

Phenomenological Models of Inter-Subjectivity: The Position of Michel Henry¹

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In this paper, I would like to provide some of the elements necessary for a comprehension of Michel Henry's position within the context of the phenomenological debate on inter-subjectivity. This apparently straightforward task is, in reality, extremely difficult.

The grandeur of all great thinkers lies in the fact that they speak not of themselves or in their own names, but rather engage with 'the things themselves.' However, it is not at all clear whether and how it is possible to solicit and to establish a comparison between thinkers regarding such 'things themselves.' This difficulty is certainly present in the case under investigation since, strictly speaking, the expression 'inter-subjectivity' refers only to Husserl's formulation of the issue, which all the major interlocutors in the phenomenological debate on this topic have explicitly criticized, rejected and variously replaced. The alleged 'thing itself' therefore immediately bursts into a difficult-to-manage plurality of all the ways the thing in question has been named over time: "*Fremdwahrnehmung*," "*Mitsein*," "*un-pour-l'autre*" and "*pathos-avec*" are only some of the expressions Scheler, Heidegger, Levinas and Henry have used to reconfigure and rename the problem that Husserl's phenomenology left as a legacy. These different expressions not only involve different historical-natural idioms, but also entirely different theoretical languages that, importantly, are not immediately translatable one into the other, and may indeed be mutually incompatible. In this respect, and clearly, the problem of 'inter-subjectivity'—I use the expression here in an entirely provisional and general sense—has already emerged in all of its theoretical urgency.

It may be noted, in beginning, that Henry lucidly and ruthlessly pointed out the difficulty that I have just briefly outlined, by stressing more than any other thinker before him the radically immanent character of this phenomenon: this—

¹ The following article is a translation of a contribution offered originally to the international conference of the Fonds Michel Henry at Louvain and the 'Istituto Italiano di Cultura' at Bruxelles, entitled *Michel Henry en résonance. Réceptions italiennes et débats actuels* (Louvain-la-Neuve/Bruxelles, 26-27 February 2015).

the very condition determining the possibility of accessing the things themselves—takes place as the self-revelation of life to itself in pure self-affection. What can a form of inter-subjectivity—i.e., engagement, sharing, or community—mean, then, if it has nothing to do with objects or things, but is located at the original level of this self-revelation in immanence?

It bears repeating that my aim here is not to discuss directly Henry's perspective on inter-subjectivity, which, moreover, has already been addressed by a large body of literature.² Rather, I seek to organize the phenomenological space in which Henry's theoretical proposal should properly be located. This space I would define according to coordinates represented by the following basic theoretical options: a) the option that founds inter-subjectivity in an opening that is rooted *a priori* in the point of view that receives the manifestation of the phenomenon; b) the option that, conversely, frames this encounter with the other as structurally *a posteriori*, as an event whose possibility is *not* always already inscribed in the transcendental capacity of the point of view itself. The generic term 'point of view' is intended formally with respect to the multiplicity of ways in which it is instantiated in various phenomenological contexts. The principle according to which there can be no manifestation unless it is received and collected within such a specific point of view, whether this is termed transcendental consciousness, *Dasein*, *ipséité*, *adonné* or still another term, the 'point of view' is the space in which the phenomenological gaze is rooted and is that in relation to which the other is indeed an 'other,' a second and distinct point of view.

The pair *a priori-a posteriori* establishes two clearly distinct models for the phenomenological constitution of the relation between these points of view. We cannot, of course, reasonably expect to find these models in a pure state in this or that author or text; they always intertwine and overlap. Nonetheless, these models are effective in showing the underlying difference between, for example, Husserl's position in *Cartesian Meditations*, according to which primordially reduced consciousness constitutes another consciousness *only after* meeting a *Leib* similar to its own (the *a posteriori* model), and Heidegger's idea of the 'always already being-with others' of *Dasein* (the *a priori* model). While a position such as Levinas,' which is founded on the radical solitude of the hypostasis, is located on the same *a posteriori* side as is Husserl's (to which, incidentally, it clearly owes a great deal), it is clear that Scheler's position, founded on an *a priori* opening guaranteed by "sympathy," clearly lies on the opposite side (and it is no coincidence that it inspired Heidegger's position).

² See, for example: Olivier Ducharme, *Michel Henry et le problème de la communauté. Pour une communauté d'habitus* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2013); Grégori Jean, "De l'expérience métaphysique d'autrui à l'intersubjectivité en première personne," *Revue Internationale Michel Henry* 2 (2011): 16-70; Eric Rohde, "Le Soi au pluriel: entre répétition et rencontre," *Revue Internationale Michel Henry* 2 (2011): 197-206; Graciela Fainstein Lamuedra, "Alteridad, intersubjetividad y comunidad en la vida en el pensamiento de Michel Henry," *Investigaciones fenomenológicas* 3 (2011): 175-92; Claudio Tarditi, "Figures de l'intersubjectivité. Michel Henry critique des *Méditations cartésiennes* de Husserl," *Dialegesthai. Rivista telematica di filosofia* 13 (2011), accessed January 27, 2015 (<http://mondodomani.org/dialegesthai/cta04.htm>).

The identification of the *a priori-a posteriori* pair, as the marker of a fundamental polarity in the phenomenological manner of conceptualizing the problem of inter-subjectivity, cannot be taken for granted. Traditionally, in fact, the problem has been posed in terms of a different conceptual structuring pair, that of ‘mediate-immediate.’ On the basis of this pair, the problem can be formulated as follows: in an encounter with others (*autrui*), are they manifest to me *immediately* as such, or does something else (my *ego*, the other person’s body, a useable or sign of some kind) inevitably mediate, with the result that the event occurs in an, as it were, derivative way?

Henry himself, for example, posed the issue in exactly these terms in one of his preparatory notes³ to the course he taught in 1953-54 in Aix-en-Provence regarding “The Communication between Consciousnesses and the Relation with the Other.”⁴ As a matter of fact, this note is all the more significant in that it sought to explicate the overall structural frame of Henry’s analysis:

*The experience of the other. The schema of my analysis of the experience of the other is the following: 1/ A critique of analogical reasoning and of Hegel, Sartre, Scheler. (+ The classic theory: pantheism, sympathy, etc.) 2/ A direct experience of the other is given.*⁵

After having baptized the problem of inter-subjectivity with an expression—‘the experience of the other’ (*expérience d’autrui*)—that functions as a common thread throughout the entire evolution of his thought, Henry laid the foundations for a two-stage trajectory. The first, *pars destruens*—which consists in criticizing analogical reasoning, a manner of thinking that is mediated structurally by what functions as *analogatum*—was followed by the formulation of his own thesis. The specificity of the latter consisted in asserting the ‘direct,’ unmediated character of the way we experience others, and in showing how it is phenomenologically possible to account for such immediacy.

It is clear that the immediate-mediate and *a priori-a posteriori* pairs are not entirely heterogeneous. They rather lend themselves to superimposition, to the extent that the mediated tends to coincide with the *a posteriori* and the immediate with the *a priori*. Nonetheless, it is more productive to keep them separate and to reformulate accordingly the traditional manner of framing the problem, primarily in order to avoid any rush to support one of the key assumptions of this traditional framing, namely the idea that access to ‘an immediate and direct experience of the

³ Michel Henry, “Notes sur l’expérience d’autrui,” ed. Grégori Jean, *Revue Internationale Michel Henry* 2 (2011): 71-138. The Editor has assembled materials collected by Henry in “L’expérience d’autrui” with thematically related notes discovered in the working notes to *L’essence de la manifestation*. On this monographic issue, see Jean, “De l’expérience métaphysique d’autrui à l’intersubjectivité en première personne,” 18-19.

⁴ “La communication des consciences et les relations avec autrui” (See Henry, “Notes sur l’expérience d’autrui,” 139-72).

⁵ “*Expérience d’autrui. Le schéma de mon analyse de l’expérience d’autrui est le suivant: 1/ Critique du raisonnement par analogie et de Hegel, Sartre, Scheler. (+ théorie classique: panthéisme, sympathie, etc.) 2/ Il y a une expérience directe d’autrui*” (Henry, “Notes sur l’expérience d’autrui,” 71). See also Jean, “De l’expérience métaphysique d’autrui à l’intersubjectivité en première personne,” 23.

other' (*expérience immédiate et directe d'autrui*) is truly a phenomenological ideal, to be pursued at all costs. This assumption, as we have just seen, also guides Henry's initial formulation of the issue. Framing the problem in terms of an *a priori-a posteriori* access to inter-subjectivity at least has the advantage of being more neutral than the first pair in terms of evaluation, and of highlighting, for example, the fact that a thinker like Levinas, who focused his enquiry on inter-subjectivity, radically rejected the *a priori* position which at first glance appeared to be the most promising.

At this point it is finally possible to formulate precisely the thesis that I seek to argue here: in his attempt to develop a phenomenologically satisfactory solution to the problem of inter-subjectivity, Michel Henry no doubt adopted an *a priori* model; this approach led him to propose what is essentially a variation on Heidegger's position, despite all of the criticisms, some of which were extremely harsh, that he directed at this latter position. In short, it is not a coincidence that the notion of '*pathos-avec*' so closely resembles Heidegger's idea of '*Mitsein*'—'*être-avec*' in French. Beyond all the superficial criticisms, there is a deep and unintended solidarity that exposes Henry's position to all the difficulties of the *a priori* model in general and of that of Heidegger in particular.

Generally speaking, in Henry's conceptual framework, the problem of inter-subjectivity appears immediately, already in the notes he wrote in his youth, in more or less the following terms (that themselves remain substantially the same): in order to be truly of an other (*autrui*) and not of a fictional surrogate, the experience of the other must be the experience of the other person's feelings, *pathos*, ipseity. This is alive and pathic, just like mine. Otherwise, it would not truly be an experience of the other, but rather a pseudo-experience made up of unreal, noematic and transcendent content. What is more, it is not even enough to access another person's lived experience, because the crucial point is that this *Erlebnis* or lived experience must be experienced in the absolutely specific, individual way that the other person experienced it. In asserting this radicalization of similar positions (primarily that of Scheler, from which the example was taken), Henry argues that is not enough to grasp the shame on the face of the other person in order to declare the problem of inter-subjectivity resolved. The problem is not the other person's shame, it is the way the other experiences it, his or her manner of experiencing shame: "it is not the experience of *that which* is experienced by the other that is important, but rather the experience of *the other [as] experiencing this or that thing*."⁶ With this, it is already clear where Henry's trajectory will take him: indeed, it is clear that this experience is only possible if there is no gap (either temporal or logical) separating the other person's experience and the way I experience the other person's experience.

Experience is genuinely an experience of the other only if (as Henry explicitly states at the end of *Pathos-avec*, thereby distilling the conclusion of this

⁶ Henry, "Notes sur l'expérience d'autrui," 87: "Ce qui compte n'est pas du tout l'expérience de *ce qu'*éprouve l'autre mais l'expérience de l'*autre éprouvant* telle ou telle chose."

essay), “community is an *a priori*.”⁷ Now, this statement—which, unsurprisingly, concludes a heated critical engagement with the Fifth of Husserl’s *Meditations*, the paradigm of a phenomenology judged to be incapable of achieving this very *a priori* dimension of inter-subjectivity—inevitably sets the stage for an engagement with the equally paradigmatic view representing the opposite position, that of Heidegger. Indeed, this comparison arrives in § 47 of *Incarnation*, a section that also represents Henry’s most extensive discussion of inter-subjectivity as a mature thinker.

It is clearly impossible to retrace the entirety of the lengthy path that would enable us to grasp fully the function that this section, entitled “*The Experience of the Other in a Phenomenology of Life*” (*L’expérience d’autrui dans une phénoménologie de la vie*), plays in the overall work. It will suffice to note that Henry uses this section to engage once more the issue that he had addressed already at the level of the phenomenology of the flesh—in relation to which, in that context, he had reached a dead end before then re-engaging the issue, and this time resolving it, on the level of the phenomenology of incarnation. Henry employs the customary strategy of identifying the non-explicit assumption due to which phenomenology until that point had been unable to develop an adequate solution to the problem of inter-subjectivity. After quickly recalling the limits of Husserl’s approach—specifically, its unjustifiable privileging of intentionality, such that the inability to account for other people’s experiences is nothing more than the epiphenomenon of a deeper failure to account for the transcendental life of consciousness—Henry goes on to analyze Heidegger’s position, focusing primarily on Chapter IV of *Sein und Zeit*.

At first glance, everything would seem to disprove the hypothesis that Henry is in solidarity with Heidegger’s approach. From the beginning to the end of the section, Henry takes care to put as much distance as possible between his position and that of Heidegger. Indeed, the way the latter is presented casts it as an internal variation on Husserl’s model, equally unable to offer a satisfactory solution to the risk of solipsism. According to Henry, while criticizing the fact that intentionality is rooted in consciousness, Heidegger reasons on the basis of the same ecstatic background typical of Husserl’s phenomenology: while *Dasein* is certainly not transcendental consciousness, yet it radicalizes the very aspiration that comprises intentionality, by structuring itself as pure and simple openness to externality: “by eradicating definitively every form of ‘interiority,’ Heidegger’s *Dasein*, which is no more than ‘being-in-the-world’ (*In-der-Welt-sein*), furnishes a long-sought solution to the problem of the experience of the other.”⁸ Of course, in Henry’s perspective, this highly sought-after solution is only an illusion.

⁷ See Henry, “Pathos-with,” in *Material Phenomenology*, trans. Scott Davidson (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 131 [Henry, “Pathos-avec,” in *Phénoménologie matérielle* (Paris: PUF, 1990), 175].

⁸ Henry, *Incarnation: A Philosophy of Flesh*, trans. Karl Hefty (Evanston/Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 2015), 239 [Henry, *Incarnation. Une philosophie de la chair* (Paris: Seuil, 2000), 342].

However, before proceeding to his criticism, Henry is careful to convey Heidegger's position as accurately as possible:

Da-sein (the fact of being-there) is by itself a 'being-with,' and in this way a being-there with others. *Dasein* is not a 'being-with' because, opening us to the world, it opens us to others along with everything that shows itself in the world, in the same immediacy, without there being any need to leave any individual sphere in which we would be initially enclosed. It is not because, *in fact*, we are with someone in the world, or with many, that we are this 'being-with.' Whether we are alone or with others, 'being-with' always precedes. Solitude, for example, is possible only on the foundation of this 'being-with,' and as a privative modality of it.⁹

As this lengthy quotation shows, Henry is perfectly successful in capturing the essence and ultimate aim of Heidegger's attempt; that *Mit-sein* "always precedes" (*précède toujours...*) means precisely that it is an *a priori* opening that does not depend in any way on the occurrence of a "de facto" event such as the presence or absence of a concrete other. Heidegger's model is without doubt an *a priori* position.

Henry's first objection focuses on the macroscopic contradiction—a contradiction that Henry is not the first to notice—in the idea of basing the *a priori* character of *Mit-sein* on the act of engaging with inner-worldly, useful things. In this model, the inner-worldly useful thing is given the function of a fundamental mediator of that which, paradoxically, is labeled *a priori*. Indeed, as scholars have noted, in *Sein und Zeit* the other (*autrui*) is introduced as a term for referencing the ready-to-hand (*Zuhanden*). Henry cites Heidegger's famous (and rather disappointing) examples: the other is the one from whom I bought this book I am reading; the owner of the field I walk through, or the boat I see moored. Regardless of the phenomenological poverty of this description, the real problem according to Henry is that this argument gives rise to what is in effect a vicious circle: how might I engage with the ready-to-hand (*Zuhanden*) for what it is, if not on the basis of the preliminary opening of *Mit-sein*? The only possible conclusion is that; "Heidegger's explanation turns in a circle. But it turns in a circle only because it is incapable of grasping 'being-with' while legitimating in some way the meaning it gives it."¹⁰ As long as readiness-to-hand continues to play a decisive role, *Mit-sein* cannot be grasped at the level of its origin: indeed, the world's ecstatic horizon continues to constitute the real premise of the encounter. It therefore remains wholly external to the immanence of life, at which level it should properly be situated. For this reason, *Mit-sein* in its unreality cannot truly account for its own 'content,' that is, the real and concrete other that is, actually, mysteriously absent from Heidegger's description:

If "being-with" must mean a "being-with-the-other," one cannot pull this out of a hat.... "Being-with" as an opening to the world never explains anything

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 240 [343].

about its content or about this relational, instrumental system that is supposed to show itself in it.¹¹

From Henry's point of view, which is directed from the beginning at the most fragile element of Heidegger's analysis, the dead end is revealed finally in the absence of any interaction between the notion of *Mit-sein* and the notion that expresses the decisive trait of *Dasein*, which is capable of granting substance and reality to what would otherwise remain simply an abstract concept; its "mineness" (*Jemeinigkeit*). It is only on the basis of this radical discovery, that always attributes *Dasein* to itself by making it an ipseity (i.e., a totally singular Self that cannot be reduced to any other) that an encounter with an other Self—as radically individual, as radically real and concrete, as an ipseity—makes sense. Of course, pushing the idea of *Jemeinigkeit* to its furthest limits "presupposes an original Ipseity, an 'experiencing undergoing itself' in which every conceivable Self [*Soi*] consists."¹² However, in making this observation we have already left behind Heidegger's theoretical domain; as a matter of fact, Henry's idea is that only by replacing the world's ecstatic appearance with the manifestation of life to itself is it possible to consider "mineness" in depth, and therefore to frame the problem of sharing pathos, in which this ipseity is given to itself, on the correct conceptual terrain. Only in this way do "all the aporias of classical thought or contemporary phenomenology then dissipate."¹³

One might wonder if the dissolution of aporias, which is certainly one of the imperatives of 'classical' thought, should be taken for granted as a legitimate objective of phenomenology. The latter, in its mandate to adhere to what is given, should perhaps welcome rather than dissolve that which presents an aporetic trait. But let us leave this question open for now. For the moment, the important point is that Henry believes that the inter-subjective problem addressed by Husserl, Heidegger and all intentional phenomenology is resolved by abandoning the idea that it is necessary to begin from the finiteness of a Self in order to achieve a relationship with another Self:

...still less should one move from an I [*moi*] or ego conceived as the point of departure, the source point of intentionality.... Every relation from one Self to another Self requires as its point of departure not this Self itself, an I [*moi*]—my own or the other's—but their common transcendental possibility, which is nothing other than the possibility of their relation itself: absolute Life.¹⁴

Anyone with even a minimal familiarity with Henry's thought will be unsurprised: this step toward absolute life had been in the works for quite some time, in order that the problem of inter-subjectivity be dissolved. It is much less obvious that one can 'speak' this solution using Heidegger's vocabulary, in

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 241 [344].

¹² *Ibid.* [345].

¹³ *Ibid.*, 242 [345].

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 243 [347].

opposition to which the solution was developed. The passage cited above proceeds as follows: “In the experience of the other, it is indeed a question of recognizing its inescapable precondition, ‘being-with’ as such, in its radical phenomenological possibility.”¹⁵ Again later: “in as much as they are living in one and the same Life, and are Selves in the Ipseity of one and the same Self, they are and can be each with the other in the ‘being-with’ that always precedes them.”¹⁶ What is striking is not only Henry’s emphasis on the ‘being-with’ (*être-avec*), but his literal repetition of the very characteristic that he himself had highlighted as a key objective of Heidegger’s analysis: the fact that this ‘being-with’ is truly such if it “always precedes” (*precede toujours...*)—that is, if it excludes any form of radical solitude from the very beginning.

Henry had long accepted and supported the idea (exquisitely characteristic of Heidegger) that solitude is a derivative modification of ‘being-with.’ Indeed, in *Notes sur l’expérience d’autrui* he wrote:

Is [solitude] an ontological determination, absolutely appropriate, insurmountable and unsurpassable, or is it only an existentiell determination? In Heidegger it seems to be, at first glance, a simply existentiell determination; but, actually, since it is based on a ‘being-possible’ which is ontologically defined (‘being-toward-death’ is an *existential*), it is an ontological determination.¹⁷

In another note, Henry asserts the “apodictic evidence” of the refutation of solipsism, and explains that “solitude is less a privation of others than the privation of a mode of inner transcendental experience. One who suffers does not suffer for another’s absence. He suffers because of the absence of *his experience* of the other.”¹⁸ In other words: if solitude is not truly the absence of others but is the absence of my experience of the other, this means that the ‘being-with’ structurally inherent in ipseity, already more open to others, is not in the least affected by a merely contingent possibility, itself wholly contained within that which was defined as an “ontological” (*ontologique*) rather than an “existentiell” (*existentielle*) determination.

From this point of view, it can be argued that Henry’s main goal is not so much to distance himself from Heidegger’s position, but rather to correct Heidegger using Heidegger’s own approach, by asserting that Heidegger fails to conceptualize, and to hold fast to, the theoretical model he adopted, namely, *a priori* inter-subjectivity. As a matter of fact, Heidegger’s analysis of ‘being-with’ (*Mitsein*) conducts an ontological-existential reworking of what Scheler had called “Robinson’s experiment.” Radicalizing the situation Defoe described in his

¹⁵ *Ibid.* [347].

¹⁶ *Ibid.* [348].

¹⁷ Henry, “Notes sur l’expérience d’autrui,” 104: “Est-elle [i.e., la solitude] une détermination ontologique, absolument propre, insurmontable et indépassable, ou seulement une détermination existentielle? Chez Heidegger elle semble n’être à première vue qu’une détermination existentielle, mais en fait, comme elle repose sur un pouvoir-être ontologiquement défini (être-pour-la-mort est un *existential*), c’est une détermination ontologique.”

¹⁸ *Ibid.*: “La solitude est moins la privation d’autrui que la privation de ce mode de l’expérience interne transcendante. Celui qui souffre ne souffre pas [de l’absence] d’autrui. Il souffre de l’absence de son expérience d’autrui.”

famous novel, Scheler wondered if a radically solitary individual, alone not simply because he was shipwrecked on a desert island but because he had never enjoyed any true inter-subjective experiences, would be totally unaware of the possibility of other people or if, instead, he would have “the *a priori* proof of the existence of some ‘you’ in general.”¹⁹ Without going into the details of this rather intricate issue, it should suffice to underline that Scheler’s response is obviously yes, and that this response is the theoretical antecedent of Heidegger’s assertions in *Sein und Zeit* that the ‘being-with’ of the *Dasein* is radically independent of the presence or absence of another actual person.²⁰ However, what is most important to note is that this is obviously the same theoretical trajectory that Henry followed, in relation to which he denounces Heidegger’s inadequacy: essentially, all Henry does is expose Heidegger’s unfaithfulness to himself, while at the same time proposing his own solution as a solution capable of perform the functions that the existential analytic set out to perform but proved incapable of completing. This strategy, simultaneously hermeneutical and theoretical, is vulnerable to two fundamental objections.

The first objection concerns Henry’s criticism of the disconnection between ‘being-with’ and the tangible substance to which ‘being-with’ should grant access—a criticism which, as I have said, is fully legitimate. It is, however, necessary to take note of the fact that this disconnection is actually consubstantial with the *a priori* model as such, which by its very nature inevitably ends up subordinating the tangibility and reality of the other to the opening or *subjective* horizon that makes the encounter possible. The problem appears quite clearly in Heidegger’s approach: the insistence on the contingent nature of solitude is reversed in the impossibility that the tangible other escape the clutch of the ‘being-with’ of *Dasein* in any way. While the ready-to-hand can be broken, and thus interrupt daily dealings the world, and thus provoke surprise, the other never really ceases to be such, and thus never surprises. It is unnoticed to such an extent that it is difficult even to find a suitable name for it in the field of existential analytics: *Mitdasein*? Other *Dasein*? Simply ‘other’? What is certain is that ‘being-with,’ unlike ‘being-in-the world,’ is never seriously threatened or cast into doubt by the possible absence (always *de facto* and always contingent) of this or that individual other. The price that must be paid in order to obtain the *a priori* certainty of ‘being-with’ and the *a priori* refutation of solipsism is exactly the problem Henry would highlight—and this is indeed a rather high price, given that it concerns the irrelevance of the other. In this regard, it is significant that in the period of the *Notes*, Henry was open to a possible doubt. Specifically, this doubt concerned Heidegger, but in reality it also concerned *any a priori* model and attempt to offer a comprehensive and final solution to the problem of inter-subjectivity (and therefore also the solution he himself went on to propose): “The problem [is] well-resolved, and in fact too much so. If everything is *patent*, how would anxiety before

¹⁹ Max Scheler, *Wesen und Formen der Sympathie*, in *GW VIII*, ed. Manfred S. Frings (Berlin/München: Francke, 1973), 230-1.

²⁰ For a more extended analysis of this issue see Stefano Bancalari, *L’altro e l’esserci. Heidegger e il problema del ‘Mitsein’* (Padova, Cedam: 1999).

the other originate: anxiety between lovers; what are you thinking of?”²¹ This question, which goes straight to the very heart of the issue of inter-subjectivity, reveals the uneasiness lurking beneath the explicit solutions that Henry proposed. It reveals a possible refutation of the *a priori* model that yet never developed into the real elaboration of an alternative model.

The second objection derives, one might say, from the application of the principle of charity. Despite the fact that Heidegger repeatedly asserted the a-priority of ‘being-with’ (*Mit-sein*) with regard to the world’s opening, it is quite unlikely that Heidegger’s position as a whole fails to go beyond the contradiction Henry identified. Therefore, he asserts the need for a mediation of the ready-to-hand in order to ensure the appearance of the other. Indeed, things are not quite so: in this respect Henry fell victim to an almost standard reading, actually a partial reading, of the fourth chapter of *Sein und Zeit*. This fails to take into account the stringent internal logic of Heidegger’s argument, which, from the beginning of the first (§25) to the end of the last (§27) of the three sections comprising the chapter, is aimed at demonstrating precisely the *a priori* character of ‘being-with’ (*Mit-sein*). I will illustrate this point below; on the basis of what has emerged thus far, it is immediately clear that Henry’s reading is not simply partial or ungenerous. The point is that detecting the coherence of the logic within Heidegger’s discourse inevitably involves bringing to light the problematic nature of the *a priori* model as such, an issue faced by anyone who decides to adopt this model, including both Heidegger and Henry, who never openly criticized it and indeed who explicitly re-asserts its underlying assumption.

The ultimate aim of Heidegger’s argument is clearly stated from the very beginning. In § 25, at the very moment in which he outlines the issue he proposes to resolve through his analysis of *Mitsein*, Heidegger foreshadows the solution, which involves calling into question the obviousness of the starting point of the analysis: “It could be the case that the ‘who’ of everyday *Dasein* just is *not* the ‘I myself.’”²² That which only appears as a hypothesis in the initial phase is revealed at the end to be the long sought-after solution. As scholars have noted, the Who of everyday *Dasein* is precisely this ‘not,’ the ‘no one’ who dominates the daily play of inter-subjective and social relations; in other words, the ‘They’ (*das Man*). From the very beginning, all of Heidegger’s descriptions are aimed at this outcome and designed to demonstrate that *Dasein* is always already with others (precisely because it is always already inhabited by the ‘They’). And yet, it must be added, this is the most coherent outcome of any *a priori* model, including Henry’s.

At first glance it may seem completely inappropriate to bring Henry’s ‘Life’ in relation with Heidegger’s ‘They’ (*das Man*), if only because the former is expressly defined as absolute ipseity, whereas the ‘They’ is exactly the opposite;

²¹ Henry, “Notes sur l’expérience d’autrui,” 154: “Problème très bien résolu, trop bien; si tout est *patent*, d’où vient [l’] inquiétude devant l’autre ; inquiétude des amants : à quoi penses-tu?”

²² Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985), 150 [Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, in *GA II*, ed. Friedrich-Wilhelm von Herrmann (Frankfurt am Mein: Klostermann, 1977), 115: “Es könnte sein, daß das Wer des alltäglichen Daseins gerade *nicht* je ich selbst sein.”—*Trans.*]

it is the negation of every self and every ipseity. This is certainly true, but it is quite derivative of the manner in which these two concepts, Life and They, are presented as solutions to the problem of inter-subjectivity. It is also derivative of the structural similarity of the problems that these alleged solutions encounter.

Let us first consider the methodological move that, in the context of both Henry's radical phenomenology and Heidegger's existential analytic, makes it phenomenologically possible to legitimize the a-priority of any opening to the other. This move involves taking a step backward in terms of the point of view (in the sense outlined above) that is assigned to a 'before' in relation to the Self. Whether this is a matter of discovering the 'They' (*das Man*) as the 'real' actor of everyday life or shifting from one's own Self to the 'absolute Life' (*Vie absolue*) as a "common transcendental possibility" (*commune possibilité transcendantale*) of all Selves,²³ from a methodological point of view the process is the same. Heidegger's assertion that "it could be the case that the 'who' of everyday *Dasein* is just *not* 'I myself'" echoes Henry's argument that we must not begin "from an I [*moi*] or an ego conceived as the point of departure, the source point of intentionality."²⁴ In both cases the issue is to determine the relative phenomenological legitimacy of this move. Given that it is impossible to avoid a point of view, or a "source point of intentionality," in which the phenomenological gaze is located, doesn't the possibility of transferring this point of view from the Self to elsewhere in relation to the Self (the 'Life' or the 'They') presuppose exactly what should instead be established—that is, the relationship between this point of view and another point of view? In other words, we risk illegitimately claiming the right and privilege to speak on behalf of 'Life' or of the 'They,' assuming what phenomenology teaches us from the start to view as the greatest mistake of pre-phenomenological thought, that is, in the words of Merleau-Ponty, "*pensée de survol*." Once again it is interesting to note how the young Henry denounces precisely this risk in Heidegger's use of the notion of 'Being:' "The truth of Being, which ensures that I see that *x* is in front of me, as this table is in front of me, plays in Heidegger the same role [*le même rôle de survol*] as does the 'abstract understanding' in Hegel's Spirit."²⁵ It is not clear, however, why the exact same observation should not apply to 'Life,' attributing to it "*le même rôle de survol*."

It should be noted that, when the heuristic concept of a 'point of view,' as discussed above in our introduction, is installed (legitimately or otherwise) in the position of an "absolute," the problem of inter-subjectivity cannot be considered resolved. The denunciation of the absolute character of manifestation simply serves to make explicit the conditions due to which this problem was posited in the first place. As Husserl's analyses demonstrate *ad abundantiam*, the phenomenological issue of inter-subjectivity certainly does not concern the

²³ See Henry, *Incarnation*, 243 [347].

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Henry, "Notes sur l'expérience d'autrui," 92: "La vérité de l'être qui fait que je vois que *x* est devant moi comme je vois que cette table est devant moi revient ainsi à jouer chez Heidegger le même rôle de survol que l'Esprit de Hegel."

empirical description of the relations among other empirical egos. Rather, it only arises when trying to understand how to juxtapose an absolute—in this case, that of transcendental consciousness—with *another* absolute, that is, another consciousness that is *also* transcendental. So, in Henry’s terminology, the real problem would be to understand whether and how, absolute Life can open to another life that is *likewise absolute*. Given that this is nonsense in Henry’s terms, the very problem of inter-subjectivity is all but dissolved: not because it is resolved but because it is expunged from the outset and on principle from the theoretical framework in use. In fact, this is exactly Henry’s position. To remain truly faithful to a concept of absoluteness—according to which “the reality of feeling is the reality of the absolute,”²⁶—implies an obligation to conclude that “every possible being in common... is always first and foremost carried out as an immediate modification of absolute subjectivity.”²⁷ This subjectivity, as a result of its absolute nature, naturally remains singular, exactly as Heidegger’s ‘They’ (*Man*) is structurally singular.

In this theoretical situation we can identify the common thread of the (actually rather narrow) range of concrete types of communities that Henry considers in *Pathos-avec*: that between the hypnotist and hypnotized, between a mother and her child, and between the self and the dead who inhabit therein. Indeed, these types are united by the fact that they *do not* involve “the emergence of an I as an I or an other as an other.”²⁸ It would be hard to find a more relevant definition of Heidegger’s conceptualization of the ‘They’ (*Man*). On closer examination, the idea underlying both Henry’s pathic community (*communauté pathétique*) and Heidegger’s ‘They’ (*Man*) is “fusion” (which can be seen explicitly in *Incarnation*)²⁹. This is no coincidence, because the source common to both is Scheler’s idea of unipathy (*Einsfühlung*), an idea upon which both authors draw even while criticizing it—because this conclusion is structurally connected to the adoption of the *a priori* model.

Given this, it seems to me that Henry’s approach occupies quite a clear position within the phenomenological debate on inter-subjectivity. It is equally clear that there is an underlying affinity between his position and that of Heidegger. This does not mean that there are no fluctuations. Some of these have been identified in the course of this article. These fluctuations, thoroughly and expertly outlined by the editor of the *Notes*³⁰ in his aforementioned introductory essay, do

²⁶ Henry, *The Essence of Manifestation*, trans. Girard Etzkorn (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1973), 628 [Henry, *L’essence de la manifestation* (Paris: PUF, 1990), 788].

²⁷ Henry, *Material Phenomenology*, 115 [155].

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 127 [171].

²⁹ In this book, Henry defines authentic erotic experience as the “each living being’s desire to enter into symbiosis with the life of another living being and finally to be united with it in a loving vital fusion.” [Henry, *Incarnation*, 311: “désir de chaque vivant d’entrer en symbiose avec la vie d’un autre vivant et finalement de s’unir à lui dans la fusion vitale amoureuse.”—*Trans.*] The notion of “fusion” may generate several problems within the domain of the philosophy of religion, as was argued by Jean Greisch, *Du ‘non-autre’ au ‘tout autre’* (Paris: PUF, 2012), 36.

³⁰ See Jean, “De l’expérience métaphysique d’autrui à l’intersubjectivité en première personne,” 32-3.

not seem related to some internal evolution in Henry's thought, however. Rather, they signal an unfulfilled possibility, the invitation to think about how the problem of inter-subjectivity would arise if Henry had not taken a step backward in the face of the radical solitude of feeling, declaring that it was always already—in an *a priori* manner—resolved in the *pathos-avec*.

This solitude already emerges in the disturbing question raised in the *Notes* (“what are you thinking of?”)³¹ and bursts forth in, for example, the beautiful pages of *Incarnation* on the night of lovers. Here the “phenomenology of the sexual act” unfolds through descriptions which, proceeding without any concern that they might end up in a dead end, appear far more phenomenologically powerful than the descriptions of hypnotic community: “The impotence of each to attain the other in itself exasperates the tension of desire up to its resolution in the paroxysmal feeling of orgasm, in such a way that each has its own without being able to feel that of the other as the other feels it.”³² The hypothesis that remains to be explored is whether this dead-end might actually conceal Henry's most fruitful contribution (perhaps even the one most characteristic of his thinking), to the issue of inter-subjectivity, and whether the importance of this contribution can only emerge within the framework of an *a posteriori* model.

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³¹ See note 21, above, and also Henry, “Notes sur l'expérience d'autrui,” 154.

³² Henry, *Incarnation*, 211 [302].