation of Genesis see Henry, *Incarnation*, §45.

exteriority, as if it experiences itself as an object. The self, in this notion of creation, is created as utterly separate from God, devoid of God's self-revelation in self-affection.

Rivera is wrong, though, to see Henry's rejection of this as being entirely against the traditional theological notion of creation. Rowan Williams, for example, separates creation from manipulative power, since

what creation emphatically isn't is any kind of imposition or manipulation: it is not God imposing on us divinely willed roles rather than the ones we 'naturally' might have, or defining us out of our own systems into God's. Creation affirms that to be here at all, to be a part of this natural order and to be the sort of thing capable of being named – or of having a role – is 'of God'; it *is* because God wants it so.⁵²

Williams, of course, is working from a more 'properly' theological angle than Henry. However, we can see that there is a similarity to their positions. On both accounts "Creation" is to be rejected as a term if it means exterior power or intentional force. Williams does in fact use the language of 'outside' to refer to God's self-offering of his own life,⁵³ but Henry is not so far from this position either, as he readily affirms that "God could just as well live eternally in his Son and the latter in his Father without any other living ever coming to life" (129). Such a statement suffices as an acknowledgement of what Rivera calls the basic "theological distinction" between creator and creature.⁵⁴

⁵² Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 69.

⁵³ "What God utters... is God: the summons to the world to be, and to find its fruition in being in the presence of God sets 'outside' God the kind of life that is God's. So if God's act of creation gratuitously establishes God as the one who is supremely there *for* the world, it seems we must say that God is already one whose being is a 'being for', whose joy is eternally in the joy of another; and since God, as we have said, does not 'wait upon' becoming an object to another, we are led to think of God's own self as eternal identity in otherness, a self-affirming in giving away" Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 73-74. Williams goes on to quote Sebastian Moore's *The Inner Loneliness*, a passage that could easily be found in Henry: "Love in God does not *result* but *originates*... because God is God, the absolute original, the absolutely originating, an eternal process of self-affirming in self-love" qtd in Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 74.

⁵⁴ Rivera, "Generation," 223.

Continuing on this same theme of the “theological distinction,” I suggest that Henry is continually oscillating back and forth between asserting the utter *sameness* of our life and the divine life and the insurmountable *distance* between the two, such that his Christology appears to be both very “low” and very “high” at the same time⁵⁵. In the first case, he asserts the univocity of “life” for God, Christ, and for man (101): life is always ‘self-experiencing’ in the same way. In the second case, however, we refer back to Henry’s point about God living in reciprocal interiority between Father and Son without any need for other ‘livings’. That we do indeed experience ourselves is not an indication of the necessity of God’s life ‘over-flowing’ without God’s free act. God is not in a position of dependence on the living nor is God a “blind and unconscious life, a life that desires without knowing what it desires and without even knowing that it desires” (49).

⁵⁵ Kevin Hart has noticed that Henry’s Christology is unusual in being ‘high’, since a typical postmodern appropriation of theology general advocates for the ‘low’. See Hart, “Without World,” 176. He argues against Henry, accusing Henry of never integrating a “descending Johannine Christology” with a “synoptic ascending Christology,” opting instead entirely for the later. George Lindbeck, in his essay “Messiahship and Incarnation: Particularity and Universality Are Reconciled,” designates these two poles of Christology as 1) messianic (synoptic ascending) and 2) incarnational (Johannine descending). See Lindbeck, “Messiahship and Incarnation,” 63-86.

Henry may help to achieve an absolute singularity alongside an absolute universality, thus offering a response to Lindbeck’s challenge to “reconcile” the messianic and the incarnational. Henry’s Christology is messianic insofar as the singularity of the self-affection of Life in an essential ipseity, the Arch-Son, is accomplished only in him. Messianic Christologies, Lindbeck claims, generally privilege *historic* singularity, emphasizing the politically liberating aspects of Jesus’ teaching and actions; messianism occurs as an ethical-political rupture in the solidified and oppressing patterns of social structures. Henry, however, suggests the transcendental singularity of Christ as the condition for any Life at all, whether divine or human. This *transcendental* singularity of Christ as the essential ipseity of the Father/Life achieves the universalizing of incarnation, the universal condition for any living.

This, however, can still maintain the messianic dimension of historicity if we follow Karl Hefty’s suggestion that “The emphasis on Christ’s interior relationship with his Father in no way devalues his historical existence. On the contrary, it renders it intelligible, since only his relationship with the Father determines his historical existence from beginning to end.” Hefty, “Introduction to the English Edition,” xx. Henry himself confesses the historic singularity of Christ at the very end of *Words of Christ*: “this Word does not speak only to each of us in our timeless birth – where, brothers of the firstborn, Icon of the divine essence, we are given to ourselves in the self-revelation of Life in his Word [*Verbe*]. It is also expressed in human language. And this happened twice in history. It spoke through the prophets, before turning us upside down when it became that of Christ.” Henry, *Words of Christ*, 118. Thus the historical specificity is not neglected but is instead slightly relativized by placing Jesus’s historical existence within the theological/phenomenological framework of *who Christ is*, which is in the end controlled by nothing other than his relationship to the Father. For helpful theological treatment of this issue, see Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 136-142.

This appearance of Christ as both the same and different from humans is always within life: “access to Christ can be had only in life and in the truth proper to it” (88). Even though Henry asserts that “Life is the same for God, Christ, and Man” (101), he also asserts that it is “*on the plane of life itself* that the abyss separating Christ from people opens up, and it must likewise be understood on this plane” (129, emphasis added). Christ, as we learned in the previous chapter, is designated by Henry as the First Living, the unique Son of God in which God knows, experiences, and affects Godself eternally. Henry is fond of quoting John 10:10: “I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.”⁵⁶ He comments on this “most extraordinary, seemingly crazy, sentence” as follows: “He led Life to the living *by first leading it to itself in him*, in and through his essential Ipseity – and then by making a gift of this ipseity to any living being so that, within that ipseity, each of them becomes possible as a living self” (128). This will certainly be an important theme to explore in the subsequent sections of this chapter. For now, suffice it to say that *Christ only appears as utterly different within the utter commonality or univocity of life shared with all the living, and yet we are only in this utter commonality of life by virtue of the non-reciprocal, asymmetrical relationship established between Christ and living human beings, human beings finding themselves self-affected by and in Life, given to them by Christ.*

2.2. Self-Knowledge in Christ

One of the most important designations of Christ is to claim him as the Son of God. This is a strong theme in much of the New Testament. This designation circumvents the problems

⁵⁶ New International Version. Of course, for Henry, it would be difficult to say that life can come both ‘partially’ and in ‘fullness’, since there is no such thing as Life which is not full, which is not utterly and thoroughly self-affecting, “crushed against itself,” as Henry puts it (56).

dealt with by the Chalcedonian definition, since the concern is not with “natures” or “persons,” but is instead about a relationship, a relationship that Henry argues is not external but internal. To be the Son of God, the Firstborn of the new creation is, as discussed above, to be engendered in a dynamic process of self-affection, not to be thrown into a world. This dynamic dimension of Life is emphasized in earlier works of Henry as *culture*⁵⁷ as well as in an early section of *I Am the Truth*, where Henry writes: “Life ‘is’ not. Rather, it occurs and does not cease occurring. This incessant coming of life is its eternal coming forth in itself, process without end, a constant movement” (55). We should therefore be cautious of ascribing a static Gnosticism to Henry, a flight from particularity into the universal One. While there is admittedly something that could possibly be classified as “gnostic” in Henry’s approach, Revelation is manifestly *not* “a content foreign to its own essence and somehow transmitted to a few initiates” (25).⁵⁸ Instead, this is a disclosure of divine Sonship, and not only of Christ, but of all human kind: “Christ’s word,” Henry writes in *Words of Christ*, “accomplishes *the substitution of a divine genealogy for a natural genealogy*. And this substitution concerns humans as much as him who comes to teach it to them in a teaching so fundamental one must really call it a revelation.”⁵⁹

This substitutionary genealogy is central to Henry’s account of the meaning of the living individual. It is a rigorously Christological anthropology, as Henry states that “far from understanding Christ (or even just a part of his being) on the basis of man and his condition, it is man who must be understood on the basis of Christ, and can be so only in this way” (101). This is a very important and appropriate move for any Christian philosophical account of the human person. The commonality between Christ and the human person in the New Testament is

⁵⁷ Henry, *Barbarism*, 5-6.

⁵⁸ As quoted in chapter 1, above.

⁵⁹ Henry, *Words of Christ*, 41.

expressed in the “child/son of God” motif in the Johannine and Pauline traditions. Christ’s person, self, ipseity, and birth is the form and pattern upon which every human person as a Son of God must be predicated.

Henry’s approach to this commonality, as we have seen, is phenomenological. Christ is the essential ipseity within which Life comes into itself by experiencing itself, affecting itself, in the thorough identity of phenomena and phenomenality, the utter unity of the “what” and the “how” of appearance. In chapter 6 of *I Am the Truth* Henry formally introduces his central concept of self-affection, making a distinction between its “strong” and “weak” senses (105–109). Self-affection is what is “specific to life”; life affects itself as both affecter and affected. The “strong” sense is what we have considered in Henry’s approach to Christology; in that context there “ceaselessly occurs” (55) an eternal, transcendental, phenomenological self-affection of “absolute life,” the life of the Father eternally engendering the Son. As Henry writes regarding this self-engendering, “However passive this experiencing that life constantly has of itself in its *pathētik* embrace may be, it is nonetheless produced by life itself – and it is life’s generation of itself to which the strong concept of self-affection refers” (106). There is thus a passivity appropriate to this phenomenological-transcendental structure of Life, a receptivity that is identical with its own productive activity. This “appropriate passivity” is the ceaseless occurrence of the Christ, the First Living, both receiving and enacting the Life of the Father within himself and as himself, such that Henry describes the Father-Son relationship as one of “reciprocal interiority” and speaks of Christ as the knowledge that the Father has of himself.

How does Henry expand this reciprocal interiority to include every “son”, every human person, within its dynamic? His phenomenological inquiry into this question is rich and complex. The New Testament is filled with such phrases as “in Christ”, “through him”, and “I am the

gate.” What do such expressions *mean*? How do they relate, reveal, and unfold what takes place in my own subjectivity, my own ipseity and selfhood? Henry’s response is that Christ functions as a transcendental principle that precedes any living individual. “Never would a transcendental me be given to itself,” Henry writes, “ – nor come into itself so as to be capable, in this continual coming-into-itself, of being a self – if the original phenomenological Ipseity of the First Self of Life did not furnish it with the substance of its own ipseity” (116). And he goes on to claim that “Christ is not foremost the one who mediates between humans and God. Christ is foremost the one who mediates between each me and itself, the relation to self that allows each ‘me’ to be a me” (116).⁶⁰

This is a phenomenological insight: our experience of ourselves, our self-affection, is preceded by an ipseity which is both the same and not the same as myself. Christ and I are the same through God’s self-affection as the source of our life, Christ’s and my own. And yet we are not the same in our passivity with regards to self-affection (in the “weak” sense). Christ inhabits a “strong” sense of self-affection because he *is* God’s self-affection, the one who eternally brings Life into itself. I, though, am *dependent upon Christ’s dependence* on the Father as the eternal Son. As Henry writes: “I experience myself, and constantly, in that, the fact of experiencing myself constitutes my ‘Me.’ But I have not brought myself into this condition of experiencing myself. I am myself, but I myself have no part in this ‘being-myself’: I experience myself without being the source of this experience” (107). There is thus a certain “being-thrown” in

⁶⁰ This again needs to be understood in a specific way. In a certain sense there is no contradiction between these two modes of mediation, since both take place within Life and there is a unity of knowledge of God and knowledge of self. When Henry sets them in opposition we have to consider the idea that the mediation of Christ between God and humans which Henry rejects here is the truth of the World, a relationship of pure exteriority. However, if God is Life and we as Sons of God find ourselves self-affected and self-known, passive with regard to our own self-affection, then there is no competition, no zero sum, no contradiction between Christ’s mediation between God and the self and between the self and itself even while also maintaining a certain asymmetry between God-Christ and the living individual. See *I Am the Truth* 129.

Henry, but it is not a throwness into the world; rather, it is a throwness into *myself*. That, I think, is perhaps the clearest way to summarize Henry's position on the relationship between Christ and the living individual: *Christ is the one who inhabits the beginning, eternal Life, eternal self-affection, and thus is that transcendental ipseity who casts the living individual into him or herself, into their condition of Sonhood, of self-affection, of Life.*

Through this formulation Henry is able to construct both a phenomenological unity and difference between Christ and every living individual. There are points in *I Am the Truth* where Henry seems to privilege the unity between God/Christ and the human person to such an extent that it flirts with a phenomenologically flavored pantheism. There are a few ways to respond to such suggestions, however. The first is through Henry's favorable though undeveloped exploration of Jean-Luc Marion's theme of "God Without Being."⁶¹ Henry's basic use of this theme consists in refusing to submit God and Revelation to an exterior criterion, the criterion of Being, "(subordinating) God to a mode of manifestation alien to his proper essence" (157). The "proper essence" of God is not what God "is", since the "existence" of God is only "proven" or "disproven" within the truth of the World, when a neutral concept of "being" is predicated of God. Instead, the proper essence of God "is" phenomenological, a mode of phenomenality as self-affection. Thus, even with Henry's univocal suggestion that "*Life has the same meaning for God, for Christ, and for man*" (101), such univocity is not an ontological unity since the "being" or "existence" of God has been overcome by the phenomenological priority of self-affection. In a critique of Heidegger, Henry writes: "*The absurd subordination of God to Being is the subordination of Life's Truth to the world's*" (157, emphasis original). In the world's truth the reality of God has already been lost from view; whether or not God 'exists' is immaterial since

⁶¹ Marion, *God without Being*. Henry's main treatments of God and Being occur in the essay "Speech and Religion," 228-299, and *I Am the Truth*, 28-29, 55, 154-157.

God has already been ‘stripped’, as it were, of God’s own essence which “is” phenomenological, not ontological. The concept of “being,” then, has a very narrow range of meaning indeed, if the essence of God, Life, Christ, and the human person escapes it or is ultimately defined by something other than being: the phenomenality of self-affection.

Second, even if we were considering a phenomenological brand of pantheism/panentheism, at least with regards to God/Christ and human beings, Henry is at pains to preserve their asymmetry, not simply for the sake of orthodoxy or the Augustinian Ontological difference⁶² between Creator and Creature, but in order to preserve individuality, avoiding the disinterested, blind life of romanticism that he so roundly criticizes.⁶³ To quote Henry at length:

[T]o the reversibility of Life and its Ipseity – of Father and Son, in their reciprocal interiority – is starkly contrasted the irreversibility of the relation of the Arch-Son with all those who receive from him and his original Ipseity the possibility of their Self and their me. This irreversibility, however, is not something negative. Instead, it carries within itself an extra-ordinary event, the marvel of marvels. It is not merely that in this Arch-Ipseity there occurs the potential for each living to become a living transcendental me. What’s more, thanks to this ipseity in which a living relates to itself, touches every point of its Being, experiences itself and enjoys itself, this living is not merely a me but is irreducible to any other, experiencing what it experiences and feeling what it feels, unlike any other – not because what this “me” experiences is different from what another feels, but simply because it is the one experiencing it and feeling it. In the bosom of the single and same life, this single and same Ipseity, it is irreducibly different. This is because *such is the essence of the Arch-Ipseity generated in absolute Life that, giving to every thing whatever it is to which Life is given in order to experience itself, Life makes that thing, in the phenomenological realization of experiencing itself, into a Self that is absolutely singular and different from any other.* (130, emphasis original)

Our *difference* from Christ, the irreversibility of the path of Life from the Arch-Son to those who receive their ipseity from him, is our *individuality*, our uniqueness. There is a phenomenological distinction between Christ and the living individual, a distinction that can be articulated as

⁶² As argued by Rivera against Henry in “Generation, interiority and the phenomenology of Christianity in Michel Henry”.

⁶³ See Henry, *I Am the Truth*, 48-49.

follows: I am utterly myself in my self-affection, experiencing and becoming nothing other than the self-unfolding of my own life. My own life is grounded in the dynamic of an eternal and original self-affection, that is, the Life of God in Christ. There is a paradox here: my life is at once fully mine with nothing exterior, and yet it fully not mine, insofar as it is an imitation of the transcendental birth of Christ, given by and through him alone. However, because there is no exteriority or “world” in self-affection, this is not an “exterior” imitation or reproduction; it is a real generation or participation. Henry goes on to attempt a formulation of this paradox:

Thus, the generation of the Arch-Son in the self-generation of absolute life is *to some extent* reproduced in each transcendental birth, since therein a single and same Life, experiencing itself in and by means of its original ipseity, gives birth to howsoever many *moi*'s that are irreducibly different and new – to howsoever many Individuals, none of whom is even remotely similar to any other, none of whom has been preceded by an Individual who could be compared to him in some way, none of whom will be followed by another who might encroach even slightly on, or cast doubt on, his irreducibility to and difference from any other Individual – the one who is this singular Self, forever different, forever new. (130, emphasis added)

Henry's use of “to some extent” is thus his attempt to formulate both the difference between and the unity of 1) the Arch-Ipseity of Christ and 2) the Ipseity of each living individual.

In the context of this discussion regarding the relation of Christ to the living individual, we can turn to two key Christian themes that Henry takes up in *I Am the Truth*: Predestination and Faith. First, regarding predestination, Henry's very brief use of the term comes up in the context of his philosophical anthropology in chapter 6 of *I Am the Truth* (“Man as ‘Son of God’”) and in the resulting ethic in chapter 10 (“The Christian Ethic”). I will give a more thorough treatment of Henry's proposal for a Christian ethic in chapter three, below. For now, it will be sufficient to note that Henry's use of predestination in these two contexts is an example of how closely he links subjectivity and ethics, such that they are nearly identical with each other. He even goes so far as to say that living one's own life is a primary ethical injunction:

“This is the first commandment of the Christian ethic: you will live, or, more precisely, you will be this living Self, this one and none other” (183).

How does predestination function within a Christian-phenomenological anthropology and its resulting ethic? Traditional Calvinism of the “double-predestination” stripe holds that salvation, reconciliation, and communion with God cannot be accomplished, even in part, by the exercise of the human will, which is in utter bondage to sin. God has chosen, elected, or predestined each person to either a future of glory with him or a future of separation from him. Henry’s decision to take up this theme of predestination reveals that he has a certain sympathy for this proposal. His phenomenological approach, though, tends towards a universalism regarding this predestination, since to be human, for him, is to be living, self-affecting, and thus a Son of God. “Salvation” from “forgetting the condition of Son” (133; discussed in chapter 3, below) – a sort of Henrian equivalent to sin – is not a theme he develops alongside his discussion of predestination.

The beautiful insight Henry offers regarding predestination is that this concept names our relationship with God. *Predestination simply is that relationship the living have with Life, the Sons have with the Father/Arch-Son, the human person has with God:* “As Son,” Henry writes,

man is predestined, and his destiny is written within the reciprocal relation of the weak and strong concepts of self-affection, or in the relation that is established between a life such as his own, constantly self-affected without ever being the source of this self-affection, and a Life that affects itself absolutely, the Life of God. (108-109)

Predestination is the relation of the living with life. This type of relation, Henry insists, is not an external relation between two separate terms nor is it a dialectical relation where the two terms depend in a negative sense upon each other (119). Instead, “the relation between Individual and Life in Christianity is a relation that takes place in Life and proceeds from it, being nothing other

than Life's own movement" (119). This 'internal' relation of predestination is sharply distinguished from "pre-programming" (184-85). Pre-programming would be an eternal determination delivered from outside, God "pre-programming" every action performed within a world that was separated from his own freedom. Predestination, by contrast, is the unfolding of life, of God, from within God's self as generation.

We now turn to the theme of "Faith". A famous Biblical formulation of faith comes from Hebrews 11: 1: "Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see."⁶⁴ Henry does not make use of this passage explicitly, but his treatment of faith is quite compatible with it. What matters is how one defines "what we hope for" and "what we do not see". Henry's point regarding this question is that "Faith is not produced in the field of knowledge, as a sort of knowledge of inferior degree" (193). What is unseen or invisible is not what *might* be seen or *will* be seen. Rather, it is always hidden from "sight," if by "sight" is meant the perception and knowledge a visible, objective fact in the truth of the world. Against the phenomenological tradition of intentional consciousness, Henry writes

Faith is not a signifying consciousness that is still empty, incapable of producing its content by itself. Faith is not the realm of consciousness, but rather of feeling. It comes from the fact that nobody ever gave himself life, but rather that life gives itself, and gives itself to the living, as what submerges him – from the fact that in life he is totally living, as long as life gives him to himself. *Faith is the living's certitude of living, a certitude that can come to him ultimately only from absolute Life's own certitude of living absolutely, from its self-revelation, without reservation, in the invincible force of its Second Coming* (193).

This faith is a sort of modified Cartesianism: there is a 'certainty' that comes from experiencing oneself but it is caught up in the phenomenological insight that Life as self-affection, as a living individual, never gives itself to itself but always finds itself given to itself. I *affect* myself as myself but I do not *give* myself to myself; that pure gift is accomplished by Christ, the

⁶⁴ New International Version.

transcendental Arch-Son. As Simon Jarvis puts it “Life is certainty. Life is what I cannot doubt, even if I want to, because it is what I am.”⁶⁵ My life, though, is always a pure gift. I am self-affected, the original essence of my ipseity, as Henry puts it, but this is so thoroughly a gift that there is no phenomenological gap between giver-gift-receiver;⁶⁶ an asymmetry, to be sure (this ‘path’ does not run the opposite way) but not an exteriority, not the phenomenality or truth of the world.

Predestination and faith, then, offer two windows into how Henry’s phenomenological approach to Christianity can open up fresh possibilities within generative concepts that can become stagnant or unimaginative. They also offer insight into Henry’s own conception of self-knowledge in Christ, the main theme of this section. Both are related to the condition of the human person as a Son of God, as finite self-affection generated from the essential self-affection of Christ. Predestination names the condition of Sonship. Sonship cannot be “chosen,” it cannot be “escaped” because it is the self’s own life; it can be forgotten, dismissed, or misinterpreted but never ultimately done away with. Faith is the type of “knowledge” which is appropriate to this predestined condition or relation between the living and absolute Life. My transcendental condition of self-affection, myself given to myself by Christ in self-affection, is an internal, not external, repetition and imitation of the Arch-Son’s eternal birth. As I will explore later with respect to Henry’s ethical proposal, this condition of self-affection is where Henry roots his theory of action, and he does so in such a thorough manner that faith and predestination become identical with love itself.

⁶⁵ Jarvis, “Michel Henry’s Concept of Life,” 371.

⁶⁶ This harkens back to Henry’s critique of Jean-Luc Marion in Henry’s 1991 article “The Four Principles of Phenomenology,” 19.

Self-knowledge does not have to do with facts or even stories about oneself, but instead with an irreducibly singular self, known to itself not through conventional knowledge as one might ‘know’ an exterior object, but through the knowledge of self-experience and self-affection. When discussing self-hood, affection and knowledge are one and the same; affection is its own knowledge. Any narrative or hermeneutical arrival at self-knowledge depends on a more ancient and primordial transcendental structure of self-affection which Henry finds most thoroughly in the relation and union between Christ and the Father, that relationship which generates out of itself each living human person. This will be important in chapter 3 when I make some moves towards an Henrian ecclesiology and pneumatology.

2.3. An Henrian Approach to Flesh and Atonement

No discussion of self-hood and self-knowledge/affection in Henry is complete without an analysis of the flesh, most thoroughly worked through in the extensive study *Incarnation*, but also importantly present in *I Am the Truth* and *Words of Christ*. In line with the Christological focus of this study, my analysis will provide some reflections on the cross in light of an Henrian perspective on suffering and the flesh. This brief discussion will open up onto the final chapter, an exploration of soteriology in Henry through the categories of rebirth, intersubjectivity, and ethics. For now we turn to Henry on the flesh and atonement. This is one of the explicitly constructive attempts on my part to appropriate Henry’s philosophy of Christianity for categories of Christian theology that he himself does not directly treat.

Henry’s concept of self-affection, so closely tied to his designation of the human person as “Son of God” to the point of being identical with it, is also never divorced from his important category of *flesh*. Here we are referred back to Henry’s distinction between the truth of life and

the truth of the world. Self-affection refers to “flesh” in the truth of Life, while hetero-affection refers to the “body” in the truth of the world. In *I Am the Truth* chapter 11 Henry discusses this duality of appearing:

Because the way of appearing is double, what appears, even if it is the same, nevertheless appears in two different ways, in a dual aspect. Thus our singular body appears to us in two different ways: on the one hand as this living body whose life is my own life, inside of which I am placed, with which I coincide at the same time as I coincide with each of its powers – to see, take, move, and so on – such that they are mine and the ‘I Can’ puts them into operation. On the other hand, it appears as a body-object that the ‘I Can’ sees, touches, feels – the same as any other object. (195, emphasis original)

The self-affection of the human person as a Son of God takes place exclusively on the plane of the former “appearing”. I live as flesh. My flesh is lived, is my life, and is the ultimate and inescapable locus of my sonship. There is nothing ‘objectifiable’ within this description, nothing which allows my flesh to slip into the “outside” of the world. This is a step further than the distinction between “having” a body and “being” a body. The flesh also escapes determination by the later, insofar as “being”, as mentioned above, is overcome by the more ancient and thoroughly immanent phenomenological structure of self-affection, unconditioned by “being”. The flesh knows itself, reveals itself, and teaches itself. I “am” not a body. Rather, I *feel* myself as *flesh*. Thus, it is caught up in the identical dynamic of God’s revelation discussed above in chapter 1.

How does this relate to Christ? Henry is constantly relating the structure of self-affection directly to the Arch-Son in whom the self-affection of the Father is eternally accomplished. He writes:

It is impossible to come to someone, to reach someone, except through Christ, through the original Ipseity that connects that person to himself, making him a Self, the me that he is. It is impossible to touch flesh except through the original Flesh, which in its essential Ipseity gives this flesh the ability to feel itself and experience itself, allows it to be flesh. It is impossible to touch this flesh without

touching the other flesh that has made it flesh. It is impossible to strike someone without striking Christ. And it is Christ who says ‘Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.’ (117)

Our own self-affection is given to us; we find ourselves self-affected, given into that phenomenological structure of Life by the Arch-Son who “connects” us to ourselves. However, while this self-affection takes place outside the purview of the objective *body* it is nonetheless united with the subjective *flesh*. Self-affection is never “fleshless”. This, though, is entirely due to the Incarnation, which within Henry’s phenomenological approach we can designate as eternal, immemorial, or original; Christ, as the transcendental structure in which each self comes into itself, is *eternally* incarnate in a phenomenological sense, eternally experiencing the absolute Life of the Father as the transcendental condition for any fleshly self-affection.

While Henry does not explicitly address Christ’s passion in detail, he does extensively treat the Beatitudes which are a thoroughly appropriate place to begin a theory of the atonement: “Blessed are those who suffer, for they will be comforted”. Henry makes suffering key to his conception of selfhood. He describes this in terms of “suffering oneself”. To live oneself is to suffer oneself, to be “radically passive with respect to one’s own life, to submit to it at each moment in a submitting that is stronger than any freedom” (199). The fundamental difficulty of such suffering is in wanting to escape it and yet finding such escape impossible, since suffering oneself is essential to living as oneself. We wish to escape ourselves, but cannot: “Suffering belongs to the living” (202). This results in anxiety and in anxiety’s extremity, despair (200).

The beatitudinal reversal of suffering into joy is articulated by Henry as follows:

Suffering and joy are linked by an essential affinity, which refers back to a primitive unity: the absolutely primitive original unity of Suffering and Rejoicing. Suffering appears to be the path that leads to enjoying, and thus its condition. It is only in experiencing oneself in the ‘suffer oneself’ that the life of the living Self comes into itself, such that suffering is veritably a path and a way. It is the test that life must pass so that, in and through that test, it attains itself and comes into

itself in that coming that is the essence of any life, the process of its self-revelation. (200-201)

This strikes me as a deep spiritual insight. Let me tie it to another important theme in Henry's discussion of suffering: suffering *teaches itself*. Suffering does not reveal something other than itself. There is no phenomenological split between the experience of suffering and the suffering itself, between the experience and what the experience reveals or teaches; the experience of suffering *is suffering revealing itself*. While we may "objectively" state that suffering is a result of circumstances external to the self, the suffering *itself*, whether physical, emotional, spiritual, etc. is never divorced from subjectivity, from the Ipseity which suffers itself, and from the structure of self-affection; "the absolute Life that gives suffering in itself is given to itself in the Ipseity of this suffering, in its self-giveness" (204).

Suffering holds a privileged place in Henry's discussions of self-affection. Not only is it his most common example, but it holds a place of structural significance. Becoming oneself, knowing oneself, is never a disinterested, objective knowing (the truth of the world) but is always *pathētik*, in the sense of passivity to oneself in self-affection. Henry, though, does not allow suffering to remain the final structural determination in his theory; as in the quote above, this passivity of suffering as living oneself, one's own life, also bursts into joy: "It is only in its 'suffer oneself,' insofar as that occurs, that life attains itself in the self-enjoyment of its own rapture" (201). The depth of Henry's insight is in the fact that this joy or rejoicing is not as a sort of external recompense, a reward after the fact of suffering. Suffering is the "path" that leads to joy. However,

to suffer is not a way or a path in the sense in which we usually understand it; it defines no place in which one would have to be so as to leave it to enter another place and stay there in turn, in that place where joy reigns. On the contrary, 'to suffer' dwells inside 'to rejoice' as *that which leads to joy inasmuch as it dwells within it*, as its eternal and permanent condition. (201, emphasis original).

Suffering is bound up in a transcendental co-habitation and transformation into joy. I do not think this amounts to an “explanation for suffering” in order to excuse God for the reality of suffering. Suffering of the innocent, especially, remains an abominable mystery. Henry writes, though, that “the absolute Life that gives suffering in itself is given to itself in the Ipseity of this suffering, in its self-giveness” (204). Because we only come into ourselves through Christ the Arch-Son, in suffering each self is intimately close with the Life of God, not as an explanation for suffering (as if suffering is “worth the pain” because of the intimacy with God) but simply as a phenomenological insight: in our suffering, God, too, as Absolute Life in Christ, suffers with us and within us.

This may help Henry’s analysis to be placed within a description of the atonement, the suffering and death of Jesus Christ which reconciles humanity and creation to God. It may appear that Henry is so disinterested in history and narrative that to him the story of cross and resurrection are either merely superfluous or even problematic, if they are implicated in the truth of the world. However, I suspect that the transcendental/metaphysical implications of Henry’s “Arch-Son” and “First Living” need not be divorced from historical narrative.

Jesus Christ suffered on the cross. His willingness to submit himself to himself, to the self he was as generated by God, brought him this place of suffering. The “world” is populated with living individuals who have forgotten their condition of Sonship, their source of Life. Jesus is the one who has not forgotten, being the eternal Incarnation of self-affection in the flesh, the original passivity-to-himself, not in temporal terms but in a phenomenological-transcendental sense. On the cross his “to-suffer,” the knowledge of suffering himself as himself, was brought to an “external” or “visible” expression. However, the extremity of Jesus’s passivity to himself on the cross is not a “mere” external or historical fact, but is the pinnacle of this passivity by which

every living individual is themselves. Being immersed in this story of Jesus’s death is not a “truth of the world” because of an internal participation: each living individual partakes of Jesus’s “Arch-suffering.” It is this simultaneous passivity to oneself and to God that each living self is actually experiencing at every point of their life, their flesh.

Jesus cries out from the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”⁶⁷ In the intensity of suffering oneself, in the extremity of total self-affection, Jesus’s suffering is so close to him, so unified with him, that the true experience is one of abandonment by God, abandonment by Life itself to the point of death. This suffering oneself that is experienced by Jesus is an isolation, a loneliness, an utter internal silence, such that “abandonment by God” is an appropriate expression. This suffering, though, this abandonment, is Life giving itself to itself, eternally generating an essential ipseity, the Arch-Son, even at the moment of pain and terror on the Cross. Christ eternally lives as the transcendental condition of suffering itself *as* the transcendental “sufferer” or “suffering servant” – the eternal incarnation is impregnated with suffering-on-the-way-to-joy. This is not a “death of God” theology where the death of Jesus effects the birth of a fully material “Holy Spirit” amongst the community of believers. Instead, I propose that an Henrian inspired description of the atonement accounts for the suffering of Christ’s abandonment on the cross as an eternal-transcendental arch-suffering which is also an eternal transformation into *joy*, such that through suffering is accomplished the joy of reconciliation as proclaimed by Paul in Colossians 1:19-20: “For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.”

⁶⁷ Matthew 27:46b

How does this suffering-into-joy structure given in the experience of the cross translate into the salvation of the living individual? We get a hint at an answer by turning to the following passage in *I Am the Truth*:

Any me that relates to itself grows by itself, swells with its own content. This growth of the self in any possible me, this self-affection in which the self touches itself at every point of its being, is its flesh, its phenomenological flesh, its living flesh. In my living flesh I am given to myself and thus I am a me – I am myself. But it is not me who has given me to myself; it is not me who joins me to myself. I am not the gate, the gate that opens me to myself, nor am I the grass, the grass that allows my flesh to grow. In my flesh I am given to myself, but I am not my own flesh. My flesh, my living flesh, is Christ's. (116)

Suffering, as previously noted, is Henry's privileged example of an affective tonality that reveals nothing other than itself. Suffering is also the category used to describe our own passivity with respect to ourselves in the structure of self-affection. I suffer myself in living my life, in growing my flesh. However, this being myself, this self-affection that takes place in my flesh, is given by Christ. Christ suffered himself to the point of absolute death on the cross, a suffering in every way imaginable or conceivable. This is not an exterior truth, an objective, disinterested observation, but instead reflects back on ourselves in a thoroughly immanent manner. The truth of the cross is the truth of myself. It is there that we know what "to suffer oneself" means, in a knowing that is a "knowing-otherwise," not in the sense of knowing facts about an object, but instead of knowing what it means to experience oneself, suffer oneself through participating in death with Christ. We "see" this on the cross, but not in a disinterested manner; it is thoroughly existential, inviting us to feel the pain of being oneself. Such an "imitation of Christ" is not as an external imitation, but an internal one, since Christ is a historical figure only insofar as the eternal self-affection of the Father as the arch-flesh of Christ is the transcendental structure for our own suffering of ourselves. "Only God can make us believe in him, but he inhabits our own flesh" (233).

2.4. Conclusion: Life on the Cross

In this exploration of Christ and self I hope to have conveyed something of a reading that opens Henry up to Christian anthropology, spirituality, and even systematic categories such as atonement. Christ appears to us *in* life as the giver of life, the transcendental structure by which we are given to ourselves in self-affection. This in turn allows for a reshaping of predestination and faith. My closing remarks on an Henrian theory of the atonement are only short steps down what may be a fruitful path. This discussion of the atonement, though, takes us to an event at the heart of Christian faith which opens onto further questions of salvation. In one of Henry's few direct references to the cross he writes:

By incarnating himself the Word took upon himself the sin and death inscribed in our finite flesh, and he himself destroyed them by dying on the cross. What is restored then is the original human condition, his transcendental birth in divine Life outside of which no life occurs to Life. But this restoration is possible only if it is the Word himself who is incarnated in this flesh, which has become sinful and mortal, so that out of its destruction the Word itself emerges and with it our generation in Him, in the embrace of absolute Life.⁶⁸

The cross, then, enacts the *death* of the objective body, an objectivity which leads us away from Life and into the World where no life is possible. The *Life* of Christ on the cross leads, instead, to the resurrection of the Flesh, a simultaneously recollective movement (recalling our condition of Son) and forward movement (eternally growing in our condition): the dynamic of salvation, a dynamic to which I now turn.

⁶⁸ Henry, *Incarnation*, 234.

III

Henry's Path(s) of Salvation

In this third and final chapter of my study on Christology and selfhood in Henry, I explore Henry's trajectory or "narrative" of salvation while making frequent use of a masterpiece of fantasy literature: Ursula K. Le Guin's *A Wizard of Earthsea*.⁶⁹ This is not a straightforward task. Le Guin is not working within the confines of Henry's phenomenological vocabulary and so the illustrative points which I take from this novel will thematically rather than conceptually or technically relate to Henry's Christology and philosophy. Because Le Guin does not self-identify or write as a Christian, the points of Christological significance in her work require some interpretive leaps that go beyond what is made explicitly available to us in her text. The task of drawing these out is potentially fruitful, I suggest, because Henry's approach to Christology and the Christian faith is so closely related to his notion of self-hood and philosophical anthropology which resonates through Le Guin's novel.

Consequently, the first two sections of the present chapter in particular will be interspersed with illustrations from and reflections upon Le Guin's novel. First, I map Henry's "path of Salvation," building on his definition of the human person as a "Son of God" through his discussion of "Forgetting the Condition of Son" in chapter 8 of *I Am the Truth*, and into his most explicit proposal for salvation in chapter 9, "The Second Birth." This passage of salvation, as we shall see, consists of recalling that the self is fully itself only in being given to itself by the Life of God in Christ. Secondly, I supplement this path with another, ancillary salvation path found more explicitly in chapter 11, "The Paradoxes of Christianity". This secondary approach

⁶⁹ Another attempt to examine *A Wizard of Earthsea* and the question of the Self through contemporary philosophy and psychology is Bernard Selinger's *Le Guin and Identity in Contemporary Fiction*, Ch. 2. Selinger's approach is largely psycho-analytic, making use of the theories of Jacques Lacan and Julia Kristeva.

introduces another dimension of the “forgetting” Henry has explored in chapter 8: in contrast to approaching oneself as the source of one’s own powers, one’s own life, there is instead the difficulty of wanting to escape oneself. This is not so much a “forgetting” of oneself as a “rejection”. Thirdly, I explore the ethical ramifications of Henry’s Christology that he broaches explicitly in chapter 10 of *I Am the Truth*. Ethics is a common point of attack for several of Henry’s critics, and I attempt to defend him against some of the most aggressive of these charges. This discussion leads into my exploration of Henry and intersubjectivity, which opens onto the theological categories of the Holy Spirit and the Church.

3.1. Two Paths of Salvation: Path One – Forgetting and Second Birth

The first insight of Henry’s that is reflected in *A Wizard of Earthsea* has to do with the transcendental nature of the self. The very first paragraph of the novel prefaces the entirety of this particular story by claiming a sort of transcendental or a priori status to the rest of the life of our protagonist, Ged: “His life is told in the *Deed of Ged* and in many songs, but this is a tale of the time before his fame, before the songs were made.”⁷⁰ Thus, though the story is told in a narrative and thus temporal form, there is a suggestion in this line that it can be read not merely temporally prior but also transcendently prior. The transcendental condition of Ged’s public life lies in self-affection, his experience of himself, his own life lived within Absolute Life. Again, at the conclusion to the novel, Le Guin writes, “If Estarriol of Iffish kept his promise and made a song of that first great deed of Ged’s, it has been lost.”⁷¹ On an Henrian reading of *A Wizard of Earthsea*, such a “song” would be *constitutively* “lost”, since what takes place, as I

⁷⁰ Ursula K. Le Guin, *A Wizard of Earthsea* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 2012), 1.

⁷¹ Le Guin, 256. Hereafter, page references to this work will appear in parentheses in the text with the author’s surname.

will go on to show, is Ged's story of self-affection which *cannot* be represented in the word of the world, as Le Guin poetically conveys in the climactic final chapter of the novel.⁷² Henry himself writes regarding the word of Life, which is "older and functionally different" from the word of the world: "The other Word, with which we are now dealing, differs in nature from any human speech. It understands neither words nor meanings, neither signifier nor signified, it has no referent, it does not come from an actual speaker, nor is it addressed to some interlocutor, *to anyone at all who might have existed before it – before it spoke*" (217). It is this "other word" that I suggest Le Guin explores through Ged's story, the "story" of Ged's relationship to himself. Thus, Le Guin's apophatic comments of "before" and "lost" are entirely appropriate to her subject matter. The "time" within which this story takes place is a "immanent temporality," as Henry writes: "In this temporality there is neither before nor after in the sense we understand them, but rather eternal movement, an eternal flux in which life continually experiences itself in the Self that life eternally generates, and which is never separated from itself" (160). *A Wizard of Earthsea* can be read as a parable or narrative-fictional description of the transcendental structure in each self's experience of life – the experience of oneself.

Having established the appropriateness of reading this novel within Henry's transcendental structure of life's self-affection, I now turn to the specifics of Henry's forgetting the condition of Sonship, a forgetting that begins the explicit path of salvation described in the chapter titles of *I Am the Truth*. For Henry, what is crucial for self-hood is the self entering into possession of its own powers (136). However, though we are completely in possession of our

⁷² As the novel approaches its climax, Ged and his friend Vetch sail beyond the outermost reaches of the Archipelago to the east. Le Guin describes what I take to be a faithful parallel to the difference between World and Life, Vetch seeing through the truth of the World while Ged "seeing" through the truth of Life: "it was as if, though one wind drove them in one boat, Vetch went east over the world's sea, while Ged went alone into a realm where there was no east or west, no rising or setting of the sun, or of the stars." Le Guin, *A Wizard of Earthsea*, 246-47.

powers, we have not brought ourselves into that condition of possession: “*Any power the ego possesses is given to it in the very process by which it is engendered as ‘me’ in the Ipseity of the Arch-Son...* Any possibility of power implies that this power is in possession of itself, given to itself – where any self-giveness occurs, in the original Ipseity of Life” (138). As discussed more thoroughly in chapter 2, although we experience ourselves without any gap, without any exteriority, part of that experience of ourselves consists in recognizing that we experience ourselves without having brought ourselves into that condition. The same is true for these “powers”. We are in full and free possession of our own powers, but we have not given ourselves possession of those powers.

Henry’s argument regarding the ego’s forgetfulness of the source of these powers progresses as follows in *I Am the Truth*:

The ego that is free to exercise each of its powers when it wants to experiences itself as such. It experiences its freedom, or more exactly, this power which is its own to exercise each of the powers given to it. It experiences this power because, let us say, the givenness that granted it each of these powers *is none other than its own givenness to itself, the self-giveness constitutive of its Ipseity*. (139-140, emphasis added)

The parallel argument in *Words of Christ* goes on to claim that

Lived in the indubitable experience that they have of themselves in their free exercise, [these powers] are experienced as actually free, and they are free indeed. Consequently, the I which constantly lives the extraordinary capacity of putting each of these powers into play whenever it wants, *easily imagines itself to be their source*.⁷³

And again from *I Am the Truth*: “*Thus is born the transcendental illusion of the ego, whereby this ego takes itself as the ground of its Being*” (140).

Henry’s analysis here is perceptive and accounts for our own experience of our powers and abilities, the power to move our flesh, the power to think. Life gives itself so fully to us, so

⁷³ Henry, *Words of Christ*, 96, emphasis added.

completely without any gap or distance between itself and the self which lives, that the living Self perceives itself to be self-founded; and, indeed, in a *certain sense*, it truly is “self-founded”. What does life give to us? Ourselves. We are given to ourselves, and that givenness to ourselves, the experiences of ourselves within the exercise of our own powers, is nothing other than our self-experience. There is no “otherness” or “difference” in our experience of ourselves and in the use of our powers: “One given to itself, the ego is really in possession of itself and of each of these powers, able to exercise them: it is really free” (141).⁷⁴

This is precisely the experience Ged has in *A Wizard of Earthsea* when he is coming into his powers, developing his abilities and skills as a wizard. He arrives on the island of Roke, ready to attend the renowned school for wizards. At this point he has already experienced the excitement and thrill of his own powers, enjoying them and the praise he receives from others regarding them (Le Guin, 2, 5, 8). Ged’s yearning for self-founded power continues to increase as a result of his interactions with Jasper, another young wizard in training, who becomes Ged’s first acquaintance at the school. Jasper exhibits an air of superiority and aloofness, and we read that “Ged’s pride would not be slighted or condescended to. He swore to prove to Jasper and to all the rest of them among whom Jasper was something of a leader, how great his power really was – someday” (Le Guin, 56-57). Consequently, when reflecting on the wisdom of his teachers on the use of power, Ged thinks to himself: “surely a wizard, one who had gone past these childish tricks of illusion to the true arts of Summoning and Change, was powerful enough to do what he pleased, and balance the world as seemed best to him, and drive back the darkness with his own light” (Le Guin 60). And even in moments of fear and vulnerability, Ged tells himself that such moments “were the shadows merely of his ignorance. The more he learned, the less he

⁷⁴ This argument is repeated in *Words of Christ*, 96.

would have to fear, until finally in his full power as a Wizard, he needed fear nothing in the world, nothing at all” (Le Guin 74).⁷⁵

Le Guin’s descriptions parallel well with Henry’s description of the self and its project of building-oneself or coming-into-itself in the world:

To relate to oneself in and through the care of oneself is to throw oneself forward toward oneself, project oneself ahead, open toward oneself a path that is “outside oneself,” that is “outside” the world. It is to be projected towards an exterior self, a self-that is to-come and unreal: unreal not because the exterior self is still to-come, in the mode of not-yet, but because it is exhibited in the world’s truth, where there is no Life, no Ipseity, and consequently no possible Self. (143)

Thus, according to Henry, what Ged is casting himself towards in his seeking and collecting of his own self-founded and self-governed power and knowledge, is not a Self at all but an unreality within which no life is possible.

Henry makes a distinction between two ways “for the ego to relate to itself”. The first is “*the relation to itself of the ego in care for itself,*” and the second is “*the relation to itself of the ego in Life*” (143, emphasis original). It is the first path that Ged takes,

in which the ego, throwing itself outside itself toward itself, never reaches anything but a phantom, some possibility (to become rich, powerful, prestigious) it gives itself as a task ‘to realize,’ but which is precisely never real, as long as it relates to this task in Care... the relation to self of the ego in care of itself in the world liberates only a ghostly and unreal self. (143)

This is illustrated precisely when Ged releases his “shadow.” Ged attempts to work a difficult spell out of his pride and self-centred care, a spell of summoning a spirit from the dead:

Only for a moment did the spirit glimmer there. Then the sallow oval between Ged’s arms grew bright. It widened and spread, a rent in the darkness of the earth and night, a ripping open of the fabric of the world. Through it blazed a terrible brightness. And through that misshapen breach clambered something like a clot of

⁷⁵ This is the myth of Gnosticism, that a secret knowledge will lead to freedom and salvation, a myth Henry denounces: “the banishment of knowledge – any form of knowledge, whether philosophical, or scientific, intelligible or sensory – in the process of Christian salvation is not gratuitous but rather is motivated by the very nature of the expected salvation. In order to vanquish the Forgetting that renders absolute Life Immemorial, the Forgetting in which thought holds Life, *we should precisely not ask that of thought*” *I Am the Truth* 153, emphasis added.

black shadow, quick and hideous, and it leaped straight out at Ged's face...
Staggering back under the weight of the thing, Ged gave a short, hoarse scream.
(Le Guin, 84)⁷⁶

Ged takes his powers to be utterly his own, ignorant of the gift that they are. In using them towards a project of Care, Care for himself, his pride, and his exterior image as perceived by Jasper and his fellow students (in the "world"), he projects himself towards a shadow of himself, an unreality which attempts to destroy Ged's true self. "The more the ego is concerned with itself, the more its true essence escapes it. The more it thinks of itself, the more it forgets its condition of Son" (144).

How is this forgetting overcome? How is salvation effected? How do we recover the life we have forgotten? For Henry, salvation is strongly connected and linked to *origin* or *beginning*; there is a "recollecting" that takes place, but, as he states, "what can never be remembered is precisely what can never be forgotten,"⁷⁷ "In life, no road leads outside of itself. By this, we mean that it does not allow what is living to cease living."⁷⁸ In Ged's quest to rid himself of his shadow he returns to his first teacher and mentor, Ogion. Ogion offers these words of wisdom, paralleling Henry's approach to salvation:

A man would know the end he goes to, but he cannot know it if he does not turn, return to his beginning, and hold that beginning in his being. If he would not be a stick whirled and whelmed in the stream, he must be the stream itself, all of it, from its spring to its sinking in the sea. You returned to Gont, you returned to me, Ged. Now turn clear round, and seek the very source, and that which lies before the source. There lies your hope and your strength. (Le Guin, 178-79)

This source, for Henry, is Life itself, the originary and ancient self-affection of infinite birth. The New Testament often speaks of salvation as "rebirth," a "birth from above", as in John 3:3. For

⁷⁶ I will return to this passage in my discussion of the second path of salvation below; it opens itself up to multiple avenues of Henry's thought.

⁷⁷ Henry, "Speech and Religion," 234.

⁷⁸ Henry, *Material Phenomenology*, 120.

Henry our return to ourselves is nothing but the endless repetition of our transcendental birth: “our transcendental birth never ends if it is true that the arrival of the Self in its Self as [self]-affected in the [self]-affection of absolute life happens only inasmuch as this [self]-affection happens.”⁷⁹ The source of this birth, the source of our life, is Christ, as explored in chapter 2 above.⁸⁰

How should we understand this Christological foundation of the Second Birth? One helpful way to do this is through Henry’s philosophy of language which draws heavily on a phenomenological approach to the gospel of John.⁸¹ This harkens back to the discussion of Revelation and Truth in chapter 1, above. The Revelation of God is God’s self-revelation and that self-revelation is Christ, who is “*nothing other than the knowledge God has of himself*;⁸² this self-knowledge, this self-revelation, is God’s Word, the Word of God, who was in the beginning and through whom all things were made. This connects with salvation as a transcendental self-affection, the condition of Sonship, demonstrated when Henry writes that “coming into the condition of experiencing oneself and of being revealed to oneself is accomplished in the self-revelation of absolute Life in its Word (*Verbe*). In other words, the possibility that humans have to hear the Word (*Parole*) of God [read: achieve salvation] is consubstantial with them.”⁸³

Life speaks itself. God reveals himself. Salvation does not come from knowledge of a “thing”, either sensible or intelligible. We do not recall our condition of Sonship by knowing a

⁷⁹ Henry, “Speech and Religion,” 232.

⁸⁰ Interestingly, Henry’s proposal for salvation is thoroughly linked to his conception of the Christian ethic, which in turn is thoroughly linked to an ethical injunction to be oneself: “This is the first commandment of the Christian ethic: you will live, or more precisely, you will be this living Self, this one and none other” (183). I will expound on the further implications of Henry’s ethical and inter-subjective proposal in section three of this chapter, below.

⁸¹ This project is most thoroughly undertaken in Henry’s essays “Material Phenomenology and Language,” “Speech and Religion: The Word of God,” and in *Words of Christ*.

⁸² Henry, *Words of Christ*, 90.

⁸³ *Ibid*, 104.

set of referential propositions. “Always already life is given to us by giving us to ourselves in the pathos of its Speech.”⁸⁴ This is a philosophy of language that articulates a language without referent, without audible words or intelligible propositions. However, this language nonetheless *speaks*. What this language says is itself. It is its own truth. *A Wizard of Earthsea* captures something of this sense when Le Guin describes Ged’s first encounter with the Arch-Mage Nemmerle:

As their eyes met, a bird sang aloud in the branches of the tree. In that moment Ged understood the singing of the bird, and the language of the water falling in the basin of the fountain, and the shape of the clouds, and the beginning and end of the wind that stirred in the leaves: it seemed to him that he himself was a word spoken by the sunlight. (Le Guin, 47)

And later on Ged articulates something of this approach to language as well:

All power is one in source and end, I think. Years and distances, stars and candles, water and wind and wizardry, the craft in a man’s hand and the wisdom in a tree’s root: they all arise together. My name, and yours, and the true name of the sun, or a spring of water, or an unborn child, all are syllables of the great word that is very slowly spoken by the shining of the stars. There is no other power. No other name. (Le Guin, 229-230)

Thus there is a language proper to Life, which in turn implies a theory of language that challenges both the commonly understood referential function of language and the unveiling or disclosive function of language in Heidegger, for whom “To say means to show, or make appear, *to present a world in a clearing*.”⁸⁵ Instead, for Henry, “Life is a word in the sense that the language it speaks manifests what it communicates, not as something other than it, but as itself.”⁸⁶

⁸⁴ Henry, “Material Phenomenology and Language,” 364.

⁸⁵ Qtd. in Henry, “Speech and Religion,” 220, emphasis original. See this essay for Henry’s critique of Heidegger in the context of his critique of the truth of the world.

⁸⁶ Karl Hefty, “Introduction to the English Edition,” xxvii.

In *A Wizard of Earthsea*, the system of magic is predicated upon “true names”. To know the true name of something is to have power over it, to “[know] it’s being; which is more than its use” (Le Guin, 20). “Ged” is a true name and thus designates not just referential power but a more existential, essential power. Ged’s quest to undo, reverse, or otherwise overcome his shadow thus revolves around knowing the *name* of this shadow self.

Ged’s journey takes him east over the sea to a place-without-place, the heart of himself, described in extreme terms – the sea is made to seem as dry land, and he walks out onto the land-not-land: “He strode forward, away from the boat, but in no direction. There were no directions here, no north or south or east or west, only towards and away” (Le Guin, 249). The climactic scene is described thus:

Aloud and clearly, breaking that old silence, Ged spoke the shadow’s name and in the same moment the shadow spoke without lips or tongue, saying the same word: “Ged.” And the two voices were one voice.

Ged reached out his hands, dropping his staff, and took hold of his shadow, of the black self that reached out to him. Light and darkness met, and joined, and were one. (Le Guin, 251)

“Ged” does not function here as referential or disclosive but as a word that says and reveals itself, a word of Life. Ged “understands,” understands himself not as an object, but as a self-in-Life, self-affected in Life. Le Guin describes Ged’s “salvation” in the following reflection:

Ged had neither lost nor won but, naming the shadow of his death with his own name, had made himself whole: a man: who, knowing his whole true self, cannot be used or possessed by any power other than himself, and whose life therefore is lived for life’s sake and never in the service of ruin, or pain, or hatred, or the dark. (Le Guin, 253-54)

As discussed above, in pride and self-founding power, Ged cast himself towards a powerful and impressive self of the future, but that future self was an unreality, a place where no life could be found. Instead, when Ged neither rejects nor accepts his shadow self, but simply names it *as*

himself, he recalls his condition of sonship, living life for its own sake, in the immediacy of self-affection.

However, in reading *I Am the Truth* there appear to be not just one, but two narratives of salvation. This first, we have been discovering, is founded in the forgetting and recollection of sonship. The second, found in chapter 11, “The Paradoxes of Christianity,” names not the forgetting of our condition through an identification of our self with our foundation, but instead names the rejection of our condition in realizing the immense difficulty of living as one’s own life. It is to this second path that I now turn.

3.2. Two Paths of Salvation: Path 2 – Weight and Transformation

The burden of life, the burden of the living, is oneself. “In experiencing oneself in the ‘suffer oneself’ of life,” Henry writes, “each person relates to himself in such a way that he bears himself, finding himself charged with self without having wanted it but also without ever being discharged of this charge that he is for himself” (199). This is an understandable progression that emerges from forgetting our condition of Sonship; it is a half-step towards salvation and a half-step towards despair and anxiety. The self, on this account, does not trust its sonship. Instead, the Self finds that its attempts to found itself are futile, then insists that it therefore has no foundation at all, that its life is a mistake, and that it needs to escape or end this accidental life it is in. “From the suffering of this Self charged with self in the suffering of his ipseity there arises anxiety, the anxiety of the Self to be a Self – this Self that he is without being able to avoid or escape this condition, the fact that he is a Self, and, even more, this particular Self that he is now and will be forever” (200). The self does not choose itself, does not choose to come into life. Yet within the gaze and care of the world – the external representation of oneself to oneself, the self casting

itself outside itself towards an unreal reality – the self finds itself judged by the world. And then taking on these criteria and realizing the impossibility of meeting them, the self fruitlessly attempts to make itself into something other, something transcendent, trying to escape the burden of itself entirely.

This experience is accurately illustrated by several passages in *A Wizard of Earthsea*. First, as quoted above, when Ged releases his shadow, it “leaped straight out at Ged’s face” and Ged “[staggered] back under the weight of the thing” (Le Guin 84). The novel thus shows a remarkable attentiveness to the *weight* of being oneself.⁸⁷ This weight emerged first from his pride in attempting to found himself in his powers. Later on, Ged says harshly of himself that “[t]he word that was mine to say I said wrong. It is better that I keep still; I will not speak again. Maybe there is no true power but the dark” (Le Guin 230). Thus is expressed a certain self-hatred, a wish to escape from himself into a realm of darkness, not the night of self-affection,⁸⁸ but the darkness of being free of the weight of himself. We find another illustration of this point when Ged is confronted and pursued by his shadow on the moors of a northern island of the Archipelago: “He ran, he ran, through that vast dusk land where there was no hiding place” (Le Guin, 148). Ged is utterly unable to flee, unable to escape himself, unable to rid himself of being himself. And Henry echoes this: “there is not some exteriority in which this suffering would find the means to avoid the self and flee itself” (204). We are utterly bound to ourselves, thrown into ourselves. This weight is a weight of suffering; the self has not willed to be itself, to live its own life.

⁸⁷ Though it is not clear at this point of the narrative; only at the novel’s end do we discover that this shadow “is” Ged. His experience of it is his experience of himself – a weight, a difficulty, an anxiety.

⁸⁸ A darkness where Henry makes one of his remarkable statements: “In the depths of its night, our flesh is God” (“Phenomenology of Life” 259).

However, in response to this suffering and weight, Henry offers a reflection on the first of the beatitudes,⁸⁹ “blessed are those who suffer.” He writes:

Suffering and Joy are linked by an essential affinity, which refers back to a primitive unity: the absolutely primitive original unity of Suffering and Rejoicing. Suffering appears to be the path that leads to enjoying, and thus its condition. It is only in experiencing oneself in the “suffer oneself” that the life of the living Self comes into itself, such that suffering is veritably a path and a way. (200-201)

And later on:

The Beatitudes describe man in his condition of Son – a Son finding in the essence from which he is born his phenomenological predestination, that of reproducing in himself the destiny of absolute Life, its perpetual coming forth, in the ‘to suffer’ and through it, in the joy of self and in the exhilaration of this rapture. It is because suffering bears within it this ‘to suffer’ and gives it to feeling more strongly than any other tonality of life that all those whom it strikes will also bear within themselves what is given at the summit of this ‘to suffer’ – absolute Life’s joy of self and its exhilaration. (205)

What we have here is, again, a statement of suffering’s indwelling in joy; one of them does not triumph over the other but both are held in a deep unity, such that suffering, the suffering of oneself, is itself the blessing, the joy and exhilaration of being *this* self and none other. The Self suffers itself in being given to itself, but that suffering is on the way to joy of being *this* Self, given to itself by the Arch-Son.

This is not a simple identity of suffering and joy, however; there is, in the eternal process of suffering-and-enjoying-oneself, a “transformation” of this weight of suffering, a transformation captured by Christ’s words in Matthew 11.30: “For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” And this “ease” and “lightness” is effected by the condition of Sonship: the self is self-affected, but has not brought itself into that condition. As Henry writes:

The sentiment of forever being burdened with self without having wanted to is the sentiment it experiences as an unhappiness at being born, in the anguish that arises from this unhappiness. But this sentiment of being forever burdened with self without having wanted to is precisely not given by the ego to itself, nor does

⁸⁹ Partially treated in chapter 2, section three on atonement.

the ego determine its conditions, not does it even bear this burden: only absolute Life's self-giveness gives it to the ego, what carries and bears it is only what makes it bearable to itself, the "to suffer" of absolute Life, in which that Life comes into itself in the exhilaration of its original ipseity. (208, emphasis original)

Being a self, being this singular self, and experiencing oneself as such, is truly a suffering of oneself. Yet it is only a suffering because Absolute Life through the Arch-Son has brought this self into self-affection. There is a crucial Christological dimension to this second path of salvation here: it is Christ, as the First Living, who bears the weight of the self-being-itself, because the ego does not "even bear this burden". Christ has transcendently given the self to itself and thus Christ also transforms the weight of the self to itself, allowing the self to experience Christ's own enjoyment of absolute Life (the Father) and "the exhilaration of [Life's] original ipseity".

Henry's description is incredibly accurate regarding this second path of salvation, the difficulty and pain of being oneself alongside the joy and exhilaration of being oneself. Wrestling through Henry's texts and attempting to articulate their depth and wisdom in this essay on his Christology has impressed its accuracy upon me. One might say that the frustration I have with myself in trying to understand Henry, the uncertainty I have in pursuing this challenging thesis topic, the anxiety I have that in trying to escape my limitations and write a thesis beyond my own power, my own ability, my own self – all of these things speak to the deep accuracy of Henry's description. In this very exercise I am "thrown" into myself, "crushed" against myself, unable to escape the limits of my powers and abilities, yet at the same time I am given *these* powers and abilities with which I have written *this* piece of work as *this* self, and none other. And Le Guin, commenting on her own novel in a recent "Afterward" to a new publication of her *Earthsea Cycle*, suggests just this thing of Ged, as well:

To be the man he can be, Ged has to find out who and what his real enemy is. He has to find out what it means to be himself. That requires not a war but a search and a discovery. The search takes him through moral danger, loss, and suffering. The discovery brings him victory, the kind of victory that isn't the end of a battle but the beginning of a *life*. (Le Guin 266, emphasis added)

3.3. An Henrian Approach to Pneumatology and Ecclesiology

I now move past my engagement with *A Wizard of Earthsea*, but the themes covered in these previous two sections should be borne in mind as I go on to explore pneumatology, ecclesiology, and, in the next section, ethics. Regarding ecclesiology, then. The Christian tradition has generally understood salvation as being dependent upon inclusion into the elect community of God, the Church. The turn to the subject in modernity and enlightenment thought, however, shifted the locus of salvation towards the individual *to the exclusion* of this communal dimension. The focus of my investigation so far has been Christology and the relationship of the Self and Salvation within Henry's Christology. Reflection on community, though, is certainly not missing in Henry's "Christian trilogy". While community does not receive extended attention, Henry's brief reflections are not lacking in profundity or depth.

Additionally, in Christian theology the community of the church is often related to the ongoing presence of the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity. Henry makes no more than passing mentions of the Spirit in his "Christian trilogy" and only once, to my knowledge, explicitly mentions the Trinity.⁹⁰ However, making use of his phenomenology of community for some reflections on an Henrian ecclesiology may also provide some resources for expanding his "philosophy of Christianity" to allow for something of a pneumatology.

For Henry, being given to ourselves in absolute Life is always also a givenness into community: "The self-givenness of absolute phenomenological Life, in which each Son is given

⁹⁰ Henry, *Incarnation*, 171.

to himself, is the Being-in-common of Sons, the preunifying essence that precedes and preunites each of them, determining him a priori both as a Son and as sharing in this essence, potentially, along with all conceivable sons” (257). It is Christ who gives each individual to itself, since through Him absolute Life has come into itself as the First Living; this both establishes our uniqueness, since we are given to ourselves as *this* self and no other, and yet also our commonality, since we are given to ourselves in the same way as any other self: in the absolute Life of the Arch-Son. Regarding this experience of the other and community, Henry writes, “Access to the other is only by way of the access of a Son to a Son, in the transcendental birth of both, in the self-givenness of absolute phenomenological Life in its essential Ipseity – only in God and within the Arch-Son” (257). Thus, the “transcendental birth” of a Son functions both as a) his or her singularity, since Life is given by Christ to *this* singular Self as *this* singular ipseity, and also as b) his or her access to the other: access to the other comes through a common sonship, a common source of Life.

The second birth of the Christian into salvation is often connected to the sacrament of baptism, which signifies inclusion into the body of Christ, the Church. The Church is only the body of Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit, and so there appear to be certain structural similarities between Henry’s “transcendental birth” in intersubjectivity and the role of the Holy Spirit in the inclusion of individuals into the Church. Additionally, the power of the Holy Spirit as described here finds a Trinitarian expression towards the end of *Words of Christ*: “One is in the other in this way, the Father in his Son, the Son in his Father according to a reciprocal inwardness (each experiencing, living, loving one in the other), which is an interiority of love, which is their common Love, their Spirit.”⁹¹ Therefore it is appropriate to suggest that access to

⁹¹ *Words of Christ*, 85.

the other, according to Henry, is through the eternal common Love of Absolute Life and the First Living, that is, through the Holy Spirit of love between the Father and the Son.

Henry's emphasis on the affectivity and this passing reference to the Spirit as a "reciprocal inwardness" offers insight into how the Church might be understood as bound together through affectivity and not out of a common list of propositions or even through the objective and visible practices of the sacraments and liturgy. In *Incarnation* Henry writes,

The content of every community is all that belongs to Life and has its possibility in it. Suffering, joy, desire, or love each carry a gathering power infinitely greater than what one attributes to 'Reason,' which properly speaking has no power to gather, in as much as one cannot deduce the existence of a single individual from it, or anything that must be gathered in a 'community.'⁹²

The "content" of the Christian community is the transcendental affectivity of suffering, joy, desire, and love, shared in the common experience of self-affection which, as Henry demonstrated in chapter 7 of *I Am the Truth*, is always an experience given by and in Christ. Henry's one direct reference to the Church supports this analysis, as he writes: "Christ remains in his grown body, in his 'entire' body, which the Fathers also call his Church. He remains in this 'entire' body, which is his mystical body, as that which gives each of its members to itself. What he gives to each of its members is thus himself."⁹³

Some tentative steps toward an Henrian inspired ecclesiology and pneumatology could thus unfold as follows. Life comes from God, is of God, and is God. The Father as Absolute Life eternally engenders himself as the transcendental Ipseity of Christ, the Arch-Son, and Christ, as the Word of God, is the knowledge and feeling that God has of himself. This engendering is an eternal-transcendental reciprocal interiority between Father and Son, a common bond which is their Spirit. The Spirit is co-eternal with the Father and the Son; Life only affects itself in an

⁹² Henry, *Incarnation*, 244.

⁹³ *Ibid*, 251.

essential Ipseity, Christ, and this self-affection is the eternal movement of the Spirit. Each person of the Trinity depends on the others, equally singular and equally united. In regards to the living human person, it is Christ as the First Living through whom each of them is engendered.⁹⁴ This gift of Life is the gift of every Self to itself in self-affection. What Christ is infinitely, living beings are finitely. These finite living beings are living beings only because they are joined by Christ to himself, and thus to each other. Yet we must remember that Christ himself is transcendently-eternally engendered by the Father in the interior-reciprocal Love which is the Spirit, and a living being will come into itself in the same way that Christ has come into himself. The path to Christ is a repetition of his eternal engendering and birth from the Father, a relation which *is* the Spirit. The Spirit is thus a constitutive part of each living being joining itself to Christ.

Anyone who is living, caught up in the dynamic of self-affection, has thus been born of God, joined to Christ's transcendental birth which is the Spirit. There is therefore a certain universalism at work in such an Henrian approach to pneumatology, and thus a universal *Church*, freed from the "objective" determinations of participation in external activities of love, worship, or sacrament.

Does Henry, though, offer any possibility of an ecclesiology that does not simply include every living being but also designates a distinctive community? A hint of a direction is provided at the end of *Incarnation*:

It is not for everyone, it is true, to live as his God what gives him to himself. The majority live like idolaters: They hardly care at all about the power that gives them life, and live in it only for themselves, and care, in all things and in others, only for themselves. To the members of his body, to each of them who, given to themselves in the self-giveness of the Word, will live only from the infinite Life that is put to the test in this Word, *to those who love one another in Him in such a*

⁹⁴ See Henry, *I Am the Truth*, 128.

*way that it is Him they love in them, Him and all those who are in Him, eternal Life will be given, so that in this Life that has become theirs, they are saved.*⁹⁵

The Church, then, is that community which seeks to not “live like idolaters,”⁹⁶ a community that acknowledges, celebrates, and worships “the power that gives them Life,” the Father (Arch-Life) through the Son (Arch-Son) in the Spirit (Arch-Birth). This is also a community that “love[s] one another in him in such a way that it is Him they love in them, Him and all those who are in Him,” so that love becomes a constitutive feature of this community. Though there are hints of an “institutional” character of this body of Christ, in a common life of word and deed, what Henry offers to ecclesiology is thus far more expansive than a mere human institution and derives itself from the *universality* of the living addressed above. This is not to say that he is unwilling to demarcate between living in Life or living in death; most of us are idolaters, and idolatry is surely as pervasive within the institutional church as without. Thus, we should hear Henrian resonances when Rowan Williams suggests that we ought not to be surprised when we see what it means to be the Church – the mystical body of Christ – exemplified outside the confines of human structures.⁹⁷

3.4. Henry’s Christological Ethics

This emphasis on the body of Christ as a community that *loves* is a helpful opening onto Henry’s Christological ethics. What is interesting, though, is that Henry’s tenth chapter on “The

⁹⁵ Henry, *Incarnation*, 251-252.

⁹⁶ Though, certainly, there is nothing that “protects” the church from being an idolatrous community. Freedom from idolatry is not guaranteed by being the church. Perhaps the church, more importantly than effectively resisting idolatry is that community which admits and confesses its idolatry.

⁹⁷ See Williams, *Token of Trust*, 128: “One of the simplest possible definitions of the Church is to say that it is meant to be the place where Jesus is visible active in the world. And once we have said that, we can turn it around and say that where Jesus is visible active, something very like the Church must be going on. This is very far from saying that the visible Church and its teachings and sacraments don’t matter; it is simply to recognize that at times we learn something about what matters most in the Church by looking outside its visible boundaries”.

Christian Ethic” in *I Am the Truth* is almost exclusively focussed on the critique and overcoming of the Law and has little discussion of intersubjectivity or community. His ethical proposal is interwoven closely with the dynamic of salvation. As Henry writes, “To do the Heavenly Father’s Will is to let the relation to the self that joins the singular Self to itself be accomplished, just like the relation to itself of absolute Life – for the living man it is to let life be accomplished in himself like the very Life of God” (166). And later on: “This is the first commandment of the Christian ethic: you will live, or, more precisely, you will be this living Self, this one and none other” (183).

The Christian ethic is established in the command to live. The command to live establishes a theory of action which is totally at odds with the action of the world. In the world, to act means to take an interior plan or design and make it outward, objective, either in the form of a material object (a craftsman’s vase) or a mental object (a perfect circle). (172) This, according to Henry, is what the law attempts to accomplish, forming and establishing an objective criterion for external and visible action. The problem with the law is that it does not produce the *keeping* of the law; simply having a law is no guarantee that it will be kept.

For Henry, Christianity offers a new understanding of action, one that holds action within life as an invisible force. This functions within Christ’s words condemning hypocrisy and enjoining those who act to do so in secret: God sees what the human objective eye does not see. Fasting should appear as not-Fasting. When performing an act of mercy, do not let your right hand know what your left hand is doing. In *Words of Christ* this secret locus of action is referred to as “the heart”. The action of life is not an externalization of an interior potentiality. Instead, it remains within life as an experience of itself. This is why it is an ethical action and injunction to be oneself, to live one’s own life as a self-affection of one’s self; action is never separated from

experiencing one's self as given to one's self in self-affection by the absolute Life of God in Christ.

Additionally, non-reciprocal relation to God indicates the importance of non-reciprocal love towards others. Because we are first given to ourselves without having brought ourselves into that condition of self-affection, it is clear that this is a *non-reciprocal relationship*: “*Non-reciprocity indicates the immanent generation of our finite Life in the infinite Life of God.*”⁹⁸ Instead of loving others because they love us, as in exterior relationships that are “natural” – familial, national, geographical relationships – a new reciprocity is established out of the non-reciprocal relationship between humans and God. This “new” reciprocity

no longer results from the fact that the human beings among whom it is established have the same nature, a human nature. It results from the interior relationship of each living being to the Life in which it lives; and, in this manner, from the interior relationship that it has, in the Life, with each one of the other living beings who draw their own life from this same Life – which is his or hers and which is theirs, which is their life in common.⁹⁹

Every living person's “interior relationship” to God does not designate this as a “common nature,” such that love for each other comes from recognizing this common nature as an exterior designation. Rather, it is a *phenomenological* unity; this unity comes first from experiencing the non-reciprocal relationship between each living person and the absolute Life of God in Christ.

3.5. Is Henry a Gnostic?: Criticisms of Henry

To bring this chapter to a close I want to briefly address one popular critique of Henry, since this critique often arises in response to Henry's approach to ethics. Henry's central notion of self-affection may appear to advocate for a gnostic escapism from reality, withdrawing into an

⁹⁸ *Words of Christ* 34.

⁹⁹ *Ibid* 37.

isolated self which experiences a private relationship between itself and God. This is a common criticism of Henry,¹⁰⁰ as we read from Joseph M. Rivera: “Henry tends towards a radical monism, one that raises the question of a Gnostic dualism (the radical separation of self and world in which reality is alone found in the self).”¹⁰¹ Kevin Hart extends the critique from monism to the lack of intentionality, since “love,” the argument goes, “including divine love, is radically intentional;” “Only a phenomenology that accords weight to intentionality, and to the counter-intentionality of the divine gaze,” Hart insists, “is one that can give an adequate account of Christianity.”¹⁰² Finally, Ronald L. Mercer Jr. offers the following critique in his comparison of Henry and Emmanuel Levinas:

What is insufficient in Henry’s work is that life as the field into which living being emerges is not specific enough in its essence to describe the living *human* being. Inasmuch as life acts as a coming to oneself, a wakefulness open to the world, the transcendence of life does not assure that the living ‘I’ will acknowledge the right of anything else to awaken into the world as different. If living things are the very essence of God and the very essence of God is my essence, then all living things and I are essentially the same. Everyone is me.¹⁰³

Mercer is not entirely incorrect with his final inference in the above quotation that, for Henry, “everyone is me”. Henry does indeed write that

[Since] the other, ‘others,’ the ‘neighbor,’ is just another me, an *alter ego*, its essence can only be identical to mine. It follows that everything that Christianity has asserted on the subject of this ‘me’ that I am also holds good for this other ‘me’ that is the other’s ego. (247)

However, in order to adjudicate these critiques of Henry, we should examine more closely what Henry says about love and the experience of the other.

¹⁰⁰ This critique is also found in Felix O Murchadha, *A Phenomenology of Christian Life*, 20-26, but without the ethical thrust; O Murchadha’s critique centres more on the “claim that Christ came to save creation”, since Henry challenges the notion of creation as dealing in the truth of the world.

¹⁰¹ “Generation, interiority and the phenomenology of Christianity” 233.

¹⁰² “‘Without World’: Eschatology in Michel Henry” 191, 192.

¹⁰³ Mercer, “Need for a Levinasian Other,” 166.

How essential is radical alterity to ethics? How intentional is love? Henry writes:

Life is love. Life is love because it experiences itself infinitely and eternally. Because it is Life, “God is love,” as John says (1 John 4:8). It is because God (as absolute Life) is love that he commands Love. He commands it of all the living by giving them life, by generating them in himself as his Sons, *those who, feeling themselves in infinite Life’s experience of self and its eternal love, love themselves with an infinite and eternal love, loving themselves inasmuch as they are Sons and feeling themselves to be such.* (186, emphasis original)

Life in me leads me to love Life in the other, recognizing the *same* Life self-affected in a *different, singular, and unique* self in the other. The necessity of God’s Life in all living persons does not lead to identical personalities in people or a bland ontological amorphism; rather, as Henry writes of each self who receives its life from Christ, the Arch-Son, “*such is the essence of the Arch-Ipseity generated in absolute Life that, giving to everything whatever it is to which Life is given in order to experience itself, Life makes that thing, in the phenomenological realization of experiencing itself, into a Self that is absolutely singular and different from any other*” (130, emphasis original). Henry is thus clearly committed to the difference and irreducible singularity of each individual self.

Why do we assume that love needs to be constituted by intentionality? Intentionality is how we relate to objects in the world; I intend this computer screen, for example. Is it not possible that there is something qualitatively different about love that must escape the indifferent structure of intentionality within the truth of the world? God is love, God is nearer to us than we are to ourselves. God is in Christ, and Christ is in every other. Suggesting a primordial unity in life does not mean we dissolve into an amorphous mass, nor does it mean that every act of love is necessarily more attentive to myself than to the other. I do not love because I expect something in return, and Henry’s philosophy does not suggest such a scenario. Indeed, Henry clearly makes

use of Christianity to *reject* reciprocity, for what credit is it to love those who love you?¹⁰⁴ It is Christ who gives each self to itself, thus establishing a transcendental non-reciprocal relationship¹⁰⁵ – what we might call *grace* – and it is Christ who also establishes the relationship between them: “Undergoing experiencing itself in the Ipseity of the First Self, absolute Life generates in its transcendental possibility every Self and thus every conceivable I. It generates them as living Selves and egos and at the same time generates in them the transcendental possibility of their relation.”¹⁰⁶

To Rivera and Hart on the charge of Gnosticism,¹⁰⁷ I would respond by suggesting that they do not take into account what Henry means by “world”, which designates something very specific, as discussed in chapter 1, above. Additionally, Henry’s sophisticated treatment of flesh, incarnation, and intersubjectivity, all designate themes that resist simple rejection as Gnosticism as evidenced in the following passage from *I Am the Truth*:

It is impossible to come to someone, to reach someone, except through Christ, through the original Ipseity that connects that person to himself, making him a self, the me that he is. It is impossible to touch flesh except through the original Flesh, which in its essential Ipseity gives this flesh the ability to feel itself and experience itself, allows it to be flesh. It is impossible to touch this flesh without touching the other flesh that has made it flesh. It is impossible to strike someone without striking Christ. And it is Christ who says: “Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did to me” (Matthew 25: 40)... [T]he me is not anchored in itself forever except by force of the essential Ipseity that, giving it to itself, binding it to itself in its *pathētik* embrace, has made of it this me that it forever is. Thus, before this me ever existed, the original Ipseity of the Arch-Son cast it into itself. Without this Ipseity that preceded it, no me would ever be. So if I have something to do with me, I first have to do with Christ. And if I have to do with another, I first have to do with him in Christ. And everything I do to him, I first do to Christ. (117)

¹⁰⁴ *Words of Christ* 27.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid* 32.

¹⁰⁶ *Incarnation* 243.

¹⁰⁷ As well as Felix O Murchadha, in note 14 above.

In this passage we see that the transcendental incarnation has eternally and continuously taken place in every finite Flesh, in every self-affection of a person in Life. Self-affection is never “un-fleshed”. Flesh and self-affection are held in a phenomenological unity. This is not to say that objective materiality is necessary for self-affection; such objectivity would be designated as “body,” separated from self-affection by being placed in the world of hetero-affection. “Flesh,” on the contrary, is a transcendental-phenomenological category; self-affection takes place beyond/before the objective body, but never without the subjective flesh. As Christ is that Arch-Ipseity through which each living finds itself self-affected, we can say that Christ is transcendently incarnate, the Arch-Incarnation. Flesh is the site of self-affection, and if God’s life is “strong” self-affection, as Henry puts it, then God self-affected in Christ lives as an eternal, transcendental Arch-Flesh.

Additionally, Henry provides a rigorously Christological grounding for ethics in the encounter with the Other, since Christ is the one who joins each self to itself and thus is transcendently implicated in every living being. To reject or hurt the other is to reject Christ, the transcendental foundation of every living self, and to reject Christ is also to reject myself. This is not to slip ethics into a conception where one acts with love towards the other because the other simply *is* yourself; the unity of the self with the other in Life is, admittedly, a theme for Henry, but not one which can provide grounds for a devastating or final critique of his ethics. Recognizing the unity of every living being in Life through Christ does not necessarily result in a solipsistic ethic. The communal Life of living individuals that desires to grow can be a radical call to care for the other and promote the flourishing of Life even without the radical alterity of the human other summoning the self to do justice and love.

3.6. Conclusion: The Interdependence of Ethics and Salvation

In this chapter I have sought to make clear why Henry's phenomenological approach to salvation is a compelling one. Although it does not pretend to be an exhaustive theological treatment of soteriology, the foregoing discussion does seek to offer some helpful paths forward by closely connecting salvation with our originary condition of sonship through Christ. Additionally, tying ethics to the point of identification with salvation is an important move for Christianity to recover, even if Henry's particular approach to ethics appears to suffer from a lack of otherness (though I have tried to show that there are alternative ways of approaching this dilemma). Ethics is also closely tied to salvation in Henry's first ethical commandment: to be *this* living self. Ethics is thus not merely about our relation to others, and salvation is not merely how we are saved by God in Christ; both are dependent upon each other. In Le Guin's *A Wizard of Earthsea*, Ged's path to salvation and, we can now add, ethics, sprung from "the very source, and that which lies before the source" (Le Guin, 179): the transcendental reality of self-affection.

Conclusion

Henry, Christian Theology, and Spirituality

In coming to the conclusion of this study on Christology and selfhood in Henry, it is appropriate to sum up the main points I have attempted to bring out in my exposition. First, the Revelation of God is always in Christ; it cannot occur in “the world”. This does not completely ignore the question of Jesus of Nazareth’s historical particularity, but it does, admittedly, place Christ within a transcendental rather than historical framework. Christ is the First Living in which Life comes into itself, as its eternal condition. Christ joins God to himself: “No life without a living. Not a living without life” (62).

Secondly – and crucially for my purposes of examining my own spiritual question of how Jesus Christ relates to individual persons throughout history – in this movement of life into itself as Christ, Christ also reveals us to *ourselves*. We cannot come to live our own life without Christ giving it to us. And only he can give us our own life, for he inhabits Life from its eternal beginning. Through Christ we come to know ourselves not via abstract knowledge, but with an experiential and *living* knowledge that comes only from our self-affected experience of ourselves, which is housed within the acknowledgement that we have not brought ourselves into Life. Rather, Life is an eternal gift of the Absolute Life of God through Christ.

Finally, this movement of coming-into-oneself through the gift of one’s own life in Christ is not merely a creational or transcendental principle; it is also a necessarily *soteriological* movement. We have forgotten the life given in Christ and are casting about in “the world” where “no life is possible.” By truly coming into our own Life we return to an eternal beginning, which is Christ inhabiting Life as the eternally begotten Son of Absolute Life (the Father). This return is salvific since by it we are freed from the lifelessness of “the world,” and this opens up onto ethics and community: the life of the Church.

Am I entirely satisfied with my exploration of Henry's Christology? Has this offered a sufficient answer to the question of who I am in relation to the particular, historical figure of Jesus of Nazareth? In many ways I do believe this *has* been a fruitful and successful study vis-à-vis my initial question. Henry, I think, has been able to utilize a transcendental model of Christology without sacrificing the particularity of Christ or collapsing the distinction between God and the human person. Christ remains unique, particular, and singular. In some ways I think Henry's transcendental direction is a necessary and appropriate one for interpreting what the scriptures and Christ continue to mean across time and space. An overly historical approach might be constrained from making such transcendental or metaphysical claims. This is not to neglect history, either, for Henry's argument, if he is correct, would place Christology at the foundation of any approach to historical knowledge. Only because we find ourselves in Life, given into self-affection by the Life of God in Christ, are we able to experience the hetero-affection of historical reality.

Is Henry's philosophy of Christianity, then, an important place for Christian theology to turn as Christianity faces the intellectual and practical challenges of the 21st century and beyond? This, too, I think should be answered in the affirmative. Henry's approach to Christianity is simultaneously creative and grounded in the tradition. While his approach to scripture and the church fathers would likely not pass any exegesis exam, the innovative nature of his approach is one which is required of the Church if the tradition is to remain alive. It would be fruitful, I think, to put Henry in dialogue with the tradition of interpreting the scriptures; he touches on theologians like Augustine, Anselm, and Eckhart, but a continued dialogue between Henry and the tradition of Christian theology would help to hone in on the innovations he makes on the tradition. His phenomenological-transcendental approach to the scriptures takes up many themes

of the tradition, such as the singularity of Christ and the radical dialectic of unity-difference between God and the human person, but he places them on a different plane than that of ontology, and it may be that the “God-without-being” theme is a crucial one for Christian theology to explore moving forward. Henry would be an intriguing dialogue partner on this score.

I certainly do not think that my spiritual journey with Henry, Christ, or myself has reached its final destination, even as my time with this study draws to a close. And yet, despite the incomplete nature of this journey, Henry has opened up an understanding of life in Christ as not only infinite and dynamic, but also as full, rich, and, in a certain sense, *stable*. My own life cannot be doubted – it can only be lived. This is not a naïve interpretation of *cogito ergo sum*, but instead is a radically *Christian* approach to selfhood. There is a fullness and richness to Life which cannot be created or discovered, because I am always-already inhabiting it. And this should offer hope to *every* person: inscribed at the very heart and as the very condition of their finite Life is the Infinite Life of God. No matter how bleak the situation, God in Christ is always as close to us as our very selves: *Au fond de sa Nuit, notre chair est Dieu*.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁸ “In the Depths of its Night, our flesh is God.” Michel Henry, “Phenomenology of Life,” trans. Nick Hanlon in *Transcendence and Phenomenology*, ed. Peter M. Candler Jr. and Conor Cunningham (London, UK: SCM Press, 2007), 259.

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