

MICHEL HENRY'S ONTOLOGY OF CORPOREAL SELF-KNOWLEDGE: AN
INTERPRETATION OF *PHILOSOPHIE ET PHÉNOMÉNOLOGIE DU CORPS*

A.J. Smith

School of Religious Studies
Faculty of Arts
McGill University
Montréal, Québec

Supervisor:

Dr. Garth W. Green

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Abstract

In this thesis, Michel Henry's doctrine of bodily self-knowledge is comprehended and articulated, and placed within the context of his ontology of subjectivity. This is completed through an account of the first section of *L'essence de la manifestation* and the establishment of the context of Maine de Biran's work. As regards the latter, I triangulate Biran's reading of Kant with Henry. This is followed by an exposition of the section of *Philosophie et phénoménologie du corps* that bear on corporeal self-knowledge. It is argued that the content and purposes of the body in Henry's early work is not an incidental application to a new topical foci, but rather serves a central conceptual purpose as the completion of *L'essence de la manifestation*, whereby the subjective body is the concrete content of subjectivity. Finally, the importance of this early work for Henry's latter theological trilogy — in particular *Incarnation* — is suggested as a direction for future work.

Résumé

Dans cette thèse, la doctrine de l'auto-connaissance corporelle de Michel Henry est saisie et exprimée, ainsi qu'elle est située dans le contexte de son ontologie de la subjectivité. Ceci est fait à travers une explication de la première section de *L'essence de la manifestation* et du contexte de l'oeuvre de Maine de Biran. En ce qui concerne Maine de Biran, je triangule son interprétation de l'oeuvre de Kant avec Henry. Ceci est suivi d'une exposition de la section de *Philosophie et phénoménologie du corps* qui porte directement sur la question du l'auto-connaissance corporelle. Cette thèse soutient que le contenu et l'objet du concept du corps dans les premiers écrits de Henry n'est pas une application accessoire de *L'essence de la manifestation* au nouveau sujet, mais fonctionne plutôt comme son achèvement, où le corps subjectif est défini comme le contenu concret de la subjectivité. Finalement, l'importance des premiers écrits de Henry pour sa trilogie théologique, notamment *Incarnation*, est proposé comme une question pour les travaux futurs.

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A Note on the Texts

Henry's books have been translated and published in English only sporadically. The first texts to be published in English were *The Essence of Manifestation* and *Philosophy and Phenomenology of the Body* in 1973 and 1975, by Girard Etzkorn. I cite the latest edition of Michel Henry's texts in the original French as published by Presses universitaires de France. However, I do also refer to the Etzkorn translations, in particular Henry's prefaces for the English editions. Throughout, I cite the English translation of Henry (when existing) in square brackets after the French citation of an Henry text.

As for Maine de Biran, almost nothing of his work has been translated into English, with the exception of a few texts from the beginning of the 20th century. Moreover, none of the important French works of secondary literature on Biran (e.g., Henri Gouhier, Bernard Baertschi, François Azouvi) have been translated in English. Accordingly, I cite Maine de Biran's *Essai sur les fondements de la psychologie* as found in *Des Œuvres de Maine de Biran* (Tomes VII/1 and VII/2), edited by F.C.T. Moore and published in 2001; his correspondence from *Des Œuvres de Maine de Biran* (Tomes VI and VII) edited by Pierre Tisserand and published in 1930; and the *Journal intime de Maine de Biran* edited by A. De Lavalette Monbrun, and published in 1927.

i. Introduction

i.1 The Place and Importance of the Body in Henry's Œuvre

At first blush, it seems odd that Michel Henry devotes a full and detailed treatise on the nature of the body, *Philosophie et phénoménologie du corps*, as a codicil to his project on absolute subjectivity, *L'essence de la manifestation* (1963). The impression is only deepened as it occurs in a monograph that is staged as a study of the philosophy of Maine de Biran (1766-1824), a philosopher in the tradition of *spiritualisme française* who, apart from his obscurity, seems (if only initially) curiously distinct from Henry's starting point in the phenomenological ontologies of Husserl and Heidegger.¹ While his book on the body is often passed over in a cursory fashion—especially in English-speaking scholarship, where it has received little attention—a detailed, exhaustive (as much as can be achieved), and structural exposition of this book's contents, along with a clarification of how the problematic of ontological monism can and must be applied to our corporeal self-knowledge is necessary to fully affect a comprehension of Henry's project.

In the short preface appended to the English translation of *Philosophy and Phenomenology of the Body* written in 1974, Henry explains that he intended the

¹ Henry's work is carried out as an engagement, in some way, with the history of philosophy. To begin to speak of the full range of material that Michel Henry makes use of would firstly require a formidable, even adamant, catalogue. As Michel Fichant writes, "Toute la pensée de Michel Henry est nourrie d'une confrontation constante, exigeante et rigoureuse, à la lecture réfléchie des textes majeurs de la tradition philosophique." See Michel Fichant, "Michel Henry et l'histoire de la philosophie," in *Michel Henry: Dossier Conçu et Dirigé*, ed. Jean-Marie Brohm and Jean Leclercq (Lausanne: Editions L'Âge d'Homme, 2009), 258.

contents of the book to compose no more than a chapter in his investigations of the nature of the ego's subjectivity. While those investigations were published in 1963 (originally in two volumes) as *L'essence de la manifestation*, the section addressing the topic of the body that was originally intended as a discrete chapter grew, Henry reports, into an autonomous study of its own.²

The study on the body was developed between 1948 and 1949, but only came into being in 1965 due to, as he sarcastically put it, “les normes universitaires en vigueur interdisant la publication d'une thèse avant sa soutenance.”³ In the “Avertissement à la seconde édition,” written in 1987, Henry specified that *Philosophie et phénoménologie du corps* was not only a chapter sequenced within the project but in fact was the first to be completed: “initialement conçu comme un chapitre de *L'essence de la manifestation* et le premier à être achevé, il en a été détaché en raison de sa dimension.”⁴ Indeed, in the next sentence Henry describes this as “ce premier travail.”⁵

In *L'essence de la manifestation*, Henry clarifies and overcomes—precisely by genealogically working through—the fundamental presuppositions of a constitutively presumptive phenomenological bias he names ‘monisme ontologique.’ As ontological monism does not recognize any other mode of

² Michel Henry, *Philosophy and Phenomenology of the Body*, trans. G. J. Etzkorn (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1975), ix.

³ Michel Henry, *Philosophie et phénoménologie du corps: essai sur L'ontologie biranienne* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2011), v.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

appearance than a constitutive exteriority through a phenomenological distance, Henry endeavours to find the most fundamental mode of appearance, one whereby appearance immanently appears to itself. This involves, of necessity, placing “le problème de la connaissance de soi sur un base correcte.”⁶ Within *L’essence de la manifestation* this occurs, and is accomplished, on the “plan de la subjectivité absolue.”⁷ *Philosophie et phénoménologie du corps* clarifies in greater detail that this ‘plan de la subjectivité absolue’ includes, and is not complete without, an account of the body.

Philosophie et phénoménologie du corps therefore functions as a companion and extension to *L’essence de la manifestation*, though it was in fact completed first. It takes the form of an analysis of the body, “It must be understood that this work constitutes an application of the general theses for which we argued in the *Essence of Manifestation*—to the problem of the body.”⁸ Whereas the body as a phenomenon is usually taken to be a paradigmatic, or at least the first, transcendent object with which we are acquainted, Henry instead places the body within the realm of subjectivity, “le corps, sans sa nature originale, appartient à la sphère d’existence qui est celle de la subjectivité elle-même.”⁹ Appealing to and

⁶ Michel Henry, *L’essence de La manifestation* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2011), 57 [45]. When citing the pagination of Henry’s text in French, I cite the most recent edition from Presses universitaires de France first and then subsequently the English translation, if one exists, in square brackets.

⁷ Michel Henry, *Philosophie et phénoménologie du corps: Essai sur l’ontologie biranienne* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2011), 2 [1].

⁸ From the author’s preface in English, see Henry, *Philosophy and Phenomenology of the Body*, ix.

⁹ *Ibid.*

using the work of Maine de Biran at both great length and detail, Henry articulates a philosophy of the body that places our knowledge of it, what Biran calls le “fait primitif,” within the realm of subjectivity and as an alternative to, and indeed answer for, ontological monism. The general question and thematic of this thesis is to inquire why it is that the philosophy of immanent self-knowledge also requires an account of corporeal self-knowledge. While Maine de Biran’s work is obviously central to understanding the purposes and place of self-knowledge in Henry’s work, a specific insight of this thesis is that it is Biran’s reading and reception of Kant, in particular, that proves to be of decisive import for placing the body within an ontological sphere.

Writing about the progression of Maine de Biran’s thought, Henry says that “Maine de Biran a pris comme thème de sa recherche le problème de l’ego” which could only be resolved by “une analyse ontologique du concept de subjectivité.”¹⁰ The results of this analysis, and not some incidental interest in anatomy, “l’oblige [Biran] à poser sur des bases entièrement nouvelles le problème du corps” and that when “correctement interprété et situé, ramène au problème de l’ego avec lequel il s’identifie.”¹¹ There is thus something necessary, essential, and teleological about including the topic of the body as the first elaboration of a project on immanent

¹⁰ Michel Henry, *Philosophie et phénoménologie du corps*, 16 [12].

¹¹ *Ibid.*

subjectivity: “Le problème du corps occupe une place centrale dans les préoccupations d’une philosophie de l’existence.”¹²

i.2 The Structure and Argument of this Thesis

In this thesis, I trace an Henryan conception of the body, in particular the concept of bodily self-knowledge. To do so, I first contextualize and connect *L’essence de la manifestation* and the critique of ontological monism therein. The importance of the body is shown here to be in the way that we know it. Whereas ontological monism does not consider any form of knowledge except if it is transcendent, Henry argues that the self-knowledge we have of our body is immanent to itself, within the ambit of subjectivity, and so is known absolutely. Henry comes to this conviction upon reading the French philosopher Maine de Biran, whose discovery of the subjective body Henry understands to be as epocal as it is obscure. In the second section, I examine how Maine de Biran made this discovery, which is found to be the result of a close, and particular, reading of Kant. Accordingly, this reading is triangulated with Henry’s own reading of Kant. Lastly, in the third section, I turn to Henry’s own account of the body, *Philosophie et phénoménologie du corps* and exegete its structure of self-knowledge.

Philosophie et phénoménologie du corps has a central and abiding importance to understanding and comprehending both the structure and development of Henry’s philosophy. Although it is, like the rest of Henry’s oeuvre, a continuation of the same problem context and an application of the general

¹² Michel Henry, *Philosophie et phénoménologie du corps*, 253 [183].

theses of *L'essence de la manifestation*, it is unique among the other applications Henry produced in that it is a necessary outworking of this original project. Henry's project cannot be understood fully without knowledge of it; it is a diptych to *L'essence de la manifestation*. "Il peut paraître paradoxal," Henry says, "pour légitimer ce concept d'une intériorité radicale et, par là même, le concept d'âme, de faire appel au corps."¹³ This paradox is ameliorated in the 'corps subjectif' elaborated herein, because

Lorsque le corps, en effet, est interprété, non plus d'une façon naïve et unilatérale comme un objet, mais aussi comme un sujet, et peut-être comme le sujet véritable, comme la source de notre connaissance sensible, et lorsque cette connaissance sensible, et lorsque cette connaissance sensible, à son tour, au lieu d'être traitée comme un mode inférieur de la connaissance, est saisie comme le sol et la fondement de tout connaissance possible, alors l'analyse du corps ainsi compris dans sa subjectivité originelle peut sembler nous conduire à cette intériorité que nous cherchons.¹⁴

The importance and centrality of the question of the body as the first and accompanying elaboration of the concept of absolute subjectivity and interior life lies in the fact that it produces an important and fundamental recalibration, within philosophy, of the nature of subjectivity itself. Placing the body within the sphere of subjectivity does not just rearrange the classification or understanding of the body's place within an ontology, such as it is; it fundamentally alters our

¹³ Michel Henry, "Le concept d'âme a-t-il un sens," *Revue philosophique de Louvain*, Troisième série, Vol. 64, No. 81, (1966), 5-6; see also the translation, Michel Henry, "Does the Concept 'Soul' Mean Anything?", trans. Girard Etzkorn in *Philosophy Today* Vol. 13, no. 2 (1969), 94-95.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 21 [106]

understanding of what it is to be an 'I' inasmuch as, for Henry, it opens up another more original realm for appearance to appear.

This thesis ends with a prospectus on the theological turn and the body's place within it. An exposition of the problematic of the body is a necessary precursor to understanding Henry's transition to the problematic of incarnation. It sheds not a little light on the contents and purposes of the 'theological turn,' especially in the text *Incarnation*, where the theses in *Philosophie et phénoménologie du corps* are presupposed and recapitulated, although in different terms and with a different goal. I would suggest that any study of the theological turn and its larger significance within 20th century phenomenology cannot ignore the specific place of the subjective body in Henry's philosophy, which I will now exposit in the following sections.

1. *The Project of L'essence de la manifestation: The Theoretical Background to Philosophie et phénoménologie du corps*

With the goal of establishing the context through which Henry's project as a whole can be understood, this first chapter serves as summative recapitulation of the results of *L'essence de la manifestation* as they pertain to the earlier work, *Philosophie et phénoménologie du corps: essai sur l'ontologie biranienne*. Most generally, it can be described as an analysis of the nature of interior life.¹⁵ Subsequently, Henry did not experience any kind of *Kehre* away from the results obtained herein. All of Henry's subsequent work, is dependent on, and indeed presupposes, *L'essence de la manifestation*.

Taken as a whole, Henry's project can be described as an attempt to fully work through the possibilities opened up by this work, which contains the whole of his philosophical project, the results of which are never rescinded but only deepened. Henry clarifies that "*L'Essence de la manifestation n'est pas un début, c'est le résultat d'une longue vie de recherche,*" composed over the span of some 11 years.¹⁶ With regards to his oeuvre as a whole, Henry speaks of "un double aspect" where his work is separated, firstly into "l'élaboration des présuppositions phénoménologiques fondamentales qui définissent la duplicité de l'apparaître,"

¹⁵ As Felice Ciro Papparo describes the work in the preface to the Italian edition, it takes the form of a "pensiero di una vita" that is situated in a "critica rispetto alla fenomenologia husserliana e, confluyente in quel movimento di svolta teologica della fenomenologia francese" produced through its analysis "intorno alla pensabilità di una fenomenologia della Vita," especially "la dimensione concettuale ed esperienziale di *vita interiore*." See Michel Henry, *L'essenza della manifestazione*, ed. Felice Ciro Papparo, trans. Daniela Sciarrelli and Mariafilomena Anzalone (Napoli: Filema, 2009), 9-10.

¹⁶ Michel Henry, "Un philosophie parle de sa vie: Entretien avec Roland Vaschalde," In *Entretiens*. (Arles: Sulliver, 2005), 16. The interview included in this text was carried out in 1996.

and secondly into “leur application à divers problèmes ou à diverses philosophies : au corps (Maine de Biran), à l'économie (Marx), à l'inconscient (la psychanalyse), à l'art (Kandinsky), au problème de la culture (*La Barbarie*), à la phénoménologie husserlienne (*Phénoménologie matérielle*), au christianisme enfin.”¹⁷ These later works, in fact, “sont contemporaines dans le premier livre” and “sont surtout l'occasion de vérifier la fécondité de ces présuppositions.”¹⁸ In this regard, however, Henry writes that Maine de Biran was nevertheless unique, “seul, Maine de Biran m'a aidé.”¹⁹

We can see the structure of how these applications work out in Henry's original work. In the *Généalogie de la psychanalyse* (1985), Henry attenuates the genealogy and critique of ontological monism to focus on psychoanalysis, as a “héritier tardif” to the fundamental ontological presuppositions that Henry lays bare in the first section of *L'essence de la manifestation*. When Henry speaks of Western thought's “incapacité à s'emparer de ce qui seul importe” which comes at “le terme d'une histoire” meaning we must not be rid of Freud so much as “cet héritage plus lourd et qui vient de plus loin,” by which he means the latter-day heritage and inheritors of ontological monism.²⁰ It is these which “sont les présuppositions qui ont guidé ou plutôt égaré la philosophie classique.”²¹ As such,

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., 17.

¹⁹ Ibid., 17.

²⁰ Michel Henry, *Généalogie de la psychanalyse* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1985), 5 [1].

²¹ Ibid.

“C’est bien plutôt le fond impensé dont elle procède qu’il fait apporter à la lumière.”²² It is this ground which he takes great pains to bring to light in the section on ontological monism, and it is this critique which forms the background of all of Henry’s thought. With this in mind, this chapter focuses on an exposition of the beginning of *L’essence de la manifestation* where Henry establishes his material and methodological aims with regards to the question of subjectivity.²³ This thesis chapter is divided into two parts, firstly between what Henry means by the ‘L’être de l’ego’ as a philosophical project (especially the notion of a ‘fundamental investigation’ and the ontological implications that follow therefrom, worked through in chapters 1 to 7 in *L’essence de la manifestation*); and secondly by his attempt at a new concept of phenomenon through an ambitious polemic against the history of philosophy (contained in chapters 8 through 16).

²² *Ibid.*, 6 [2].

²³ Henry’s most sustained discussion of his divergence from Husserl’s methodology is found in his *Phénoménologie matérielle* (1990), principally in the chapters “Phénoménologie hylétique et phénoménologie matérielle” and “La méthode phénoménologique”. Therein, Henry wants to demonstrate in an exact way the “l’incapacité qui fut dès le début celle de la phénoménologie de fournir une réponse véritable à sa propre question” (8). This incapacity is identified and defined as seeking to account for subjectivity only through the locus of intentionality. The decision to understand phenomenology in that way is determined at the outset of Husserl’s undertaking, the result of “les décisions qui ont été prises au début et sur des présuppositions sur lesquelles on ne revient jamais” (10). These presuppositions, furthermore, determine phenomenology’s ultimate outcome and destiny within philosophy. Methodological questions are central, because phenomenology itself is “une méthode spécifique” (61). Husserl’s inability to correctly account for life’s self-appearing to itself in fact represents an important moment in philosophy, as it proves that life cannot be found in intentionality. It is, as Henry puts it, “la démonstration éclatante du statut inextatique de la vie” (4). See Michel Henry, *Phénoménologie matérielle*, (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1990), 1-135.

1.1 *L'être de l'ego*

Already in the first line of *L'essence de la manifestation*, Henry pronounced his intention to question the meaning of the relationship between the ego and being: “Le sens de l'être de l'ego est le thème des présents recherches.”²⁴ The goal, at this stage, is to “porter dans la lumière”—in the phenomenological sense—what we mean by ‘je’.²⁵ “Ce travail,” as Henry describes it, “visait à l'origine de la constitution d'une «Phénoménologie de l'Ego»”.²⁶ To accomplish this task, Henry sets himself within the governing presuppositions of phenomenology, and works through them to discover—and so initiate—their most ontologically fundamental possibility: “It is interior to these presuppositions whose insufficiency had to be shown that we placed ourselves; the very concepts which were rejected were also the ones which guided the problem initially.”²⁷ The purpose of this trajectory is show that “regardless of the degree of adequacy in its theoretical formulation . . . the ecstatic becoming-present of Being allows its most intimate essence, i.e. that which makes it life and each of us living beings, to escape it.”²⁸

²⁴ Michel Henry, *L'essence de la manifestation* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2011), 1 [1].

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ From his papers, the typewritten document he presented to either one or both of his thesis supervisors, Jean-Wahl and Jean Hippolyte, explaining the thesis project that would become *L'essence de la manifestation*. See Michel Henry, “L'Essence de la révélation. Résumé analytique,” in *Michel Henry: Dossier conçu et dirigé*, ed. Jean-Marie Brohm and Jean Leclercq (Lausanne: Editions L'âge d'homme, 2009), 55.

²⁷ From the author's preface to the English translation, written in January 1972. See Henry, Michel, *The Essence of Manifestation*. Translated by G. J. Etzkorn. (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1973), xi.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

Insofar as *L'essence de la manifestation* is a “refusal of the very philosophy from which it has sprung,”²⁹ viz., phenomenological ontology, it “répétant à l'intérieur de ses analyses propres, le dépassement qui est historiquement celui de Husserl par Heidegger.”³⁰ As “la conception Heideggérienne de l'être” is put to question in this text, it will be shown accordingly that “la caractère unilatéral” of Heidegger's account of Being “en fait échapper la « réalité », l'essence originelle de la révélation.”³¹ As such, the unusual length and peculiar difficulty of this book lies in “slow movement of maturation and elaboration at the end of which these concepts are ‘turned around’ and the same presuppositions give way to others seeking to recognize a new dimension of existence.”³²

This introductory section of *L'essence de la manifestation* offers a systematic and progressive typology of ontology. Chapters 1-6 trace the kinds of inquiries into Being that are possible (i.e., regional ontologies, formal ontology, and universal phenomenological ontology), discovering what they presuppose and also their ultimate limitation, while also articulating a way around the impasse that these intrinsic limitations establish. Chapter 7 offers the result of these and gives an account of character of the inquiry that will shape the remainder of the text.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Michel Henry, “L'Essence de la révélation. Résumé analytique,” 55.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Henry, *The Essence of Manifestation*, xi.

1.1.2 *The Trajectory Toward a Fundamental Inquiry*

En général, ce qui est passé sous silence dans un théorie, est le plus essentiel.³³

The introduction of *L'essence de la manifestation* specifies the rubric that Henry will employ in investigating and evaluating any inquiry into the nature of Being. The inadequacies of any investigation will be determined in and by those places that are not truly fundamental. That is, in investigations which do not understand those areas where, in obtaining their respective results, they have presupposed features or results otherwise obtained through other areas or by way of other means operate on a foundation they have not themselves clarified and by means they do not make transparent to themselves. Before any investigation can continue, “Elle doit d’abord être capable de dire si la problématique qu’elle institue peut être considérée comme originaire et fondamentale ou si, au contraire, elle est subordonnée à une recherche première dont elle se montre dépendante.”³⁴ This is because every inquiry whatever must first determine whether it is indebted to another, more foundational, examination.³⁵

Although Henry begins with the question of the Being of the ego and the presuppositions involved and endemic to that type of investigation, he does this to show how this investigation already presupposes and assumes the question of

³³ Michel Henry, “Le corps vivant,” in *Auto-donation : entretiens et conférences* (Paris: Imprimerie D. Guéniot, 2002), 89.

³⁴ Henry, *L'essence de la manifestation*, 2 [2]

³⁵ *Ibid.*

Being at the very beginning. In the epigraph affixed to the beginning of *L'essence de la manifestation*, Heidegger criticizes Descartes for failing to determine the meaning of the being of the 'I am': "War er aber bei diesem «radikalen» Anfang unbestimmt läßt, ist die Seinsart der res cogitans, genauer dem *Seinssinn des 'sum.'*"³⁶ Henry begins with this because even as a purported radical beginning which thought it had doubted all propositions so as to establish something absolutely certain, Cartesian philosophy failed to live up to its promise because it did not actually clarify its foundations, "car il n'est possible que sur un fondement qu'il n'a pas explicité, et qui est plus radical que lui."³⁷ However, Henry will later show that this judgement is qualified and that Descartes actually escapes Heidegger's objection, as Descartes determines Being of the Ego as a created being like any other.³⁸ This means that, if Henry is going to offer an ontology that is

³⁶ Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen, Max Niemeyer Verlag, 2006), §6, 24; Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), §6, 46; Cited in Henry, *L'essence de la manifestation*, 1 [1].

³⁷ Henry, *L'essence de la manifestation*, 3 [2]. The source of Descartes' failure to question being in a fundamental way, according to Henry is his unthinking adaptation of presuppositions that are essentially coterminous with philosophy itself.

³⁸ Henry, *L'essence de la manifestation*, 46 [36]; Again later, Henry argues that Descartes actually escapes the objection by Heidegger because Descartes is the one who elaborates the precondition of Being, which is appearance. It is instead Heidegger who misses this in his reading of Descartes:

[le *cogito* de Descartes] échappe en tout cas à l'objection dirigée contre lui par Heidegger a moment de *Sein und Zeit*, à savoir que le commencement cartésien n'est point radical car il suppose quelque chose avant lui, soit une pré-compréhension ontologique au moins implicite, car si je ne savais confusément ce qu'est l'être, comment pourrais je jamais dire « je suis » ? Seulement Descartes ne dit pas « je suis », il dit, « donc je suis ». Loin de surgir sans présupposition, son affirmation résulte de l'élaboration systématique du préalable indispensable à partir duquel seulement la proposition de l'être est possible. Ce préalable n'est rien d'autre que l'apparaître, que Descartes nomme « pensée ». La détermination de de préalable est le contenu même du *cogito*.

See Michel Henry, *Généalogie de la psychanalyse*, 19 [12-13].

fundamental, it must by implication be inaugurated with an examination of the phenomenality of the ego. Unlike Heidegger, it is not a matter of questioning Dasein as the particular being, 'je', who interrogates itself about its being (Dasein), but rather about the nature of appearance itself.³⁹

The ego cannot be submitted to any other condition, not even the horizon of visibility. The mode by which the ego becomes a phenomenon is truly fundamental, "qu'il ne peut être soumis à aucune condition."⁴⁰ For Henry, the highest problem-context for philosophy is determining an inquiry that owes itself to nothing else. The ego is fundamental in this way because its own process of fulfillment is also the realization of every truth as such. In other words, it is not itself derived from anything. Yet, in turn, it is to which every truth is indebted for the condition of its possibility. The problem of truth is the problem of that which makes transcendence possible, and which therefore cannot itself be a transcendent

³⁹ Henry, *L'essence de la manifestation*, 46 [36]; In a similar way, and by taking up Henry's project, Jacob Rogozinski critiques Heidegger for what he calls 'egocide,' that is enacting the destruction of the ego. In his reading of Descartes, Heidegger makes clear that he is interested in thinking only the 'sum' of the 'ego sum' in the cogito:

To change the name of the ego to Da-sein is therefore to decide (1) to think the "I am" on the basis of the "am," that is, from *Being* rather than from the *I*; and (2) to understand the *Being of Dasein of the basis of its Da*, its "there," that is, an *over there*, "a being-outside-of," an Outside - and thus to think of it as *transcendence*. By privileging the *ego* and not the *sum*, by representing it as a subject turned back in on itself and deprived of all transcendence, the traditional conception of the human ego becomes an obstacle to the disclosure of Being. In order to have access to this existing being, all the traditional definitions of the human ego (and especially its modern determinations as Subject) must be revoked, and we even have to get rid of the name "ego" altogether: the existing being that "I" am is no longer an *I*. In *Being and Time*, an egocide - a destitution, a destruction of the ego - is thus achieved.

See Jacob Rogozinski, *The Ego and the Flesh: An Introduction to Egoanalysis*, trans. Robert Vallier (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 16.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 47 [37].

thing. Henry names this problematic as an ‘original truth’ and identifies it with the ego.⁴¹ Put tersely, “l’être de l’ego est la vérité.”⁴² In other words, the Being of the ego is the original truth in question. Accordingly, Henry redresses the essence of manifestation, or more simply put the essence, as “l’ultime condition de possibilité de toute existence.”⁴³ The meaning of the title of his book, thus, comes into clear view: ‘L’essence de la manifestation’ refers to both the condition that makes possible the appearing of anything whatever and the essence of this appearing itself.

The being of the ego is the original and fundamental truth that makes possible each existent as such. Put another way, the essence is the condition for the possibility of every existence whatever. The essence, for Henry, is identified with Being itself because, in the most fundamental sense, Being is that which is most responsible for that which is. By this, Henry means that Being is appearing insofar as for something to be, something must appear. Appearance and Being are identical insofar as Being ‘is’ inasmuch as it appears. This leads to the fundamental question—in Henry’s technical sense—of how appearing itself is possible. It is insufficient philosophically to explain how Being appears, for this presupposes already some more fundamental mechanism which facilitates the appearing of that which appears. If a philosophical investigation is to occur at the most originary

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 48 [37].

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 48 [38].

level, it must be at the level that explains this ontologically arcane facet of the structure of Being: “comment la condition de possibilité de toute manifestation peut-elle devenir elle-même quelque chose de manifeste.”⁴⁴

Still again, the essence, as that which forms the basis of truth, is preceded by the truly foundational and original non-truth.⁴⁵ It is for this reason that, if the foundation of appearing were understood as a phenomenon, it cannot be done with the prevailing account of phenomena as it stands. Phenomenology as it is practiced is methodologically unable to deal with the question that it produces. Namely, it deals with appearance generally under Husserl’s formulation but does not uncover its own deeper meaning. The clarification that Henry is seeking is to arrive at “l’idée d’une révélation qui ne doit rien à l’œuvre de la transcendance.”⁴⁶ This renewed conception of phenomena is one that takes itself as its own content.

⁴⁷ Henry deems this kind of manifestation or revelation (here the terms are essentially synonymous) as an original revelation, because it is that which is the foundation for all appearing whatever in that it is the foundation for appearing as such. Henry writes, “Ce phénomène, ou plutôt cette manière d’être un phénomène qui ne brille point dans la lumière universelle, cette « manière » qui est un être concret, c’est cela qui sera désigné sous le titre d’« ego ».”⁴⁸ When he speaks of the

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 50 [39].

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 52 [40].

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 51 [40].

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 52 [40].

ego, what Henry means is just this original revelation that reveals itself, qua revelation, to itself. The ego is the condition of any revealability whatever.

According to Henry, a truly foundational investigation is not indebted to anything because it uncovers that which, in the ultimate sense, is not indebted to anything and also traces that which presupposes the other in both a methodological and ontological sense. What can be the ultimate condition—that is, the essence of manifestation—that allows both of them to be? The ego names a kind of being that owes its being, that is to say in Henry's terms, its appearance or revelation only to itself. It is truly foundational in that it is that which is in itself manifesting, or able to bring itself to transcendence. In its revelation to itself, the ego in its immanence to itself provides the requisite occasion of presence sufficient to found transcendence: "La transcendance repose sur l'immanence. La vérité originaire est la vrai fondement."⁴⁹ So, summarily, the internal revelation that is immanent to, and internal with, the ego, is the foundation upon which transcendent appearance rests.

The ego is thus the foundation for Being as revelation, and it is that which is accessed through the ego's identification with, and arrival at, itself: "ce qui se maintient, toutefois, dans cette identité fondamentale de sa réalité et d'un « parvenir » à cette réalité, c'est la vie elle-même, c'est la vie transcendantale de l'ego absolu en tant qu'elle est l'ultime fondement."⁵⁰ Life is the name of the occurrence of the immanent and non-temporal appearance of the ego to itself. If, in the

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 52 [41]

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 53 [41].

language of the first chapter of *L'essence de la manifestation*, the goal is to bring to light what it means when we speak of 'I,' we find that what we have brought to light—the ego—is that which, in its immanent life, is itself that which is responsible for bringing everything to light.

If Henry is going to ground everything in an invisible foundation that he names and identifies with the self-giving ego and the life that it undergoes, this indicates that a new concept of phenomena is needed. If the ego's self-relation has been misunderstood, it is because of the way in which appearing has been understood. As a fundamental investigation, Henry will show that the way in which the conception of appearing that has been hitherto understood has operated only through a mode of transcendence. If he is going to procure a way to understand the ego in a fundamental sense, and understand how it has been misunderstood, then he must procure an analysis and redefinition of the whole concept of phenomena itself. This next section of Henry's text would be dedicated to re-thinking the concept of appearing itself by way, and in the mode of, a critique of the usual singular possibility that appearing is imagined to occur through the means of exteriority. This includes within its ambit all phenomena, including the appearing of the corporeal body within subjectivity.

1.2. The Genealogy of Ontological Monism:

La conscience n'est rien ; refus ou impossibilité d'être quoi que ce soit. Critiquer durement ceci : si la conscience n'était pas d'une certaine manière [il serait] impossible de dire [qu']elle n'est pas ce qu'elle est.
D'ailleurs, l'être n'est-il pas emprunté à la présence ontologique? (rien à avoir avec l'être-présent *Anwesenheit* [présence] des Grecs).⁵¹

⁵¹ Michel Henry, Ms. A 6-12-4385; cited in *Revue internationale Michel Henry* 3 (2012): 189.

Généalogie n'est certes pas archéologie. Les déviations historiques par l'effet desquelles l'inconscient est venu dans notre monde et y vient chaque jour ne peuvent faire l'objet d'un simple constat, pas même, d'une description, celle des structures épistémiques ou des horizons idéologiques qui dirigent la pensée moderne : celles procèdent ultimement du vouloir de la vie de demeurer en soi.⁵²

The extensive first section of the *L'essence de la manifestation*—that is, the section that follows the seven chapters of introductory material—is dedicated to identifying and critiquing a constitutive *habitus* evident throughout the whole history of philosophy, from the Ancient Greek philosophers onward, that Henry terms “le monisme ontologique.” The *pars destruens* of *L'essence de la manifestation* that precedes its *pars construens*, the section on ontological monism takes the form of a lengthy genealogical survey of the philosophical tradition that undertakes a demonstration of the inadequacy of its concept of phenomena; viz., how Being shows itself.⁵³ Henry accomplishes this through developing and working out an intricate, detailed, and complex elaboration of the concept of phenomena by way of the presuppositions of ontological monism. He does this, first of all, by defining the task of phenomenology itself as “l’élucidation ontologique de l’essence du phénomène.”⁵⁴ The character of this presupposition is

⁵² Henry, *Généalogie de la psychanalyse*, 14 [9].

⁵³ For more on the distinction between the destructive and the constructive sections of the *L'Essence de la Manifestation*, see both the translation, Roberto Formisano, “Phenomenality and Finitude: Michel Henry’s Theory of Immanence,” trans. Garth Green and Alessandro Chiessi. *Analecta Hermeneutica* Vol. 8 (2016), 245-246; and the French original, Roberto Formisano, “Immanence et existence : Michel Henry et le problème de l’ontologie, entre Heidegger et Fichte,” *Laval théologique et philosophique* Vol. 72, no. 1 (2016), 65-82.

⁵⁴ Henry, *L'essence de la manifestation*, 164 [133].

described as “l’unique direction de recherche et de rencontre ou quelque chose peut se montrer et, par suite, être trouvé par nous.”⁵⁵ Of the direction dictated by ontological monism—and its “milieu absolu de l’extériorité”—Henry writes, “Aussi longtemps que la philosophie reste prisonnière de l’idée d’un horizon transcendant de la connaissance humaine, le rapport de l’ego à lui-même ne peut être compris que comme un cas particulier du rapport transcendantal de l’être-au-monde.”⁵⁶ This genealogy requires casting aside fallacious interpretations of the nature of Being itself.⁵⁷

The legitimacy of this direction can only be questioned by its being surpassed, or at least engaging in the possibility of its being able to be surpassed, “le problème se pose de savoir si un tel dépassement a un sens, si, en tout cas, il a jamais été tenté ou esquissé au cours de l’historial de la pensée humaine.”⁵⁸ Section I of *L’essence de la manifestation* is a clarification and, as it were, an attempted supersession of this regnant horizon. According to the results herein obtained, “L’essence de la manifestation devait pouvoir se manifester.”⁵⁹ To bring us past the limitations encountered, the clarification is repeated so as to bring to light “la possibilité de la manifestation de l’essence.”⁶⁰ This re-clarification occurs in

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 91 [74].

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 57 [45].

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 57 [45].

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 91 [74].

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 164 [133].

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 164 [133].

Section II, “Répétition de l’élucidation du concept de phénomène transcendance et immanence,” or §17-36, which allows Henry to offer both a reappraisal of the concept of phenomena as well as proffer a critique of philosophy generally, and phenomenology specifically.

In the next section of my thesis, I will exposit Henry’s critique of philosophy as such while also underscoring the way in which he is reformulating the nature of phenomenology from being a description of what is ideally invariant in an appearance (taking the later Husserl as determinative for the usually envisaged goal of phenomenology) to that which constitutes or makes phenomena possible; i.e., the essence of phenomena. It is this critique of the nature of phenomena, and the understanding of what constitutes appearing, that is the groundwork on which Henry builds his doctrine of the nature of the body. The purpose of this section is to summarize and establish in outline the main purposes and goals of *L’essence de la manifestation*, so as to see its *telos*, and that of a critique of ontological monism in particular, applied to the question of the body. And why such an application to the problematic of the body is a necessary application of this project.

1.2.1 *The Task of Phenomenology*

Ma phénoménologie de la vie n’a pas vocation à se substituer aux phénoménologies du monde. La phénoménologie du monde a son droit propre il y a chez Husserl et chez Heidegger d’extraordinaires descriptions de ce monde, mais leur phénoménologie est unilatérale. Or si nous ne pouvons pas voir la vie, c’est parce que nous l’éprouvons. J’ai travaillé en amont, dans une autre région.⁶¹

⁶¹ Michel Henry, “Entretien avec Thierry Galibert.” In *Entretiens*. (Arles: Sulliver, 2005), 128.

Phenomenology, as Henry grasps it, is “la science des phénomènes.”⁶² It is, as such, “une description antérieure à toute théorie et indépendante de toute présupposition, de tout ce qui se propose à nous, en qualité d’existant, dans quelque ordre ou quelque domaine que ce soit.”⁶³ Referencing, if only obliquely, Fichte’s 1792 work *Versuch einer Kritik aller Offenbarung*,⁶⁴ Henry says that “La phénoménologie est plutôt une critique de toute révélation, de des différentes formes et de ses conditions fondamentales.”⁶⁵ Any account of the nature of phenomena is co-constituted with a discussion about the nature of phenomenology itself. Phenomenology calls into question all of the ways in which the interpretations of theoretical thought mistakes itself for the real: “en tant qu’il implique la mise entre parenthèses toutes les interprétations et constructions que la pensée théorique superpose au réel.” It accomplishes this because “la phénoménologie prétend s’en tenir exclusivement à ce qui se manifeste, tel précisément qu’il se manifeste.”⁶⁶ In so doing, the goal of phenomenology is to describe the phenomena that appear precisely by making use only of that which is in the appearance.

⁶² Henry, *L’essence de la manifestation*, 59 [49].

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 59 [49].

⁶⁴ “This investigation will also abstract completely from anything particular that might be possible in a given revelation; indeed, it will even ignore the question of whether any revelation is given in order generally to establish principles valid for every revelation.” See Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *Attempt at a Critique of All Revelation*, trans. Garrett Green (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1978), §1, 39.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 55 [43].

⁶⁶ Henry, *L’essence de la manifestation*, 61 [50].

However, by its nature every appearance includes things that do not appear but which make possible its appearing; every appearance is accompanied by a “zone d’ombre.”⁶⁷ Interpreting phenomenology as a philosophy of consciousness and so adopting a ‘dogmatism of intentionality’ is insufficient.⁶⁸ A deeper analysis of appearing leads to the question of whether, and in what way, phenomenology must analyze that which makes possible what appears but which also cannot—and does not—itsself appear.

Henry calls a phenomenology that merely concerns itself with what appears as a form of natural attitude and precritical phenomenology.⁶⁹ For Husserl, the natural attitude is when we treat and interact with the objects of the world as if they were straightforwardly real, where for Henry the natural attitude is when phenomenologists treat and interact with appearances as if they were straightforwardly the ultimate horizon that is to be examined. Husserl is mistaken because that which appears is ‘radically dependent’ in being that which it is on the act of appearing. If phenomenology is going to be foundationless in the sense of being that which itself constitutes the foundation or essence of manifestation, then it must shift from analyzing appearances or that which appears to analyzing the appearing itself (the *cogitatum*, or that which in Husserl’s terminology is intended in a mental act), the nature of *apparentia* itself. Phenomenology should in no way

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 61 [50].

⁶⁸ See §11 of *L’essence de la manifestation* for Henry’s understanding of philosophy of consciousness.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 62 [52].

be concerned with giving an account of the ontic order, but rather that which makes the ontic order possible. The essence of the ontic order, in other words.

But the form of this question leads to the question of (potentially infinite) regress. If appearance *X* refers to something *Y* that makes it possible, is there something *Z* which, in turn, makes *Y* possible? “Ou bien la finitude en vertu de laquelle cette élucidation n’est, en fait, jamais possible.”⁷⁰ For Henry, this cannot be the case. The foundationless foundation that makes possible appearance is the act of appearing. There is nothing further; the act of appearing refers to nothing prior.

Henry’s understanding is not to be confused with an epistemological shift. It is robustly ontology; a re-thinking or extension of the whole philosophical and phenomenological tradition. Appearing is what is central, and so the act of appearing itself is “l’être de cet existant.”⁷¹ Phenomenology is an eidetic reduction—for Husserl, the analysis of essences that can be identified via a mental act—in its ultimate and most developed sense. This reduction brings us to the essence, which cannot be reduced any further, “[la vérité] est la réalité absolue, la vérité du vrai et du non vrai, l’origine qui éclaire toute chose, l’universel fondement.”⁷² In this way, it introduces us to the sphere of the absolute, as there is nothing further to get back to and no other condition to find. The full ontological

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 63 [52].

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 64 [53].

⁷² *Ibid.*, 67 [55].

ramifications are that being and truth actually mean nothing else than appearance as such: Cela signifie que le fait d'apparaître est ce qui confère à tout chose l'être et que la vérité, comprise en un sense premier, n'est elle-même rien d'autre que cet acte d'apparaître considéré en et pour lui-même.⁷³

It is because being applies to appearance, that it puts the question of the true and false on new ground. This is an aspect of Henry's philosophy that is sometimes ignored. He is putting the relationship between the true and the false on new ground, and furthering Husserl's epoche. In as much as the false appears, it is still under the realm of the True in the sense that truth in the fundamental sense is that which appears.⁷⁴ This means that, within the realm of appearance, the false and the true become subordinate questions. Of absolute truth in the sense of appearance, Henry writes, "Elle est la réalité absolue, la vérité du vrai et du non vrai, l'origine qui éclaire tout chose, l'universel fondement."⁷⁵ All questions, even those of truth versus falsity, become subordinated to the question of appearance, or manifestation.

Appearance becomes the ultimate horizon under which all things are thought, into understanding 'the essence of presence', or that which makes appearing itself possible. It is through phenomenology itself that one can examine the true essence or nature of appearing. Henry can say something like "La

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 65 [53].

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 66 [54].

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 67 [55]

phénoménologie recherche la Parousie de l'absolu sur le fondement de l'absolu compris comme la Parousie,"⁷⁶ and it is not a tautology but a statement about the nature of immanence.⁷⁷ Phenomenology is the means by which things can be made present, but it is phenomenology—as the means itself—which is also the thing to be investigated.⁷⁸ What makes phenomenology different from other disciplines is that it examines its own foundations, "La Phénoménologie est son propre objet."⁷⁹ This means that phenomenology is the essence that it itself seeks. Having established, first, that the question of appearance is the central focus of his text,

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 68-69 [56].

⁷⁷ For Dominique Janicaud, the specifically 'theological' character of Henry's work that he holds to be illegitimate is precisely this immanent movement of tautological auto-referentiality. What prompts Janicaud to contest the legitimacy of Henry's project is not its religious character *per se*, but rather that Henry has exceeded the legitimate scope of phenomenological method (though these are not unrelated). For Janicaud, Henry can only exceed the proper methodological boundaries of phenomenology in trying to define the structure of immanent being itself as "pure autoreference." (68) Indeed, the 'theological turn' in Henry's case is named specifically *just as* this 'autoreference' that comprises the primary component of Henry's ontology. Of this phenomenology, Janicaud writes: "The structure of immanence, then, is its pure autoreference. Let us underline, though, that this is not a structure: it is a tautological interiority." (69) The auto-referential structures of Henry's conclusions—and what follows from this in terms of life, sentiment, and phenomenality—are spurious because they reside in this tautology that merely costumes itself in phenomenological garb. Henry is not a phenomenologist according to Janicaud, but a mystic. Janicaud sums up Henry's tautological circularity this way: "the essence of manifestation constitutes the manifestation itself." [70] It is this autoreferentiality that Henry identifies with the absolute, and so is imparted with characteristics that Janicaud sees as analogously concomitant with classical divinity: "auto-affection, eternity, and omnicompleteness." [71] This exceeds the limited scope of genuine phenomenology, and means that immanence is terminologically estranged from phenomenology to now refer not to a kind of 'phenomenological' experience, as Husserl would have it, but absolute auto-revelation. Phenomenology in Henry's hands turns into the "most idealistic metaphysics." See Janicaud, Dominique. *Phenomenology and the "Theological Turn": The French Debate*. trans. by Bernard G. Prusak. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), 68-70.

⁷⁸ The 'Parousia' is a religious term which usually means something like 'second coming', whereas I read Henry's use (and capitalization) of it as the coming-to-be-present or the appearance-of-that-which-appears.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 69 [56].

and also the true goal of a rigorous phenomenology, Henry now shifts, secondly, into asking about the manner, or nature, of appearing itself.

1.2.2 *The Critique of Ontological Monism*

Ce que je n'avais pas trouvé chez [Husserl]—la reconnaissance de la dimension phénoménologique originaire propre à la vie transcendante—, je le cherchais en vain à travers la tradition philosophique occidentale. Isolant en elle des analyses qui me paraissent cruciales, je montrais chaque fois leur subordination à une même présupposition phénoménologique (ce que j'appelais alors le monisme ontologique et qu'il conviendrait plutôt de nommer un monisme phénoménologique) qui occultait l'essentiel.⁸⁰

If the task of phenomenology is to foreground, investigate, and clarify the nature of appearing as such—or, to put it another way, what constitutes a phenomenon, i.e. its essence—then it is a natural first starting place to identify the ways in which the nature of phenomena and appearing have been understood by philosophy, even if this understanding is tacit or not explicitly formulated. Henry argues that philosophy has a single account of phenomenon that is shared by essentially all examples of philosophy as such.⁸¹ This should not be understood to be a shared doctrine or idea, but rather an unthought horizon that underlies the progress and transmutations of philosophy such that all advancements are internal

⁸⁰ Henry, Michel, “Un philosophie parle de sa vie: Entretien avec Roland Vaschalde.” In *Entretiens*. (Arles: Sulliver, 2005), 128.

⁸¹ Maine de Biran, as we shall see, is a critical and important exception to this distinction. See Chapter 2 of this thesis.

to, and indeed an outworking of, this horizon.⁸² It is a horizon that takes on various forms and modes:

Qu'une seule et même présupposition s'exprime à travers ces diverses théories, cela atteste la *persistance à travers l'histoire d'une horizon ontologique commun* sous un matériel philosophique variable; et qu'un tel horizon ait pu demeurer intact jusqu'à nos jours malgré tant de révolutions de la pensée et en particulier malgré la révolution cartésienne—pour cette raison que ces bouleversements se sont toujours produits à l'intériorité et sur le fond de cet horizon.⁸³

In § 9, “La détermination unilatérale de l'essence du phénomène et le concept de «distance phénoménologique»,” Henry draws on both Gassendi and empiricism, and also Descartes and rationalism, to show that ontological monism is not merely one philosophical tendency among other ones, but a *habitus* that runs through all philosophy, even putatively competing schools and dogmatic traditions that are imagined and opposed as opposites. In *Objections to the Meditation of Descartes*, Gassendi writes, “Or, étant d'ailleurs nécessaire pour avoir la connaissance d'une chose, que cette chose agisse sur la faculté qui connaît.”⁸⁴ And Lucien Malverne puts the same guiding thread, “Il fait donc que l'être soit à distance de lui-même.”⁸⁵ Ontological monism can thus be described as the idea that the sole means of

⁸² Henry's critiques of the history of philosophy, such as Kant, is carried out by discovering the particular way in which they belong to this horizon: “Ces présuppositions ontologiques si puissantes et si universelles, qui ont été portées à la clarté du concept par la philosophie moderne, et qui rejoignent d'ailleurs celles de Kant, qu'elles développent, nous voulons les mettre en question, non pas sur un place général, mais à propos d'un exemple particulier, et cet exemple ce sera celui du corps, de mon corps.” See Michel Henry, “Le concept d'âme a-t-il un sens,” 21 [105].

⁸³ Henry, *L'essence de la manifestation*, 73-74 [60].

⁸⁴ Cited in Henry, *L'essence de la manifestation*, 72-73 [60].

⁸⁵ L. Malverne, “La condition de l'être et la mission du logos,” *Revue de métaphysique et de morale*, vol. 54 no. 1 (1949): 41-66.

appearance, its possibility *tout court*, is that of a constitutive exteriority; that a distance must supervene between the thing that appears and the thing to which it appears, also leaving in perpetual abeyance even the possibility of any other kind of manifestation.⁸⁶

Though this distance has often been thought of as a presupposition, it has never been formulated as an ontological truth. Whereas, returning to Malverne's analogy: on the ontic level my vision of a tree can only appear when one steps away from it and see its *gestalt* against the backdrop of the forest. On the ontological level, this translates to the idea that distance becomes the necessary precondition for knowledge as such. As Gassendi writes, "l'oeil ne se voit point lui-même ni que l'entendement ne se conçoive point."⁸⁷

In § 10 of *L'essence de la manifestation*, an important and complex chapter entitled "La distance phénoménologique et la dédoublement de l'être : présence et aliénation," Henry elaborates the fundamental nature of phenomenological distance in ontological terms through a *reductio ad absurdum* of its guiding premises, "La réfutation de la transcendance de l'ego joue à l'égard de l'ensemble des thèses ontologiques qui sont avancées dans ses recherches, le rôle d'une

⁸⁶ With regards to Kant's project, for example, it does not suffice to just "réfuter l'une après l'autre les diverses propositions de la *Dialectique transcendante* relatives à la connaissance de notre âme, il s'agit de remonter au fondement commun de toutes ces affirmations, c'est-à-dire à une certaine compréhension de l'être qu'elles présupposent toutes. C'est l'horizon ontologique à l'intérieur duquel la proposition *cogito sum* apparaît comme renfermant un paralogisme que nous interrogeons ; c'est l'ontologie kantienne qui est en question." See Michel Henry, "Le concept d'âme a-t-il un sens," 6 [95].

⁸⁷ Henry, *L'essence de la manifestation*, 72-73 [59].

démonstration par l'absurde.”⁸⁸ When understood through the criterion of ontological distance, Being operates through an alienated splitting that is made possible and acts by a distancing: “L’être n’est phénomène que s’il est à distance de soi.”⁸⁹ Phenomenological distance is precisely that which allows there be a hiatus between Being and itself so that, in a sort of expulsive *volte-face*, it can appear to itself as outside itself. Roberto Formisano writes of the structure of § 10 as showing this distance:

Insofar as phenomenal, Being is submitted to the εἶδος of a phenomenological distance. In order to appear, it must—as indeed must each and every transcendent phenomenon—be posited at a distance from itself, objectify itself, make itself ‘other’ to itself. Being must exteriorise itself.⁹⁰

Here we are confronted with a difference between the Being that appears and the existence of this Being. Henry uses, as illustrative of this generic and apparently universal philosophical tendency, Fichte’s 1806 *Religionslehre, Die Anweisung zum Seligen Leben* [*The Way Towards the Blessed Life*],⁹¹ which Formisano notes is not

⁸⁸ “Le concept d’aliénation perd toute signification lorsque la problématique a mis en lumière l’immanence transcendante de l’ego et que les rapports de la subjectivité absolue et du temps ont été définis conformément à l’eidos de cette immanence.” *Ibid.*, 58 [45].

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 81 [66].

⁹⁰ Roberto Formisano, “Phenomenality and Finitude: Michel Henry’s Theory of Immanence,” 251.

⁹¹ This was written during the latter Berlin period, after the Jena Period and the *Atheismusstreit*, which resulted in Fichte moving from Jena to Berlin in 1799. Fichte thought his philosophy should be explicable in a form suitable for a general, educated audience. This text is from these ‘popular works,’ if the most demanding one that deigned to explain recondite ontological matters to a general audience. For his critique, Henry appeals, *inter alia*, to Lecture III, “Difficulties Arising from the Common Mode of Thought:—Definition of Being (*Sein*) and Existence (*Dasein*),” where Fichte outlines his conception of the difference between Being [*Sein*] and existence [*Dasein*]. The task of thought is defined by Fichte as that which will “conceive of Being in itself with strict exactitude” (338). Being [*Sein*], accordingly, is conceived as something that is absolute and enclosed within itself, while existence [*Dasein*] is the manifestation of Being (which

incidental but significant as a illustrative clarification of what he has already said because “Henry finds in Fichte the same explication of the ontological meaning of the alienation of Being, reading his interpretation of God as Verbum.”⁹² Whatever else Henry makes of Fichte’s philosophical project and whatever similarities may exist,⁹³ Fichte here plays a central role in the genealogy of monism.⁹⁴ As Rametta writes apropos of this, “the paragraph dedicated to Fichte in the section on monism is at the center of Henry’s consideration of ‘ontological distance’; the ontological space which produces the site at the center of which singular entities situate themselves again and again.”⁹⁵ This is perhaps the most significant chapter

occurs as knowledge). The structure of distanciation that Henry wants to call attention to can be summarized by quotations such as: “For, what is this ‘is’ in the proposition, ‘the wall is?’ It is obviously not the wall itself and identical with it; it does not even assumes that character, but it is distinguishes the wall, by the third person, as independent; it is thus only assumes to be an outward characteristic of essential Being, and image or picture of such Being, - or, as we have expressed it above, and as it is most distinctly expressed, the immediate outward Ex-istence of the wall, - *as its Being out of its Being*” (340). This is very little on Fichte’s post-1800 work in English. For a commentary on *Die Anweisung zum Seligen Leben*, see Frédéric Seyler, *Fichtes "Anweisung zum seligen Leben": Ein Kommentar zur Religionslehre von 1806* (München: Verlag Karl Alber, 2014).

⁹² Roberto Formisano, “Phenomenality and Finitude: Michel Henry’s Theory of Immanence,” 252.

⁹³ For the argument that there are fundamental similarities between Fichte and Henry, see Frédéric Seyler, “Fichte in 1804: A Radical Phenomenology of Life? On a Possible Comparison Between the 1804 *Wissenschaftslehre* and Michel Henry’s Phenomenology,” *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* vol. 28, no. 3 (April 2014): 294-304.

⁹⁴ “Fichte appears to play a fundamental role in the very definition of the concept of philosophical monism. Moreover, Henry’s interpretation is governed by the necessity of showing that Fichte plays a crucial part in the articulation of monism in the history of philosophy. This signifies that Fichte is inserted into a problematic that, according to Henry, found its most profound conceptualization in the phenomenological tradition between Husserl and Heidegger. . . . The concept alluded to here is evidently connected with that of a “horizon,” and this more specifically as a “milieu”—the original space that permits essence to differentiate itself from itself in order to manifest itself to itself.” See Gaetano Rametta, “Fichte, Henry, and the Problem of Manifestation,” trans. Marco Dozzi and Garth Green in *Analecta Hermeneutica* Vol. 8 (2016): 335.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

in Section I of *L'essence de la manifestation*, as it establishes in concrete ontological terms the basic presuppositions of ontological monism as that which sees appearance occurring only at a distance from itself, but in a process of (self-)alienation. “La réalité n’est réelle qu’en tant qu’elle est à la fois elle-même et autre qu’elle-même.”⁹⁶

This section is followed, in chapters 11 and 12, with a critique of the philosophy of consciousness, and whether this opens up a different form of being than the one directed by the presuppositions of ontological monism, one that ontologically arises within the individual person. By philosophy of consciousness, Henry means any philosophy whatever that understands the essence of manifestation—that which makes possible the appearing of any being whatever—to be the division between subject (consciousness) and object. Indeed, as Henry will claim, this division is just another mode of division between being and Being *en soi*, “L’opposition de la conscience et de la chose est la même que celle de l’être et de l’étant.”⁹⁷

However, in the process of showing that, Henry will demonstrate that the philosophy of consciousness, the dominant mode of modern philosophy if not philosophy as such, does not designate a new horizon but rather an end of the horizon of ontological monism, “la philosophie de la conscience apparaît comme l’accomplissement de la philosophie antique de l’être, elle est un terme et non un

⁹⁶ Henry, *L'essence de la manifestation*, 88 [71].

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 93 [76].

commencement.”⁹⁸ The reason it is the *terminus ad quem* of ontological monism is because consciousness is given the name of that which confers upon beings the very power to be a phenomenon, or the essence of manifestation. Within the presuppositions of ontological monism, where existence is the form of Being or Being alienated from itself, then consciousness is the name for existence or manifestation itself.⁹⁹

If Being has to divide itself from itself in order to exist, it is not surprising that Henry again uses Fichte to note that Fichte uses the term ‘consciousness’ to name the actualization and completion of the process of Being’s self-alienation. As such, Henry can say that “La conscience désigne l’essence de la manifestation interprétée selon les présuppositions ontologiques fondamentales du monisme.”¹⁰⁰ The use of Fichte is significant because Henry wants to argue that the notion of consciousness arises at the same time as that of ontological distance (a claim he also makes in *Généalogie de la psychanalyse*), in that it is the site of such distancing. Consciousness is always presented as arising from Being but being able to separate itself from Being and contemplate it. The reason that Henry sees fit to condemn consciousness is because “La conscience n’est elle-même rien autre que l’aliénation de l’être, c’est-à-dire l’être comme tel.”¹⁰¹

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 93 [76].

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 95 [77].

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 96 [78].

With this genealogy, Henry has shown how western philosophy has proceeded internal to a set of presuppositions that govern how Being is thought to appear. In working out these presuppositions, Henry has shown that they miss something of the self-givenness they must, in some way, presuppose. The rest of *L'essence de la manifestation* carefully works through a new conception of phenomena, one that does not owe anything to transcendence.

2. *The Philosophy of Maine de Biran: The Historical Background to Philosophie et phénoménologie du corps*

Maine de Biran est le seul philosophe français—et européen—à avoir réfléchi sur le cogito de Descartes que les autres grands cartésiens, que ce soit Spinoza, Malebranche ou Leibniz avaient abandonné.¹⁰²

The subtitle to *Philosophie et phénoménologie du corps*, “Essai sur l’ontologie biranienne,” indicates that it is not just dealing with the question of the body from the standpoint of phenomenological ontology, but also functions as a study in the philosophy of Maine de Biran (1766-1824). This usage of Biran is neither incidental nor untutored; it is considered, knowledgeable, and essential.¹⁰³ It is also a reading that is characteristically Henryen in comprehension and emphasis.¹⁰⁴ But it is situated as a historical reading, one that furthermore situates

¹⁰² Henry, Michel, “Entretien avec Thierry Galibert.” In *Entretiens*. (Arles: Sulliver, 2005), .

¹⁰³ In addition, the most important Biran scholar of his generation, Henri Gouhier, was a member of Henry’s jury for his thesis, *L'essence de la manifestation*: “Le jury composé de Jean Wahl, Jean Hyppolite, Paul Ricoeur, Ferdinand Aurié et Henri Gouhier.” See the biographical interview in Anne Henry and Jean Leclercq, “Michel Henry (1922-2002): Entretien en manière de biographie,” in *Michel Henry: Dossier conçu et dirigé*, ed. Jean-Marie Brohm and Jean Leclercq (Lausanne: Editions L’Age d’Homme, 2009), 27.

¹⁰⁴ Derrida, for example, offers an entirely different reading of Biran, one that Henry would find ontologically monist. Derrida, with Nancy, thinks bodily self-knowledge in terms of feeling “oneself feeling one’s self touch” [111] and his examination of Biran consists of examining his

Biran within the historical problem context of ontological monism. According to Henry, there is an “[o]ccultation de la pensée de Maine de Biran par la culture actuelle” and even in French universities “son oeuvre ne figure pas aux programmes.”¹⁰⁵ Even more so, he is little-known outside France, “à l'étranger, aux États-Unis notamment, aucun de ses ouvrages n'est traduit.”¹⁰⁶ Henry famously esteemed Maine de Biran as that “prince de la pensée,” who, along with Descartes and Husserl, was “l'un des véritables fondateurs d'une science phénoménologique de la réalité humaine.”¹⁰⁷ Biran's accomplishment, in Henry's eyes, was the “découverte fondamentale d'un les conséquences d'un corps subjectif,” the consequences of which are infinite.¹⁰⁸ This subjective body—discovered by Biran—is for Henry when the self “se donner à nous, sinon d'elle même ; elle est l'auto-donation, le « fait primitif ».”¹⁰⁹

Knowledge of the figure of Biran, therefore, is a necessary precondition to any comprehension of Henry's philosophy. The goal of this chapter is to articulate an understanding of Maine de Biran's thought so as to clarify and understand its

doctrine of touch. Derrida interprets Biran according to the latter's empiricist tendencies, especially the reflexive aspect of touch. Because an interval exteriority still obtains between the *terminus a quo* and the *terminus ad quem*, even if it is the same ‘I’ that touches itself. Notably, Henry's work is not mentioned in Derrida's. See Jacques Derrida, *On Touching - Jean-Luc Nancy*, trans. Christine Irizarry (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2005), 111, 135-158.

¹⁰⁵ Henry, Michel, *Philosophie et phénoménologie du corps: Essai sur l'ontologie biranienne*. (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2011), v.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, v-vi.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, vii.

uses by Henry. It will be shown that Henry's usage of Biran is neither superficial nor incidental to Henry's project, as he follows "L'esprit—sinon la lettre—du biranisme;"¹¹⁰ perhaps even, it should be added, Biran's overall trajectory.¹¹¹ To make this possible, it will be shown that a necessary component of what allowed Biran to break away from what Henry terms ontological monism—which was hitherto thought to be so "fortement établi" that it "n'est venu à l'esprit de personne de le mettre en doute"¹¹²—was Biran's engagement with Kant, paralleling Henry's own. The work of Maine de Biran that most concerns Michel Henry comes only after what Henri Gouhier termed a 'conversion' in Biran's thought—indeed, one of many—that was occasioned by becoming acquainted with the main theses of Kant's critical project: the result of which is what Gouhier calls "La critique de la critique."¹¹³ This allowed Maine de Biran to put the psychology he had developed epistemologically into ontological terms. An investigation into Maine de Biran,

¹¹⁰ Anne Devarieux, "Ce que Michel doit à Maine de Biran," in *La vie et les vivants : (Re-)lire Michel Henry*, ed. Grégori Jean, Jean Leclercq, Nicolas Monseu (Louvain: Presses universitaires de Louvain, 2013), 44.

¹¹¹ For a general account of Biran's trajectory vis-à-vis theology and the pertinence of self-knowledge thereto, see the chapter "L'existence de dieu" in Bernard Baertschi, *L'ontologie de Maine de Biran* (Fribourg, Suisse: Éditions universitaires, 1982), 371-423. In addition, much of Biran's work on theological matters was carried out as an analysis and critique of the work of Blaise Pascal (1623-1662). Pascal thought religion exceeded the scope of, and was qualitatively different from, philosophical thought. Instead, Biran thought that his "science de l'homme . . . efface les frontières entre la religion et la philosophie." For the full account of Biran's reading of Pascal and so also his view of theology, see Henri Gouhier, "Psychologie et théologie dans la philosophie de Maine de Biran" in *Revue philosophique de la France et de l'étranger* vol. 135, no. 10 (Oct.-Dec. 1945), 307-308.

¹¹² Henry, *Philosophie et phénoménologie du corps*, 12 [8].

¹¹³ For the account in the chapter of the same name, see Henri Gouhier, *Les conversions de Maine de Biran* (Vrin: Paris, 1947), 253-270.

then, is not an incidental excursions but must rather be considered an essential feature of the exposition of Henry's thought.

2.1. *The Significance of Kant for Maine de Biran*

J'ai médité pendant quatre heures de la matinée avec plaisir et succès sur les idées Kant, et ce que j'ai écrit entrera dans mon ouvrage.¹¹⁴

It has already been noted that Kant plays a uniquely significant role in Henry's thought, especially as pertains to his philosophy of religion: "Kant is as central to the character and development of Henry's own philosophy as he is to that of modern philosophy as such."¹¹⁵ This import can be grasped most readily in his unpublished article (that was originally to be sequenced in the first section of *L'essence de la manifestation*), titled *Destruction ontologique de la critique kantienne du paralogisme de la psychologie rationnelle*¹¹⁶ [*Ontological Destruction of*

¹¹⁴ This is the entry for the 30th of May, 1815. The entry for the 29th reads similarly, "J'ai travaillé avec suite et plaisir pendant la matinée sur les idées de Kant." See Maine de Biran, *Journal intime de Maine de Biran : de l'année 1792 à l'année 1817* (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1927), 157.

¹¹⁵ For the role of Kant as that by which Henry is able to obtain the *quid juris* justification for his theological turn, see Garth W. Green, "The Significance of Self-Affection: Michel Henry's Critique of Kant," in *Analecta Hermeneutica* 8 (2016): 268.

¹¹⁶ The type of investigation Henry terms 'destruction' is a particular philosophical genre for Henry, used to examine and thus critique the gap between philosophical problems and the ontological horizon a philosopher uses to try and resolve them. This is an important definition to keep in mind with regards to Henry's method and the reason he appeals to Biran. In particular, when speaking of Hume, Henry speaks of a destruction as "une élucidation des horizons philosophiques à l'intérieur desquels s'opère la tentative faire par Hume pour déterminer et saisir l'origine de notre principe de causalité." As Henry explains, "C'est pourquoi cette critique est, en fait, une recherche ontologique qui va nous montrer sur quels plans Hume pose ses problèmes et situe les différents éléments qui interviennent dans leur solution ou dans leur énoncé, et comment l'échec auquel il se heurte et qu'il veut nous donner comme définitif, parce qu'impliqué en quelque sorte dans la nature des choses, tient en fait à l'inadéquation qui existe entre ces problèmes et les plans ontologiques sur lesquels on prétend les résoudre." See Henry, *Philosophie et phénoménologie du corps*, 85-86 [62].

the Kantian Critique of the Paralogisms of Rational Psychology],¹¹⁷ where he writes that “in Kant, remarkably, and for the first time perhaps in the history of

¹¹⁷ Maine de Biran sees himself as defending rational psychology. Though undertaken by a pre-critical Kant, rational psychology was the subject of a famous refutation that played a central part in the *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (1781; 1787). Kant’s earlier contemporary Christian Wolff (1679-1754) laid the groundwork for rational psychology in his 1720 textbook *Rational Thoughts on God, the World and the Soul of Human Beings, also All Things in General* [*Vernünfftige Gedancken von Gott, der Welt und der Seele des Menschen, auch allen Dingen überhaupt*; usually abbreviated as the *Deutsche Metaphysik*], and again elaborated even more systematically in *Psychologia rationalis* from 1734. Wolff’s work would occasion a flurry of literature in the genre, especially by his students. But even Wolff’s philosophical opponents, like Christian August Crusius—who Kant also read as well—did not dispute the validity and place of rational psychology. Moses Mendelssohn published on the topic later in the 18th century as well, worrying about whether it was going to die off. The novelty of Wolff’s approach to the soul lies in that fact that it distinguishes between those issues that can be decided with experience and are thus less contestable (‘empirical psychology’), and those issues that could not be decided with experience but must rather be inferred by reflection on the essence of the soul itself (‘rational psychology’). Psychology, Wolff thought, was “the science of general predicates of the soul” which “contains the first principles of theology, aesthetics, logical, and practical sciences” and therefore “belongs to metaphysics” (22).

We can see this reasoning even more clearly in Alexander Baumgarten’s chapter on Rational Psychology from his 1739 text *Metaphysics*. There, he is explicit that the soul is “a substance with internal changes”. In what is a familiar sounding explication for those who have read Kant, Baumgarten specifies that thinking requires (i) the perception of a thing coupled (ii) with perceptions of its distinguishing marks as well as (iii) the distinction itself. From this, he reasons that thinking is an accident and – since accidents can exist only in other things – thinking exists as an accident of an immaterial and incorporeal substance. The substance to which thinking is predicated is named, accordingly, soul. It is important for how Kant’s argument will develop to know that Baumgarten’s text is structured somewhat like Spinoza’s *Ethics* in that he offers definitions in earlier sections that he refers to in later sections. In his section on rational psychology he most often refers back to an early chapter of his book called “The Internal Disjunctive Predicates of Things” where he outlines the features of substances and accidents without reflecting on the possible polyvalency of the ways in which we understand the predication of substantiality, especially the definition from section §194 that states “accidents cannot exist except in substances.” This is the source of the idea that Kant critiques in the *Paralogisms*, of the substantiality of the soul.

Wolff did not see himself as merely elaborating on Descartes and in the rationalist tradition. Indeed, he saw this distinction between empirical and rational aspects of the study of the soul to be both necessary for, and as his original contribution to, the proper study of the soul. In fact, he inveighs against Cartesians by name in his chapter on the soul in his earlier textbook because they neglect empirical psychology that must remain “the touchstone” of rational psychology. So, when someone like Henry Allison exemplifies the common sentiment and says that the principal antagonist of Kant’s *Paralogisms* is “clearly Cartesian,” that is not exactly true because the German philosophers that preceded Kant essentially invented a unique discipline that made room for both pure and empirical elements, a tradition that is not reducible to either rationalism in general or Cartesianism in particular. It comes to France, primarily, through the reception of the work of Kant. See Christian Wolff, “Rational Thoughts on God, the World and the Soul of Human Beings, Also All Things in General,” in *Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason: Background Source Materials*, trans. Eric Watkins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 22.

philosophy, the problem of the Ego receives an ontological signification.”¹¹⁸ And also in “Le concept d’âme a-t-il un sens?,” where Henry defines this ontological significance of Kant’s project to lie in the fact that “La critique de Kant est radicale parce qu’elle subordonne la *metaphysica specialis*, qui traite justement de l’âme, et aussi du monde et de Dieu, à la *metaphysica generalis*, qui devient chez une interrogation sur la condition de possibilité de l’expérience en général . . . bref une interrogation sur l’être de tout étant possible.”¹¹⁹ There is also a more abridged critique—with a more general thematic scope—entitled “La subjectivité vide et la vie perdue : La critique Kantienne de l’ « âme »” that makes up a chapter in *Généalogie de la psychanalyse*.¹²⁰

What I want to here suggest, however, is that Kant plays an analogous, even parallel, role for Maine de Biran, at least for the works of Biran that are employed by Henry, even if the shape of their respective critiques are different. That is to say, much of Biran’s work that is most decisive for Henry is concerned with, and relates to, Biran’s own confrontation with Kant. Like Henry’s use of Kant, this confrontation is a historically and conceptually significant one that allows Biran to put the psychology he had been developing into ontological terms through an analysis of self-knowledge pertaining to the body.

¹¹⁸ For the translation of that article see Henry, Michel. “Ontological Destruction of the Kantian Critique of the Paralogisms of Rational Psychology.” Translated by Garth W. Green. *Analecta Hermeneutica* 8 (2016): 7.

¹¹⁹ Michel Henry, “Le concept d’âme a-t-il un sens,” *Revue philosophique de Louvain*, Troisième série, Vol. 64, No. 81, (1966), 5-6; Michel Henry, “Does the Concept ‘Soul’ Mean Anything?,” trans. Girard Etzkorn in *Philosophy Today* Vol. 13, no. 2 (1969), 94-95.

¹²⁰ Henry, *Généalogie de la psychanalyse*, 125-157 [103-129].

It is important to understand the motivations and sources behind Biran's 'conversions,' which are frequent and substantial, if Biran is to be understood at all. If Kant likens himself to Copernicus in affecting a revolution in philosophy as such, Gouhier likens Maine de Biran to Christopher Columbus in that his philosophy "est une succession discontinue de découvertes," and when taken as a whole "c'est simplement que le voyage n'est pas jamais terminé."¹²¹ It is for this reason that it is to be understood under the paradigm of discontinuous conversation and not gradual, accretionary evolution.¹²² After all, what else could possibly "désigner le mouvement qui conduit le philosophie de l'idéologie condillacienne à une anthropologie chrétienne?"¹²³

In *Philosophie et phénoménologie du corps*, Michel Henry primarily references only two texts from Maine de Biran: *Mémoire sur la décomposition de la pensée* (1805) and *Essai sur les fondements de la psychologie* (1812).¹²⁴ "L'exposé dogmatique de la théorie ontologique du corps a été fait à partir des thèses contenues dans le *Mémoire sur la décomposition de la pensée* et dans l'*Essai sur les fondements de la psychologie*. C'est dans ces deux textes, en effet, que la théorie du corps reçoit son plein développement."¹²⁵ Not only did these texts both come after

¹²¹ Gouhier, *Les conversions de Maine de Biran*, 8.

¹²² Gouhier, *Les conversions de Maine de Biran*, 8.

¹²³ *Ibid.*

¹²⁴ Reference to these two texts far outweigh reference to any other. The references to *Examen des leçons de philosophie de M. Laromiguière*, *Les nouveaux essais d'anthropologie*, and *Journal intime de Maine de Biran* all occur only in the last chapter.

¹²⁵ Henry, *Philosophie et phénoménologie du corps*, 244 [176].

Maine de Biran was made aware of Kant's work in 1802 (or at least after the figure of Kant enters into Maine de Biran's corpus), they are among the earliest examples of a French philosopher digesting and critically working through Kant's thought after knowledge of the *Kritische Philosophie* spread across the border.

2.1.1 *Le nouveau philosophe: Maine de Biran's Reception of Kant*

The first mention of Kant in any of Maine de Biran's work occurs in a letter from Charles-Marie de Féletz (1767-1850), who is usually styled as l'abbé de Féletz.

¹²⁶ Dated from 11th thermidor in year X of the Republican Calendar (30th of July 1802), the letter comments on the presence of increasing concerns with Kant among France's most important thinkers: "[Destutt de] Tracy [1754-1836]¹²⁷ a fait un très bon mémoire sur la philosophie de Kant ; une nouvelle exposition de cette doctrine fait par Kinker, et avouée par les Kantiens eux-mêmes, a donné lieu à ce mémoire qui est très bien fait."¹²⁸ In his reply to that letter that he wrote later that month, Maine de Biran commented, in turn, on Gérando's project to "réconcilier les disciples de Kant avec ceux de Condillac."¹²⁹

¹²⁶ As reported in Gouhier, *Les conversions de Maine de Biran*, 253-254.

¹²⁷ Destutt de Tracy was an important French Lockean empiricist philosopher who was interested in defining thought as being founded upon sensations. He also elaborated on the psychological nature of these sensations, and he maintained a significant correspondence with Maine de Biran.

¹²⁸ L'abbé de Féletz to Maine de Biran, Paris, 11 thermidor, in *Œuvres de Maine de Biran* tome VI, ed. Pierre Tisserand (Paris: Librairie Félix Alcan, 1930), 142.

¹²⁹ This would be a tall order as Condillac (1715-1780) was a famous and important Lockean empiricist. *Ibid.*, 145.

More significantly, Kant also comes up again in Maine de Biran's correspondence a decade later. In 1812, while writing *Essai sur les fondements de la psychologie*, Biran acted on a suggestion from his friend, the physicist André-Marie Ampère (1775-1836)—after whom the standard metric (SI) unit of measurement for electrical current ampere ('amp') is named—to read Kant (along with Locke) because it offered insights into the nature of fait primitif in a way that, he thought, would help Biran.¹³⁰ In a letter dated from 4th of September 1812, Ampère writes:

Mon ami, c'est ce livre de Locke et celui de Kant que vous auriez besoin de livre avant de mettre la dernière main à votre ouvrage. Vous n'avez idée de Kant que l'histoire des systèmes de philosophie et l'ouvrage de Villers n'ont songé qu'à défigurer par des motifs contraires. Il s'est trompé dans ses conséquences: mais comme il a profondément marqué les faits primitifs et les lois de l'intelligence humaine."¹³¹

In *Essai sur les fondements de la psychologie*, in fact, Maine de Biran would ask "Mais Kant a-t-il vraiment pénétré dans la profondeur de ce fait [primitif]?"¹³² To this question, he replied, "nous dirons que Kant, ne s'étant point arrêté au fait primitif, mérite encore bien plus que Descartes et Leibniz le reproche d'avoir supposé ce qui n'y est pas, sans y démêler ce qui y est."¹³³

The epistolary recommendations of Villers and Kinker are also important and must be commented on to understand why Biran's reading of Kant was

¹³⁰ F.C.T. Moore, "Introduction" in *Essai sur les fondements de la psychologie*, tome VII/1 of *Œuvres* (Paris: Vrin, 2001), X-XI.

¹³¹ André-Marie Ampère to Maine de Biran, Paris, September 4th, 1812, in *Œuvres de Maine de Biran* tome VII, ed. Pierre Tisserand (Paris: Librairie Félix Alcan, 1930), 520.

¹³² Maine de Biran, *Essai sur les fondements de la psychologie*, tome VII/1 of *Œuvres*, ed. F.C.T. Moore (Paris: Vrin, 2001), 88.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 89.

idiosyncratic in the way that it was. No French translation of *La critique de la raison pure* existed in the early 19th century. The first translation, by a scholar named Joseph Tissot (1801-1876), did not appear until 1835, or some 50 years after the publication of the first edition by Kant in German, and 11 years after the death of Maine de Biran in 1824.¹³⁴ By comparison, the first translation of *Critica della ragione pura* appeared earlier in Italy—the first translation of Kant’s première *Critique* in a vernacular language—in 1820, by the military doctor Vincenzo Mantovani (1773-1832).¹³⁵ And for that matter, the first English translation of the *Critique of Pure Reason* wasn’t even published long after the French version, which seems further from the German philosophical milieu. By Francis Haywood (1796-1858), it appeared anonymously in 1838.¹³⁶

Like everyone in France, Maine de Biran only knew Kant’s critical work indirectly, primarily through two books which were very famous and highly regarded in their time. Nonetheless, they were works that popularized Kant, or “ouvrages de vulgarization” as Gouhier derisively calls them.¹³⁷ They were the first works on Kant available in French: the first is itself a translation of a book into

¹³⁴ There have been four translations of the *Critique of Pure Reason* into French: 1. Joseph Tissot [1835]; 2. Jules Barni [1869]; 3. A. Tremesaygues and B. Pacaud [1905]; 4. Alain Renaut [2006].

¹³⁵ A four-volume translation of the *Critique of Pure Reason* into Latin by Friedrich Gottlob Born appeared between 1796-1798.

¹³⁶ There have been, I believe, a total of seven translations of the *Critique of Pure Reason* into English: 1. Francis Haywood [1835]; 2. John Miller Dow Meiklejohn [1855]; 3. Max Müller [1881]; 4. Norman Kemp Smith [1929]; 5. Wolfgang Schwarz [1982]; 6. Werner Pluhar [1996]; 7. Guyer and Wood [1998].

¹³⁷ Henri Gouhier, *Maine de Biran par lui-même* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1970), 126.

French authored by the Dutch philosopher Johannes Kinker, *Essai d'une exposition succincte de la critique de la raison pure* (1801); and the second by the French thinker Charles de Villers' *Philosophie de Kant, ou Principes fondamentaux de la philosophie transcendantale* (1801). Both are the only two sources for Kant that Maine de Biran cites in his notes on Kant. The text through which Maine de Biran had access to Kant directly was his pre-critical *Inaugural Dissertation* (1770).

Even at this early stage, Villers presented Kant as the German equivalent of French giants Descartes and Lavoisier: "Le France qui avait déjà produit Descartes, se glorifie encore de Lavoisier : l'Allemagne se glorifie de Kant."¹³⁸ Published in two volumes, the first volume of Villers's exposition describes the place of transcendental idealism in philosophy in general (starting from the nature of metaphysics to the nature of rationalism and empiricism) to France in particular ("Quelle philosophie règne maintenant en France?").¹³⁹ Villers ends with a hope for producing a translation of the *Critique de la raison pure* (something that did not come to pass) because of its central importance for "une nouvelle direction à l'esprit humain."¹⁴⁰ However, this would prove a challenge because, as he wrote presciently:

Dans l'ordre des choses intellectuelles, la première en difficulté est, sans doute, d'avoir fait la critique de la raison pure; la seconde est peut-être de la

¹³⁸ Charles de Villers, *Philosophie de Kant, ou Principes fondamentaux de la philosophie transcendantale*, 2nd ed (Bruxelles: Culture et Civilisation, 1973), LVI.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 220.

traduite en français, comme la troisième de la lire et de la comprendre entièrement.¹⁴¹

Villers and Kinker were the two sources that Maine de Biran reads and cites in his *Notes on Kant*. When he seems to be quoting Kant, which he does with some regularity, he is in actuality quoting from one of these two texts. Though not always entirely accurate representations of Kant's thought,¹⁴² these notes, serve as an important document through which Biran is able to confront Kant and so able to articulate his psychology in ontological terms.

2.1.2 Maine de Biran's *Critique of Kant: The 'critique de la critique'*

Maine de Biran's *Notes sur la philosophie de Kant* were probably written around 1815-1816. They allow us to see the exact manner that Kant functioned for Biran, and that Kant's work allowed Biran to think through his own project's foundations.¹⁴³ For our own uses, they also give an important and especially pointed mode of parallel contact between Maine de Biran and Michel Henry, as a critique of Kant—or more precisely the mode of thinking that he typifies and perfects—is the *raison d'être* of their philosophies. In their essay on Biran's *Notes on Kant*, Marco Piazza and Denise Vincenti describe these notes as playing a role

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 220.

¹⁴² Henri Gouhier speaks of the places where Maine de Biran's understanding of Kant's project is incomplete or deficient, owing to the lack of availability of primary sources. For example, Biran does not seem aware of the transcendental subject that does not belong to either the phenomenal or the noumenal realms. See Henri Gouhier, *Maine de Biran par lui-même*, 126.

¹⁴³ "Rather than talking about a 'French Kant', according to Jules Lachelier's emphatic definition, we could consider Biran as reflecting on his own thought through Kant." See Marco Piazza and Denise Vincenti, "The Self-Apperception and the Knower as Agent: an Introduction to Maine de Biran's *Notes about Kant*," *Philosophical Inquiry* Vol. IV, 1 (2016): 103.

of “mediation and transformation” in the period where he is led to found “psychology on an ontological basis.”¹⁴⁴ This transition occurs by the time of *Rapports des sciences naturelles avec la psychologie*. “Such a passage from the epistemological perspective of the earlier *mémoires* to the ontological one of the *Rapports* would be unclear,” they write, “if we did not take into consideration the studies carried out by Biran on Kant’s philosophy at that period.”¹⁴⁵

Maine de Biran’s *Notes on Kant’s Philosophy* account begins with a reflection on Kant’s rejection of Descartes’ ontological argument for the existence of God, viz., the idea that perception is necessary for conceiving anything and that existence can never be obtained through mere conception alone. While Biran agrees with this, he argues also that “this conception along with the primitive and necessary belief of that thing does entail its existence to such an extent that we have no other way of judging reality and distinguishing it from appearance.”¹⁴⁶ According to the reading offered by Villers, Kant considers the self to be an example of a noumenal object and the only such noumena that we have any access to.¹⁴⁷ After establishing a parallel with Kant’s outer and inner sense distinction in his own philosophy, Biran specifies that Kant identifies inner sense with the noumenal. This means that we have access to only one noumenal thing, our self.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 104.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁶ Maine de Biran “Notes on Kant’s Philosophy,” trans. Gennaro Lauro in *Philosophical Inquiry* IV, no. 1 (2016): 121.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 121.

But Kant, in Biran's reading, puts all aspects of cognition in outer sense. However, he notes—with not a little exasperation—that the problem on this account is that

Kant puts the understanding and all the faculties and the forms of cognition outside the intimate sense of individuality and, curiously, he means that the pure self immediately perceives his noumenal being, without the immediate inner apperception resulting from the contribution of any of those forms that are supposed to preconstitute its nature or to participate in its essence; is it not like assuming that the soul abstracts the fundament of its being from what precisely constitutes it before any possible experience, and how could we conceive such an abstract being as something other than a pure sign? What!¹⁴⁸

In putting the forms of cognition outside inner sense, Kant has it that the pure, non-empirical self perceives its own being without those things that make perception of any kind possible. However, Biran contends that “the explanation provided then by the author about this way of considering or formulating the *pure self* destroys exactly such a point of view.”¹⁴⁹ He argues that, on Kant's own principles, he should have instead thought that “inner immediate apperception of the pure self” is in actuality apperception of a “primitive act.”¹⁵⁰ In this way, and for this reason, the self experiences itself independently from any external impression through an immediate apperception.¹⁵¹

Maine de Biran wants to emphasize that the primitive self is truly fundamental. The primitive self is not subject to the “laws of the faculty of

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 122.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 123.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 123–124.

knowledge,” it is rather that which founds these laws in the first place, “since this immediate apperception is precisely the origin or the principle on which these laws depend.”¹⁵² Since the self is the fundament on which everything else is based, Biran also makes an argument with regard to the Kantian noumena. As he reads this distinction, Kant is saying that to conceive of something in-itself requires that we do not actually observe it. However, Maine de Biran argues that we would conceive something in itself if “we were exactly the thing” which was being conceived, and so our “observing innerly” is “certain and infallible.”¹⁵³

This sets up how Maine de Biran deals with the critique of rational psychology in the Paralogisms of Pure Reason and the idea that our perception of the self (ipseity) is not a true conception but rather nothing other than the unifying consciousness accompanying all our conceptions. About “cette expérience de notre âme” to which Biran is referencing, Kinker summarizes Kant as saying that “toute expérience est subordonnée à la condition et aux déterminations des formes originelles de notre Sensibilité pure et de notre Entendement-pur.”¹⁵⁴ To this, Maine de Biran argues that the perception of the self is not empty and does not need to be combined with any other determination; to say the soul is a ‘force’ is not to say that it is a substance, but rather the expression of “the real subject precisely as I observe and know it in itself, in its own essence and independently of

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 125.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 126-127.

¹⁵⁴ J. Kinker, *Essai d'une exposition succincte de la Critique de la raison pure*. Trans. J le F (Bruxelles: Culture et civilisation, 1973), 102.

any logical predicate or accidental mode.”¹⁵⁵ Biran wants to argue that what constitutes the essence of the soul is precisely the “intimate sense of ipseity” that Kant and the French Kantians dismiss as not concerning the being of the soul itself.

As Biran reads it, “Kant’s fault in reasoning lies always in the fact that from our invincible ignorance on what a thing is in itself he deduces our ignorance of the absolute reality of such a thing as we conceive its actual reality under such an essential attribute.”¹⁵⁶ While this may be true of other (outer) objects which we do receive through the means of sensibility and intuition, it is possible that with regards to our own self qua soul that “it is not more than what we know of it and that it contains nothing more than the attributes or the only attribute under which it manifests itself to our mind.”¹⁵⁷ Where for Kant the soul’s substance cannot be determined except as non-substantial, Maine de Biran argues that this is a mistake:

The knowledge of ourselves as substance beyond the act of thought, that is, beyond a determined thought or action, is not at all impossible and is *rather entailed by the intimate feeling of existing*; outside this intimate sense there is no possible knowledge, since there is no subject.¹⁵⁸

Biran articulates and accepts Kant’s understanding of how we cannot infer the absolute reality of objects, we cannot establish said reality by reasoning. However, the case is different, for Biran, when it comes to subjectivity, because its

¹⁵⁵ Maine de Biran “Notes on Kant’s Philosophy,” 132.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 133.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 134.

knowledge qua substance is provided by our feeling of ourselves. This felt knowledge which we encounter through psychic effort is not a predicate of the substance called soul or the thinking being. Rather, it is the thinking being itself, “the intimate sense of our individuality is not at all an attribute nor a predicate of the soul; it is rather the soul that feels and observes itself.”¹⁵⁹ The characteristic of the intimate self is something that we know, yet because of its very immanence remains invisible. As Biran writes, “As for the intimate sense of its individuality, the self which is consciousness of all that is felt and thought is independent of any accidental sensation or thought; it is itself. We demand what we know, and we do not know what we demand.”¹⁶⁰

In conclusion, these considerations with Kant’s critical philosophy are key to understanding the transition that allowed Maine de Biran to fashion a full ontology that was imbricated with, but indeed subsidiary to, psychology. Kant subordinates the question of the being of the ego to being in general, and Biran accepts this as the problem-context.¹⁶¹ However, whereas Kant argues the structure of being is such that makes it *a priori* impossible to know the being of the ego, Biran reverses this and argues that the structure of our self knowledge actually pertains to, and indeed is what makes possible, our knowledge of being as such because it is the very structure of this being.¹⁶² This also means a corresponding

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 132.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 134.

¹⁶¹ Michel Henry, “Le concept d’âme a-t-il un sens,” 5-6 [94-95].

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 32-33 [114].

disciplinary reversal. As Bernard Baertschi puts it, for Biran “La psychologie est l’antécédent de toute science.”¹⁶³ This is because “la psychologie dont parle Maine de Biran n’est pas d’abord l’étude des phénomènes psychiques: c’est la science du sujet c’est-à-dire de l’original, elle est donc une «philosophie vraiment première».”

¹⁶⁴ For Biran and Henry, this psychology necessarily includes within its sphere the question of the body, because this body, and the subjective knowledge and powers we have concerning it, are the subjective sphere itself. Triangulated with Henry’s critique of Kant, understanding Biran’s critique of the same allows us to understand the progression to an ontological psychology and Henry’s use of it, especially from *Essai sur les fondements de la psychologie*, in terms of a shared critique of an ontological problematic fashioned, originally, by Kant.¹⁶⁵

2.2. The Place of Maine de Biran in Henry’s Analysis

Subjectivité concrète. L’effort ne suppose pas la vérité de la transcendance. Maine de Biran a raison contre Heidegger, et échappe aux objections contre Dilthey et Scheler.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶³ Bernard Baertschi, *L’ontologie de Maine de Biran* (Fribourg, Suisse: Éditions universitaires, 1982), 2.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁵ It is the text that Henry cites the most in his *Philosophie et phénoménologie du corps*. This text was begun in 1811, and put on hold in 1813. Biran was not able—or not willing—to finish it before he died. By June 1815, Maine de Biran was already working on his next work, *Rapports des sciences naturelles avec la psychologie*, which may evidence he had simply moved on to other ways of characterizing his position. That is, it was not so much that Biran abandoned his earlier ideas, but that he became attracted to other formulations for it. We can see this in October 1822 he wrote in his journal that “je revenais avec attrait sur mes anciennes idées: je relisais mes manuscrits avec intérêt et pensant sérieusement en former un ouvrage que je pourrais bientôt publier.” These books - his ‘manuscrits anciens’ - were not published during his lifetime. Cited in F.C.T. Moore, “Introduction,” XIV.

¹⁶⁶ MS A 6-12-4353; cited in *Revue Internationale Michel Henry* 3 (2012).

Maine de Biran is a philosopher understood to be among the first in the spiritualist tradition of French thinking. In most elaborations, this tradition usually extends through the thinkers Victor Cousin (1792-1867),¹⁶⁷ Félix Ravaisson (1813-1900), Jules Lachelier (1832-1918), and Jules Lagneau (1851-1894).¹⁶⁸ Henry himself is sometimes thought to belong to this tradition as well.¹⁶⁹ This tradition is characterized, according to Grégori Jean, by the recognition of the “l’hétérogénéité de l’esprit et de la nature . . . en tant qu’*existence réel*” on one hand. As well as, on the other hand, a conviction that “ce « principe existant » un effluence rompant avec l’inertie d’une « substance » et se fondant finalement avec sa puissance d’engendrement.”¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁷ Victor Cousin was also responsible for editing and publishing Biran’s estate, and is responsible more than anyone for the way in which Biran is remembered. Although something of a celebrity in his day, he was even more influential as an administrator. In 1834 he was made head of the École Normale and was a member of the Académie française. After visiting Germany to examine their educational system, he was responsible for drafting the Guizot law for establishing universal primary school education, presented by the minister of education François Guizot (1827-1874). When Guizot became Prime Minister, he made Victor Cousin the minister of public instruction. Victor Cousin was significant with regards to the publication of Maine de Biran’s work because he waited until ten years after Maine de Biran’s death to begin publishing Biran’s work. According to Meacham, this led to Biran’s work existing in French philosophy only in virtual form, primarily by way of Félix Ravaisson (1813-1900). See Meacham, Darian. “Editor’s Preface.” In *The Relationship between the Physical and the Moral in Man* (London, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016), 2.

¹⁶⁸ Henry, *Philosophie et phénoménologie du corps*, 12 [9].

¹⁶⁹ Sometimes the elaboration becomes overly expansive, to refer to almost any French thinker that wasn’t a materialist. Case in point: “French spiritualist thought, which includes the works of figures like François-Pierre-Gonthier Maine de Biran, Victor Cousin, and Félix Ravaisson-Mollien, and which inspired thinkers like Jules Lachelier, Henri Bergson, Jean Nabert, Vladimir Jankélévitch, and Michel Henry, formed in large part as a response to what philosophers saw as a reductionist materialist, empiricist view of reality developed by thinkers like Étienne Bonnot de Condillac and later Auguste Comte.” See Antonio Calcagno, *The Relationship Between the Physical and the Moral in Man*, by Maine de Biran, *Notre Dame Philosophical Review*, April 25, 2017, <http://ndpr.nd.edu/news/the-relationship-between-the-physical-and-the-moral-in-man/>.

¹⁷⁰ Grégori Jean, *Force et temps : Essai sur le « vitalisme phénoménologique » de Michel Henry* (Paris: Hermann Éditeurs, 2015), 68-69.

One could also define it negatively by contrasting it with materialism, as Alphonse Leblais does in an important study from the mid-nineteenth century, where he writes apoplectically of French spiritualism's place in contemporary psychology, thinking that "la psychologie a énervé, efféminé et étoilé les intelligences françaises, en se substituant jésuitiquement à la mâle philosophes des Tracy et des Cabanis," that "elle a organisé une véritable prostitution intellectuelle," and finally that "elle a consacré systématiquement le doute, cette grande maladie des esprits de notre temps."¹⁷¹ Félix Ravaisson, on the other hand, notes with poetic fervour that by

cette idée [spiritualisme] est celle de la nature toute active et par conséquent toute spirituelle de l'existence complète ou absolue, nature de laquelle il suit que l'objet et le sujet de la pensée, de la volonté, de l'amour, n'y sont qu'une seule et même chose, laquelle est la pensée, la volonté, l'amour mêmes; une flamme sans support matériel, en quelque sorte, qui se nourrit d'elle-même. Telle est la conception unique où les contraires, partout ailleurs séparés, se confondent comme dans une vivante et lumineuse unité. ¹⁷²

Henry, for his part, describes spiritualism "qui se caractérisait par une attention prêtée à la « vie intérieure », par une « tendance introspective »."¹⁷³ Henry thinks this a mistake, and that the taxonomy that places Biran within French spiritualism

¹⁷¹ Alphonso Leblais, *Matérialisme et spiritualisme, étude de philosophie positive* (Paris: Baillière, 1865), 443; see also Engel, Pascal. "Psychology and Metaphysics from Maine de Biran to Bergson." In *Psychology and Philosophy: Inquiries into the Soul from Late Scholasticism to Contemporary Thought*, eds. Sara Heinämaa and Martina Reuter (Dordrecht; Springer, 2009), 237.

¹⁷² Jean also cites this retrospective on 19th century French philosophy for clarification on spiritualism. Félix Ravaisson, *La philosophie en France au XIXe siècle* (Paris: Librairie Hachette, 1853); Grégori Jean, *Force et temps*, 68. Jean cites a different passage and a different edition.

¹⁷³ Henry, *Philosophie et phénoménologie du corps*, 12 [9].

“c’était commettre à son propos un lourd contresens qui devait compromettre de façon définitive l’intelligence de son oeuvre.”¹⁷⁴ While the “filiation historique qu’on indique existe sans doute,” the appeal to “l’introspection” or to la “vie intérieure” will be immediately equivocated by philosophers whose horizon of thought with regards to these terms is limited to either Bergsonian intuition or Kantian and neo-Kantian doctrines of inner sense.¹⁷⁵ Jean agrees that “il est difficile de ne pas être frappé par l’apparente proximité un tel projet spiritualiste et un certain nombre d’intuitions fondatrices de la pensée henryenne.”¹⁷⁶ However, although some of the terminology may seem the same, Jean points out aptly that Henry is not dealing with understanding a specific region of Being: “avec une « corporéité » non plus comprise comme une certaine région déterminée de la sphère transcendantale ou comme « le véhicule de son être-au-monde » mai comme en constituant *l’essence*.”¹⁷⁷ It is not, in other words, “dans la substitution du corps à l’esprit, mais dans l’analyse des modalités sous lesquelles l’un et l’autre peuvent et doivent réaliser la « subjectivité ».”¹⁷⁸

This misunderstanding is all the more dangerous because it is “parfaitement involontaire,” one that represents “une véritable chute” to understand what

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁶ Jean, *Force et temps*, 69.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 69-70.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

fundamentally constitutes subjectivity and psychology.¹⁷⁹ Biran's conception of inner life cannot be understood by anyone operating with these Kantian or Bergsonian presuppositions.¹⁸⁰ The interest in Biran that characterized French philosophy up until this time was carried out by people whose presuppositions were, nonetheless, incompatible with Biran's thought even if they did not realize this fact. Henry, for this reason, can write somewhat surprisingly that, in spite of the simplicity of his style, "sa [Biran's] pensée a connu le destin de rester plus longtemps incomprise que celle d'un Kant ou d'un Heidegger."¹⁸¹ This obscurity is related to the fact that Biran's philosophy did not treat of anything but that which is "de plus humble, de plus banal, de plus commun."¹⁸² That is, the ontological constitution of the self and the body.¹⁸³

The misunderstandings to which Biran is often subject, according to Henry, occur because of the lack of novelty in his terminology, which obscures the way in which it radically undercuts the usual presupposition of western philosophical thought. Biran employs traditional terminology, which can make him especially puzzling such that he appears within the tradition of French empiricism, a disciple of Condillac, or even a kind of materialist.¹⁸⁴ In order to offer a more apparently

¹⁷⁹ Henry, *Philosophie et phénoménologie du corps*, 13 [9].

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 12-13 [9].

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 16 [12].

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, 13 [9]. This is because Kant or Heidegger operate within the realm of ontological monism, which is readily understandable to all.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 15-16 [11-12].

faithful reading of Biran, Henry claims that the best way to understand Biran is to do so through Henry's own system and terminology cultivated, primarily, in *L'essence de la manifestation*.

With this in mind, Henry has to show that our familiarity with Biran's terminology should not fool us into thinking that we are already in a position to understand the use of this terminology. "Cette terminologie n'est pas nouvelle," Henry warns.¹⁸⁵ Because of this, "le contenu intrinsèque risquent de passer inaperçus et de prêter à des contresens qui en interdisent à jamais la compréhension."¹⁸⁶ Unlike others who have tried to reshape language to fit their purposes and left us with texts of great obscurity that need to be deciphered, Biran leaves us with a corpus that we do not even realize needs to be deciphered in the first place, and for that reason we are even less able to understand it.

The way Biran functions for Henry is thus very specific. Henry is not interested in Biran because he deals generally with topics that sound consonant with Henry's, like 'interior life' or the *cogito*, and still less because Biran is a kind of proto-Husserl or proto-phenomenologist. If the concept of interior life in general was of interest to Henry, he would not limit himself to the figure of Biran within the lineage of spiritualism, but to all the other philosophers involved with that rich tradition of French thought. The refusal that Henry performs in his project is also a refusal of the suppositions of spiritualism as well. The reading that Henry gives of

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 16 [11-12].

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

Biran is, furthermore, different than the one offered by either Merleau-Ponty or Derrida.¹⁸⁷ What is significant in Biran for Henry is the kind of ontology of the self's self-givenness—articulated, as I have shown, in the crucible of Kant's reception in France—that is absent from other figures and misunderstood by nearly every other interpreter of Maine de Biran. So to grasp Biran's significance, Henry had to simultaneously disconnect him from the theoretical and conceptual lineage of spiritualism while keeping him in the historical one: "Si forte était l'opposition de Maine de Biran à son siècle que sa philosophie devait nécessairement porter en elle des éléments hétérogènes, conformes à la pensée de ce siècle, mais étrangers à sa visée propre."¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁷ See, broadly, both Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Incarnate Subject: Malebranche, Biran, and Bergson on the Union of Body and Soul*, trans. Paul B. Milan (Amherst, N.Y. : Humanity Books, 2001), and Jacques Derrida, *On Touching - Jean-Luc Nancy*, trans. Christine Irizarry (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2005)

¹⁸⁸ Henry, *Philosophie et phénoménologie du corps*, 213 [154].

3. *The Project of Philosophie et phénoménologie du corps: Le corps subjectif*

Je me vois, je me touche, en un mot, je me fens, mais je ne fens ce que je fuis ; & fi j'ai crû être fon saveur, couleur, odeur, actuellement je ne fais plus ce que je dois mé croire.¹⁸⁹

Initiated through a “rencontre avec Maine de Biran en 1946,”¹⁹⁰ and completed, Henry reports, “durant les années 1948-1949,”¹⁹¹ *Philosophie et phénoménologie du corps* overlapped the composition of *L'essence de la manifestation*, which itself was started under the direction of Jean Wahl in February 1947, and completed in 1963.¹⁹² As *Philosophie et phénoménologie du corps*

¹⁸⁹ Étienne Bonnot de Condillac, *Traité des sensations* tome II, (Londres & Paris, 1754), 255.

¹⁹⁰ Michel Henry, “Entretien avec Roland Vaschalde” In *Entretiens*. (Arles: Sulliver, 2005), 131.

¹⁹¹ Henry, “Avertissement à la seconde édition” in *Philosophie et phénoménologie du corps*, v.

¹⁹² Anne Henry and Jean Leclercq, “Michel Henry (1922-2002): Entretien en manière de biographie,” in *Michel Henry: Dossier conçu et dirigé*, 18.

was only published as a secondary thesis in 1965, some 15 years after its completion, and two years after *L'essence de la manifestation*, this has led readers to believe that it comes after the “thèse principale,” whereas it was composed at roughly the same time and apparently finished first.¹⁹³ Gregori Jean says given this large amount of time between texts, it is “outre la difficulté à considérer qu’un livre puisse à proprement parler en introduire un autre achevé une dizaine d’années plus tard, force est de constater que les liens qu’ils entretiennent sont plus complexes que celui d’introduction à la pensée qu’elle introduit.”¹⁹⁴ However, *Philosophie et phénoménologie du corps*, according to Jean, is not to be seen as a complement to *L'essence* but rather “constituer l’envers de l’ensemble de *L'essence de la manifestation*, envers qui pourrait bien constituer son *endroit*, c’est-à-dire son fondement, un fondement se serait évertuée à traduire et à transposer dans un cadre phénoménologique.”¹⁹⁵ As such, this textual chronology may be more complicated than Henry indicated, as Grégori Jean has showed in documents that have only recently come to light.¹⁹⁶ As late as March 1950 the question of the body in terms of Maine de Biran’s philosophy was still forthcoming as a part of the main thesis, which was then titled *L'essence de la revelation*.¹⁹⁷ In a letter dated from the

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, 27.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 19-20.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹⁹⁶ “La consultation du dossier CNRS de Michel Henry apporte sur la genèse de l’œuvre de très précieux éclairages.” Jean, *Force et temps*, 19.

¹⁹⁷ It was still titled this as late as 1956-1957. See Michel Henry, “L’essence de la révélation. Résumé analytique,” in *Michel Henry: Dossier conçu et dirigé*, 55.

14th of March 1950, Henry wrote to the director of the CNRS that “J’ai commencé par la rédaction au mois de décembre dernier la rédaction de ma thèse principale.”

¹⁹⁸ This main thesis—*L’essence de la manifestation*—was to have a fifth section named “l’ontologie biranienne et le problème du corps,” which was to have been subdivided into nine parts.¹⁹⁹ As Jean says, from this we can conclude that “le travail sur Maine de Biran est encore destin aux yeux de Henry à faire partie de sa thèse principal.”²⁰⁰ Of course, given that these are documents that concern the exigencies of student funding, they are to be taken with a grain of salt in discerning the exact timeline of compositions. In its origination, the project of *L’essence de la manifestation* was envisioned as being conceptually identified with, and indeed incomplete without, the consideration of the question of *Philosophie et phénoménologie du corps*.

The correct relationship between the two texts—and thus the character and structure of Henry’s project as worked out in his *oeuvre*—is to see Henry’s *Philosophie et phénoménologie du corps* as working out the concrete character of the ontological theses prescribed in the *L’essence of manifestation*. To insist that they are two parts of a single project is to recognize their mutual intelligibility, that without the elaboration of the thesis of the subjective body the ontological theory loses the content of what constitutes that which is given to and in itself.

¹⁹⁸ Cited in Jean, *Force et temps*, 19.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

Which is to say, if *L'essence de la manifestation* offers the structure of self-givenness, *Philosophie et phénoménologie du corps* provides the content provided by and within this structure. Speaking of his work, Henry said that all his books were “L’appliquant aux différents domaines de mon intérêt.”²⁰¹ With regards to its application to the body, Henry speaks of “en appliquant ma conception d’une subjectivité vivante, pathétique et in-ekstatique, au problème du corps, ainsi compris comme ‘corps vivant’, j’ai été conduit à interpréter celui-ci comme un corps subjectif.”²⁰² The reason for this application to the ‘corps subjectif’ is because it is the life that is given immediately to itself:

cette révélation originelle du corps à lui-même, c’est précisément la vie. Il y a donc un Archi-corps, une corporéité pathétique en laquelle le corps s’éprouve lui-même immédiatement, en tant que corps vivant, avant de se rapporter au monde et, sans cette corporéité pathétique qui met le corps directement en possession et de chacun de ses pouvoirs aucun rapport au monde ne serait possible.²⁰³

In light of this, we can contextualize Henry’s relationship to phenomenology more astutely. In recent scholarship, it is not unusual to see Maine de Biran’s work understood to be a kind of early proto-phenomenology. However, for Henry this reading would be exactly backwards, as the purpose of Biran is as a critique of the phenomenological tradition. Gregori Jean writes that it is often thought that “Henry y lit Maine de Biran avec les yeux de

²⁰¹ Michel Henry, “Entretien avec Bogdan Mihai Mandache,” In *Entretiens*. (Arles: Sulliver, 2005), 89.

²⁰² *Ibid.*

²⁰³ *Ibid.*

phénoménologue qu'il est déjà," and that this line of interpretation is justified by that fact that Henry also considers his book on the body to be, along with *L'essence de la manifestation*, one of two texts which constitute "deux pans d'une même chantier intellectuel," of which this comes as the second part of a kind of phenomenological ontology.²⁰⁴ This means that instead of seeing Henry's reading of Biran as one of a phenomenologist, we should see it as where he will discover phenomenology, and that he reads the phenomenological tradition from a Biranian position, "du moins qu'il s'engagera dans un débat authentique avec des textes phénoménologiques qu'il avait bien sûr, du moins pour certains d'entre eux, déjà étudiés—avec les yeux du « biranien » qu'il était déjà devenu."²⁰⁵ This being the case, we should see that in using phenomenology by working through it in a way that eventually becomes a refusal of its most fundamental presuppositions, Henry is looking at phenomenology with Biranian sensibility.

3.1 *The Integration of the Question of the Body into the Critique of Ontological Monism:*

At the outset of *Philosophie et phénoménologie du corps*, Henry begins by situating it—and so the question of the body—within the theoretical and textual context that is also elaborated in *L'essence de la manifestation*: "l'élucidation de l'être s'est poursuivie jusqu'à présent sur le plan de la subjectivité absolue et sous la forme d'une analyse ontologique."²⁰⁶ It was intended to "initialement prendre

²⁰⁴ Jean, *Force et temps*, 19.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁶ Michel Henry, *Philosophie et phénoménologie du corps*, 1–2 [1].

place à l'intérieur d'un ensemble de recherches concernant le problème de la subjectivité absolue comprise comme une sphère d'immanence radicale."²⁰⁷ The genesis of the problematic of the body is a necessary, essential, and central constituent of the project of absolute subjectivity, "la question la concernant n'est pas contingente non plus, elle s'inscrit nécessairement dans le projet d'une analyse eidétique de la subjectivité et lui appartient."²⁰⁸ The function of the section on the body and the theory it contained was to complete the articulation of the nature of this subjectivity, with which the body was identified, "Il était destiné à montrer le caractère concret de cette subjectivité qui, à l'opposé du milieu irréel ou la dissout l'idéalisme, constitue au contraire l'essence originelle de la réalité, l'essence originelle du corps lui-même comme être réel."²⁰⁹ This a theory of the body that is "au principe de l'expérience, non point à ce qu'il sent ou connaît, mais la relation de ce corps sentant et connaissant à lui-même."²¹⁰ It was not discovered by Husserl or Merleau-Ponty, but rather "avant phénoménologie par un philosophe de génie qui s'appelle Maine de Biran."²¹¹ Biran's thesis, according to Henry, is best

²⁰⁷ This was the draft written in 1956-1957—almost a decade after the work itself was completed—to his thesis supervisors, either one or both of Jean Wahl and Jean Hyppolite, at the CNRS. See Michel Henry, "Phénoménologie du corps. Résumé analytique" in *Michel Henry: Dossier conçu et dirigé*, ed. Jean-Marie Brohm and Jean Leclercq (Lausanne: Editions L'Age d'Homme, 2009), 53.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

²¹⁰ Henry, "Le corps vivant," 89.

²¹¹ *Ibid.* Henry's work can be read as a 'contra-lecture' to Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of the body.

summed as “un corps qui est subjectif et qui est l’ego lui-même” or as “un corps qui soit le nôtre et qui puisse être désigné comme la réalité de l’âme, comme l’être authentique de l’ego.”²¹² Accordingly, Maine de Biran has a central and unique place in Henry’s work, especially as pertains to the problematic of ontological monism, serving as the “fil conducteur pour notre analyse ontologique du corps.”²¹³ As, with his work, “La découverte d’une portée philosophique essentielle du corps subjectif s’accomplit chez Maine de Biran et ne fut historiquement possible chez celui-ci qu’à l’intérieur de l’horizon des présuppositions ontologiques fondamentales de sa pensée.”²¹⁴ Henry asks the question whether, and in what way, the body as an object of investigation belongs to a “réalité première” that should be investigated along with the nature of subjectivity in a fundamental inquiry.²¹⁵

Henry here establishes his relation to other phenomenological approaches towards the body through a polemic, and so the introduction of *Philosophie et phénoménologie du corps* functions as the means by which the results obtained previously are contextualized and understood. The overall aim of the introductory chapter is to argue that the body does not conceptually belong where various philosophers usually put it, as the first transcendent entity:

les différents systèmes philosophiques ont soutenu au sujet du corps des théories très diverses qui s’accordaient toutes, cependant, dans une

²¹² Henry, *Philosophie et phénoménologie du corps*, 15 [11], 70 [51].

²¹³ *Ibid.*, 14 [10].

²¹⁴ Henry, “Phénoménologie du corps. Résumé analytique,” 53.

²¹⁵ Henry, *Philosophie et phénoménologie du corps*, 1 [1].

doctrine commune et décisive, à savoir dans l'affirmation *de l'appartenance au monde de l'être de notre corps*.”²¹⁶

This is because the body has been incorrectly conceptualized, “le corps, sans sa nature originaire, appartient à la sphère d’existence qui est celle de la subjectivité elle-même.”²¹⁷ Henry claims, rather, that, when taken in an ontologically fundamental sense, the body belongs to the same sphere of existence as subjectivity. Our ‘corps originaire’ is not, he claims, a biological body, a living body, nor even a human body, it is rather, as Maine de Biran discovered, a ‘corps subjectif’, known in the same way as “le même statut que l’être de l’intentionnalité en general.”²¹⁸

The prejudice that Henry condemns under the name of ontological monism has always thought of the body as a transcendent entity when considered with its relation to the ego: “Le corps, en effet, ne se donne-t-il pas à nous comme un être transcendant, comme un habitant de ce monde ou subjectivité ne réside pas?”²¹⁹ However, Maine de Biran’s project seeks a foundation for determining the being of the ego in and through such a region where this could be determined absolutely. Such a region is not found exterior to thought but rather through the primitive knowledge that is interior to it. This is what is meant in Henry’s contention that the being of the ego is ontological knowledge, repeated in the

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 11-12 [8]. Henry even includes an oblique critique of one of his thesis supervisors, Jean Wahl. See 3 [2]. Emphasis mine.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 11 [8].

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 2 [1].

beginning of *L'essence de la manifestation*.²²⁰ Namely, ontology is precisely the fact of fundamental or absolute knowledge. This was discovered and determined by Maine de Biran, Henry writes, “Dans un texte qui est peut-être l’un des plus importants que la tradition philosophique” where “le sentiment du moi est le fait primitif.”²²¹ This is, according to Henry, to say that the ego is not something that can be discerned when submitted to a *metaphysica generalis*, but rather the condition for all knowledge, or “l’élément ontologique de la manifestation pure.”²²² Kant, as Henry repeats, lacks such a determination of the being of the ego, where the ‘I Think’ functions merely as a logical copula that accompanies our representations, which for Henry is tantamount to nothing.²²³ Kant’s theory, such as it is, does not constitute a proper theory of the ego.²²⁴ Maine de Biran’s critique of Kant aims to provide a foundation for the being of the ego where it functions as “dénonçant le monisme ontologique.”²²⁵ It intends to provide a means by which the ego appears to, and is able to have power over, itself. This opposition to Kant’s paralogism of rational psychology is one that Henry shares and wants to amplify.²²⁶ Although, this opposition is not merely directed at Kant, but also the heritage that

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, 56 [41].

²²¹ *Ibid.*

²²² *Ibid.*

²²³ *Ibid.*, 10 [7].

²²⁴ *Ibid.*

²²⁵ Henry, *Philosophie et phénoménologie du corps*, 63 [46].

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, 64 [46].

weighs heavily on contemporary accounts of the nature of knowledge. In opposition to Kant, Biran aims “à fonder l’être de l’ego”, as “le génial penseur allemand” did not think to question the “étrange paradoxe selon lequel l’âme serait moins aisée à connaître que le corps.”²²⁷

The founding of the being of the ego can only occur in a realm internal to the ego itself. An ontological theory of the ego deals with what makes the ego the milieu of pure manifestation. Henry writes that Biran’s analysis leads to the identification of the Being of the ego with subjectivity determined by, and in, its appearance to itself. This identification with subjectivity rather substantially alters how we should understand the ego. It is not a being among other beings, but the means by which Being appears to itself.²²⁸ For Biran, the effort which produces the ‘fait primitif’ produces an internal experience apart from, and prior to, exteriority. As Anne Deverieux puts this point, “c’est elle que M. Henry trouvée chez Biran quand ce dernier affirme la coïncidence, au sein du fait primitif de l’effort, de la *ratio essendi* et la *ratio cognoscendi*.”²²⁹ The ego, in existing for itself, appears to itself without any phenomenological distance. There is thus no relationship, as the ego’s appearance to itself is just what constitutes its being. We could not make the

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, 63-64 [46-47].

²²⁸ As Maël Lemoine writes, “L’exposé du biranisme par M. Henry s’articule autour de trois points: 1 / Le moi, révélé dans l’effort, n’est pas une chose qui s’apparaît à soi-même, mais le processus de s’apparaître à soi-même. L’ego ouvre ainsi une autre région d’être : l’immanence, qui n’est pas une région de l’être, mais la région de l’être lui-même.” See Maël Lemoine, “Affectivité et auto-affection : réflexions sur le « corps subjectif » chez Maine de Biran M. Michel Henry,” *Les Études philosophiques* no.2 (Avril Juin 2000), 243-244.

²²⁹ Anne Devarieux, “« Distincts non séparés » Michel Henry lecteur de Maine de Biran” in *Lectures de Michel Henry, Enjeux et perspectives* (Louvain: Presses universitaires de Louvain, 2014), 323.

mistake that another being exists as myself in my place.²³⁰ Absolute knowledge is possible only as self-knowledge, necessarily arising to and in itself as necessitated by the fundamental structures of the ego.

A mode of knowledge that is known immanently in itself is discovered through an analysis of our knowledge of the relationship between the idea of movement and its kinesthetic accomplishment. Such an analysis shows that the accomplishment of movement is identical with our knowledge of it, and allows us to understand the immanent structure of self-knowledge and so thereby the structure of internal self-appearance.

3.2 Immanent Knowledge and the Structure of Subjective Kinesthesia

In this section, I show how Henry connects the specific concept of the ‘corps subjectif’ to the more general thematic of the ego. More specifically, I focus on the necessity of this connection as a constitutive ingredient to a proper understanding of subjectivity. This is accomplished in *Philosophie et phénoménologie du corps* by way of a particular analysis and critique of ontological monism which outlines and identifies a knowledge of the body that is immanent to, and constitutive of, the ego itself. This denunciation of ‘monisme ontologique’ as the “horizon absolument impropre à l’élaboration de la question concernant l’être de l’ego” shows that “la pensée moderne relatives à l’âme, à l’être de l’ego, à la connaissance de soi.”²³¹ The “édification d’une ontologie de la subjectivité,” in turn,

²³⁰ Henry, *Philosophie et phénoménologie du corps*, 53 [39].

²³¹ *Ibid.*, 63 [46].

“de disposer d’un corps qui soit le nôtre” which is “la réalité de l’âme, comme l’être authentique de l’ego.”²³²

In Chapters II and III of *Philosophie et phénoménologie du corps*, respectively entitled “Le corps subjectif” and “Le mouvement et le sentir,” Henry uses Maine de Biran’s work to outline the nature and structure of the ‘corps subjectif’. This discussion, accordingly, allows Henry to situate Biran within what he takes to be the eighteenth-century philosopher’s proper historical context as a critic of both rationalist and empiricist schools: “L’affirmation selon laquelle l’être originaire du mouvement nous est donné dans une expérience interne transcendante, est connu par autre lui-même, confère à la pensée biranienne son caractère original qui la situe également loin de l’empirisme et de l’intellectualisme.”²³³ In turn, situating Biran in that way allows Henry to offer a universal, explicit and sustained critique of ‘monisme ontologique’ which he sees as almost coterminous with philosophy itself. Here, Henry shows how both schools of empiricism and rationalism are basically unable to think bodily movement in the same manner that they are unable to think appearance or manifestation itself. That is, both schools are unable to understand appearance except as that which is known by something other than itself, i.e. as transcendent. This shared horizon is why chapter II calls attention to Biran’s analysis of embodied movement as a critique, or a ‘destruction ontologique’,²³⁴ of the shared

²³² *Ibid.*, 70 [51].

²³³ *Ibid.*, 91 [66].

²³⁴ A destruction ontologique in Henry’s technical sense. See note 121 above.

ontological horizon of both rationalism and empiricism so as to show the “faillite complète . . . de toute philosophie qui ne fait pas du mouvement une expérience interne transcendante, c’est-à-dire qui n’a pas les moyens de le déterminer originairement comme une modalité de la vie même de l’ego.”²³⁵

Maine de Biran’s project famously seeks to understand the being of the ego in terms of effort, which is to say it is a power rather than a substance:

L’être de l’ego n’est donc plus déterminé comme une pure pensée dont l’essence s’épuise dans la connaissance de l’étendue et dans la contemplation des choses, il apparaît maintenant identifié avec l’action par laquelle je modifie incessamment le monde, me serait-ce que pour y rendre possible la continuation de ma propre existence, avec les mouvements qui je dirige vers l’univers ou l’atteindre ou pour le fuir, il est l’élément même de ces mouvements.²³⁶

The movement that is from this effort is bodily movement. The purpose of this emphasis is to understand a mode of knowledge that is given to us immediately, “Ce mode de connaissance est précisément celui de l’expérience interne transcendante, le mouvement nous est donc connu d’une façon immédiate, absolument certaine.”²³⁷ “Le mouvement,” Henry explains, “est en notre possession.”²³⁸ Henry thereby defines our body as “l’ensemble des pouvoirs que nous avons sur le monde,” with the emphasis being on the meaning and

²³⁵ *Ibid.*, 89 [64].

²³⁶ *Ibid.*, 72-73 [53].

²³⁷ *Ibid.*, 74 [54].

²³⁸ *Ibid.*, 80 [58].

significance of “nous avons.”²³⁹ To illustrate the nature of this possession, Henry uses the example of empiricist philosopher Etienne de Condillac (1714-1780). In his work Condillac sought to explain our knowledge of the body as empirical, gained as we feel ourselves and feel ourselves feeling. In a thought experiment, Condillac invites the reader to think through how our knowledge of our body is first gained and proceeds to envision a kind of self-touch whereby we gain knowledge through the instrument of the hand as it encounters the solidity of the body.

In his *Traité des sensations*, arguably his most important text, Condillac stages another thought experiment and an early example of a method akin to a phenomenological reduction, the goal of which here is to consider the nature of sensation in and of itself.²⁴⁰ Through each progressing chapter, Condillac invites the reader to examine that they are a statue, deprived of all senses but one. The reason a statue is used is that the statue can be fully immersed and even identify itself in its sensation, “Bref, il n'y a qu'une sensation et rien de plus.”²⁴¹ In each chapter, he changes which sensations remains, progressing from smelling, hearing, taste, sight, and finally to touch. Through this method of abstraction, each chapter proceeds to account for the kind of knowledge we would acquire from each sense about the world, objects, and ourselves. The aim of this experiment is to show that

²³⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁰ For an account of the experiment, its purpose and limitations, as well as its philosophical problems and implications, see Bernard Baertschi, “La statue de Condillac, image du réel ou fiction logique?” In *Revue philosophique de Louvain*. Quatrième série, tome 82, n°55, 1984. pp. 335-364.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 336.

we acquire all our knowledge through sensations alone, primarily touch because “it is this sense which instructs the others.”²⁴² The most important sensations which grant us the most knowledge of the world are provided by the hands, “if this organ were not so mobile and flexible, our statue would need much more time to acquire the ideas of shape.”²⁴³

When it comes to self-knowledge, accordingly, Condillac gives among the clearest accounts of how this process is accomplished from an empiricist perspective, we gain knowledge of our body only by feeling it. As such, self-knowledge is acquired through self-touch:

of since the statue is structured to have movements when impressions are made on it, we can suppose that its hand will move naturally to some part of its body, onto the chest for example. Then its hand and its chest will be distinguishable by the sensation of solidity that they send mutually and that places them necessarily outside of each other. However, in distinguishing the chest from the hand, *the statue will find its 'I' anew in each of them because it senses itself in both of them.*²⁴⁴

As a result, then, it is Condillac's position that we therefore do not know ourselves, as we know ourselves only as well as we know other bodies, “if I know external objects imperfectly, I do not know myself any better.”²⁴⁵ Self-knowledge is established through bodily recognition and the recognition of the ‘I,’ but since our own body is known the same way as any other external object we also do not, in a

²⁴² Étienne Bonnot de Condillac, “A Treatise on Sensations” in *Philosophical Writings of Étienne Bonnot de Condillac*, trans. by Franklin Philip and Harlan Lane (Hillsdale, Erlbaum, 1982), 337. The existing English translation of his text is incredibly rough and evinces very little editing.

²⁴³ *Ibid.*, 262.

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 235. Emphasis mine.

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 336.

very fundamental sense, know what we are. In a very profound sentence, Condillac admits “I experience myself but do not know what I am.”²⁴⁶ The statue is “nothing other than what it has acquired [through sensation]. Why would the same not be true of man?”²⁴⁷

In his critique of Condillac, Maine de Biran identifies a paralogism at the centre of this theory. Namely, how is our hand—or more precisely, our sense organs as such—through which we gain all our knowledge of the world itself known originally? When Henry mentions Biran’s critique in *Phénoménologie et philosophie du corps*, he neglects to mention that Condillac does attempt to give an account of this. According to Condillac, there is indeed no original knowledge of our sense organs, “in the beginning it [the hand] does not yet know how to guide its movements. It [the statue] is ignorant of how it ought to move its hand to place it on one part of the body rather than the other.”²⁴⁸ To gain knowledge, it engages in a sort of trial and error in which it sorts out the manifold of impressions, after which “it has bodily movements that correspond to its mind’s desires; then it moves when it wishes.”²⁴⁹

However, for Henry this completely passes over and ignores the more fundamental question of how the hand is itself known originally and how it comes

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 339.

²⁴⁸ Condillac, 235.

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.* 236.

under our power to be used and employed toward a determinate end. “La main, organe selon Condillac de la sensation de solidité, est l’instrument qui nous permet de déterminer les parties de notre corps, « *mais cet instrument lui-même comment est-il connu d’abord ?* ».”²⁵⁰

Because movement is given in an internal transcendental experience and so known immediately, the being of movement is not constituted. We do not gain knowledge of it from, or subsequent to, its accomplishment. Rather, our knowledge of our movement is what makes its accomplishment possible. As Henry says earlier in *Phénoménologie et philosophie du corps*, “nous n'attendons pas d’avoir lu les derniers ouvrages de biologie pour courir, sauter, marcher ou lever le bras, et si nous nous adonnons à de telles lectures.”²⁵¹ This explains the phenomenological question of how “les enfants et les êtres humains en général accomplissent leurs mouvements sans y penser, mais non, toutefois, sans les connaître.”²⁵² When we grasp a cup of coffee on our desk, we don’t make use of our body as an instrument or a prosthesis of the soul. We don’t perform a calculation, say, of the exact amount we need to flex our flexor digitorum profundus so as to contract the tendon in our arm to bring the cup to our mouth.²⁵³ We simply grab

²⁵⁰ Henry, *Philosophie et phénoménologie du corps*, 80 [59].

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 5 [6].

²⁵² *Ibid.*, 74 [54].

²⁵³ “I hold my body as an indivisible possession and I know the position of each of my limbs through a body schema that envelops them all.” See for a detailed account of the body’s motricity, Maurice Merleau Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald Landes (London: Routledge, 2012), 99-155

the coffee cup and bring it to our lips and blow the steam off so we can drink it. Movements are not the direct and subsequent results of our subjective decisions acting on the physiological mechanics of our body; rather these movements, in Henry's understanding, are subjectivity itself.

3.2.1 *The 'corps subjectif' in the Destruction of Ontological Monism*

The concept of the subjective body is central to Henry's critique of ontological monism, inasmuch as it is the subjective body which knows itself immanently without the intervention of a phenomenological distance. In Chapter II, David Hume (1711-1776) and Jules Lagneau (1851-1894) are singled out as representatives of empiricism and rationalism and the shared, tacit ontological horizon they operate within.²⁵⁴ These authors in particular are selected because they also talk about knowledge of the body, which they identify as an aspect of transcendent knowledge. Herein, we see that despite their different philosophical perspectives, they ultimately share the same ontological prejudice. As such, we see why Henry wants to direct his critique against almost philosophy itself as equal inheritors of this same constitutive prejudice. Accordingly, we have in this text a critique of "presque tous les systèmes philosophiques . . . qui ont abordé ce problème sans disposer des horizon ontologiques qui peuvent seuls nous permettre de le poser correctement."²⁵⁵

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 90 [66].

To demonstrate this constitutive prejudice, Henry dwells on the relationship in Hume's thought between his critique of causality and his inability to correctly understand bodily movement. For Hume, of course, our movement is not known through itself but rather through the sensation that lags behind the movement as it occurs. This is because, as a causal event, we cannot determine a terminal state of an object's eventuation from analyzing its initial state. Our knowledge is gained only from what we acquire transcendently through our senses. In *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, "qui porte le lourd héritage du dualisme cartésien," Hume understands the initial phase of a movement to come about upon an act of will to move, and the second, terminal phase of this movement to be the material movement itself.²⁵⁶ Of course, in examining the constituents of willing there is nothing there that indicates how it could direct bodily organs. Consequently, Hume must envision the thought of movement to operate on the body rather than to see the thought of movement as identical to movement itself. Thus, Maine de Biran can catch Hume "dans ses propres filets" because, according to Hume's own principles, if we do not immanently know the instruments by which we act, we could also not know where to look for and find the instruments that we intend to move, unless the being of our physical movement was the same as the psychic act which makes it possible.²⁵⁷ To be consistent, indeed, "Hume ne devrait même pas parler de notre désir, de nos

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 86 [63].

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 88 [64].

vellités d'accomplir un mouvement, puisqu'il ne dispose d'aucune théorie susceptible de rendre compte de l'appartenance à un moi de ses états psychiques.”

²⁵⁸ Hume cannot, even in principle, answer the question because, like Condillac, his whole philosophical horizon will not allow him to see the asymmetry in trying to understand the internal fact of the self-knowledge of effort through the subsequent external fact of sensation.²⁵⁹

Similarly Lagneau, the representative of rationalism, is used to show that in spite of his incredible subtlety as the ablest French neo-Kantian of his time, and even with his knowledge of Biran's work, he does not correctly understand the subjective being of the body because of his fealty to a Kantian, and so monist, ontological horizon. Indeed, he is noted by Henry as “le plus profond des néo-kantiens français.”²⁶⁰ The text of Jules Lagneau's *Célèbres leçons et fragments* is exegeted so as to call attention to the inadequacy of the philosophical horizon within which he operates, this horizon as a specific form of ontological monism which disallows the very possibility of correctly answering the question posed by self-knowledge. “Pour être en mesure de répondre à telles questions,” Henry writes, “qui sont l'apanage de la philosophie première, il fallait récuser l'ontologie qui soit d'abord ontologie de la vie, une ontologie kantienne et se trouver en

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 89 [64].

²⁵⁹ This rejection of Kant's philosophy as a form of ontological monism requires us to ground the categories within this same immanence.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 98 [71].

possession d'une ontologie qui soit d'abord une ontologie de la vie, une ontologie de la subjectivité et de l'ego."²⁶¹

As someone who wants to read Biran through a Kantian lens, Lagneau explains that our feeling of movement is due to the judgement that we are the cause of movement conjoining itself to the sensation of movement. For in this reading of Kant, our only two sources of knowledge are sensation and judgement. In other words, we gain knowledge of our movement by sensations which are then posited as effects of mental actions by way of judgements. Henry answers that this fails to account for how we determine which movement is truly our own and which is due to external factors. How can someone tell the difference between raising their own arm or someone else doing it for them? That is, if the knowledge of our own movement comes from sensations of our movement joined with the judgment that it is I who moved rather than some external force that moved me, there is no way to correctly know or determine if this movement is my own. For Henry, to correctly judge if this action is mine or not already presupposes—even if it does not recognize—that this action needs to be given in an internal transcendental experience.

All of this pertains to a clarification of the nature of the ego itself. The philosophical project which seeks to understand the process between the idea of movement and its real accomplishment is already a critique of the substantialized aspect of the Cartesian *cogito*.²⁶² As Descartes envisioned the *cogito* to be a

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 98 [71].

²⁶² *Ibid.*, 71 [52].

substance-thought encasement that cannot pertain to the sphere of extension, “Le mouvement réel s’effectue autre part, dans l’étendue, le mouvement subjectif n’étant ainsi que le dessein intérieur, et par lui-même inefficace, de ce mouvement réel.”²⁶³ Although Henry want to make explicit that “Le cogito biranien ne s’oppose nullement au cogito cartésien, il n’y a pas lieu d’opposer un « je peux » au « je pense » puisque, au contraire, toute l’analyse biranienne de l’effort a pour résultat unique et essentiel de déterminer cet effort comme un mode de la subjectivité elle-même.”²⁶⁴

It is not a matter of Descartes being a reflective philosopher while Biran is an active one, as if the ego could be bifurcated into active or reflective modes. Rather, the fundamental structure of the ego always exhibits the same structure of self-knowledge, that of internal transcendental experience, whether it is reflecting on itself or concentrating on an object in the world.²⁶⁵ To understand the active power of the cogito and the ego, it is necessary by that fact to understand the body.

²⁶³ *Ibid.*, 78 [57].

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 75 [55].

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

4. Conclusion

In this thesis, I have endeavored to articulate the importance of the body in Henry's thought. I began by outlining its context in Henry's overall theoretical work as found in the *L'essence de la manifestation*. At the beginning of that book, Henry develops a new account of the nature of phenomena, shifting the task of phenomenology to the more fundamental question of how appearing itself appears. In this new conception of phenomenology, Henry develops a deep and incisive criticism of how philosophy has conventionally and universally understood the appearing of appearance. Henry argues essentially all schools and systems descendant of Greek philosophy understand phenomena to appear in a manner that is only, and constitutively, by way of transcendence. Henry challenges the hegemony of this mode of appearance, and argues that there is actually a more fundamental mode of appearance: self-appearance.

According to Henry, Maine de Biran discovered the manner and structure of self-appearance, and its location in the subjective body. As the subject of Henry's book on the body, I traced Maine de Biran's own development of this to better understand its usage and place in Henry. Biran, I found, developed this notion of the subjective body as a direct result of a detailed and sophisticated reading of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. Analogous to Henry's own reading of Kant, Biran's 'critique of the critique' allows him to form his empirical psychology into an ontological account of subjectivity, and self-appearance. This reading

allows us to see precisely how Biran is a critic not only of Kant, but can be used by Henry to specify the inadequacies with phenomenology as found in the likes of Husserl, Heidegger, and even Sartre.

Finally, I exposit Henry's own book on knowledge of the body, *Philosophie et phénoménologie du corps*, and placed it within the context of his philosophical system, particularly his excoriation of ontological monism. Self-knowledge of the body is precisely the mode by which self-appearance occurs, an absolute knowledge that is identical with itself. When the ego is seen in Biranian terms as an ensemble of powers expressed as an 'I can,' movement itself is understood within the locus of subjectivity, and formerly banal actions like lifting one's arm can be understood in their full philosophical importance. Here we have the completion of Henry's original philosophical project that informs, and in fact determines, all that is to follow.

We should see *L'essence de la manifestation* and *Philosophie et phénoménologie du corps* as the expression of a single, sustained project. This reading is not only in keeping with the fact that the works are chronologically coterminous; it allows us to understand Henry's scholarly trajectory and see that it did not undergo any major schisms. The theological 'turn' is already present in *L'essence de la manifestation*, though it would become more avowedly Christian in its explication by the publication of the so-called Christian trilogy initiated with *C'est moi la vérité : pour une philosophie du Christianisme* (1996). *L'essence de la manifestation* remains the foundational theoretical text for Henry's works that

were to follow. Gabrielle Dufour-Kowalska writes of this, “Le premier ouvrage [*L’essence de la manifestation*], la pierre angulaire, n’a pas seulement une valeur inaugurale. Il établit les fondations et représente comme tel une référence constante, incontournable, pour l’auteur comme pour l’interprète de l’oeuvre subséquente.”²⁶⁶ However, this text cannot be considered outside and apart from *Philosophie et phénoménologie du corps*. Dufour-Kowalska also comments that it is the link to the rest of Henry’s philosophical/theological project:

Publié après mais composé avant *L’Essence de la manifestation*, *Philosophie et phénoménologie du corps* (1964) en est inséparable. En fait les principes d’une corporéité subjective, définis dans cette étude vont illuminer de dernier ouvrage de la dernière somme et rouber leur ultime application dans une philosophie de l’incarnation, qui inclut celle du Logis chrétien - testament de la pensée henryenne, culmination du Verbe fait dans l’idée et la vision du Verbe fait chair.²⁶⁷

Henry himself agreed with this appraisal of the abiding significance of his first book on the body. “Aujourd’hui,” Henry wrote of *Philosophie et phénoménologie du corps* in 1987, “je n’ai rien à changer à ce texte.”²⁶⁸ Indeed, “c’est sur ses acquis essentiels que se sont développées mes recherches ultérieures.”²⁶⁹

4.1 *The Significance of the Body in the Theological Turn: A Prospectus*

The status of the problem of incarnation is explicitly named and positioned as a thematic by Henry only at the end of *Philosophie et phénoménologie du corps*,

²⁶⁶ Gabrielle Dufour-Kowalska, *Michel Henry: Passion et magnificence de la vie* (Paris: Beauchesne, 2003), 2.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁸ Henry, *Philosophie et phénoménologie du corps*, v.

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, vi.

in a chapter subtitled “La chair et l’esprit,” where Henry characteristically laments that “l’incarnation n’ont jamais été portés à la clarté du concept ni soumis à la juridiction de l’ontologie.”²⁷⁰ An ontological clarification of the problematic of incarnation is as necessary as it is with the problem of the body because it illuminates both the indistinct notions that obscure theoretical consciousness with and provide a foundation for ethical considerations, permitting us to judge tradition, by which he means, essentially, Christianity.²⁷¹ Speaking of ontology, Henry writes that “En dehors d’une telle juridiction, la pensée ne peut cependant que se mouvoir dans des représentations vagues et incertaines, quelle que mouvoir dans des représentations vagues et incertaines, quelle que soit la permanence de l’expérience à laquelle ces représentations de rapportent.”²⁷²

An ontological analysis of the body in terms of absolute subjectivity bears on the question and problematic of incarnation, through it can be traced the role of corporeal self-knowledge, and the ontological clarification of the subjective body, in the whole of Henry’s project. The central inquiry of *Philosophie et phénoménologie du corps* has been “l’analyse ontologique de la subjectivité doit-elle être considérée comme faisant partie d’une problématique concernant le corps?”²⁷³ Answered in the affirmative, Henry argues that the content of

²⁷⁰ Henry, *Philosophie et phénoménologie du corps*, 252 [183].

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 255 [184].

²⁷² *Ibid.*, 253 [183].

²⁷³ *Ibid.*, 255 [184-185].

self-knowledge, or what appears to itself, is the subjective body that inveighs finally, and in its totality, against a transcendent or 'empty' subjectivity:

En fait, la conscience n'est pas le vide du néant et le corps n'est pas un objet. La subjectivité est réelle et le corps est subjectif. Le phénomène de l'incarnation ne signifie rien du plus que la réalité d'une possibilité ontologique qui n'est pas abstraite, mais se révèle au contraire identique à l'être même de l'ego.²⁷⁴

The significance of the body for thought is that its elaboration is necessarily the corollary of a properly ontological analysis of subjectivity, where our subjectivity is known absolutely, in the unalloyed manner of absolute knowledge. What we know of ourselves exhausts all that can be known of ourselves. As Henry writes, "Il n'y a pas de décalage entre notre savoir et notre action, parce que celle-ci est elle-même, dans son essence propre un, savior."²⁷⁵

In Chapter VI, his critique of Maine de Biran entitled *Le Problème de la Passivité*,²⁷⁶ Henry speaks of the symmetry between Maine de Biran's understanding of the ego's self-knowledge and God's own knowledge of the ego.²⁷⁷ While Biran, according to Henry's reading, may not have advanced in this

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 26 [199].

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 276 [199].

²⁷⁶ However, Henry posits that these positions are actually vestigial and do not belong properly to Biran's thought. It was merely that Biran's transitive philosophy was always aimed at, but never in the end able to eliminate, these foreign elements completely. Though, later in the chapter, Henry also critiques Gouhier and says that Biran's philosophy did not change substantially. Henry's critique of Biran's philosophy also functions differently than his critique of other thinkers. His critique of other thinkers in his larger genealogy of ontological monism is constructed so that, despite the diversity of their thought, they are shown to share a similar and fundamental presupposition. However, in this case the critique of Biran serves to bring to light that, in spite of certain infelicities, he does not share this presupposition.

²⁷⁷ Henry, *Philosophie et phénoménologie du corps*, 249 [180].

direction as explicitly as Meister Eckhart, Biran raises the same question of the relationship between self-knowledge, as an absolute knowledge, and the knowledge God has of the ego:

Si la connaissance de soi est une connaissance absolue, le problème se pose assurément de savoir si l'idée d'une connaissance que Dieu aurait de l'ego, à côté de la propre révélation immédiate de cet ego à lui-même, conserve un sens. L'approfondissement de ce problème ne conduirait-il pas plutôt à écarter l'idée d'une dualité véritable des deux connaissances en question, à l'affirmation que la permettrait-il pas, enfin, de donner une interprétation ontologique rigoureuse de la similitude de la connaissance de Dieu et de celle qui est l'apanage de l'ego ?²⁷⁸

Henry, with Biran, arrives at theology again precisely through an account of corporeal self-knowledge, as absolute knowledge.

In *Incarnation: Une philosophie de la chair*, the 'corps subjectif' is re-articulated as 'chair', designating that which "s'éprouvant, se souffrant, se suissant et se supportant soi-même et ainsi jouissant de soi selon des impressions toujours renaissantes."²⁷⁹ The body is, therein, otherwise considered inert and lifeless such that the flesh can even feel and touch the body outside itself. This means that "l'analyse du corps puisse devenir celle de notre chair et le principe, un jour, de son explication, c'est le contraire qui est vrai."²⁸⁰ Christianity, in that work, is marshalled precisely because its doctrine and understanding of the incarnation of Christ necessitated a fundamental confrontation, from within, between Greek

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 180.

²⁷⁹ Michel Henry, *Incarnation: Une philosophie de la chair* (Paris: Éditions du seuil, 2000), 8-9; Michel Henry, *Incarnation: A Philosophy of Flesh*, trans. Karl Hefty (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2015), 4.

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 10 [5].

philosophy and its monist presuppositions, “C’est alors à des concepts grecs qu’est demandée l’intelligence de la vérité la plus anti-grecque qui soit.”²⁸¹ The result of this critique of ontological monism, and Henry’s re-appraisal and reformulation of phenomenology as an analysis of the appearing of appearance lead then to an account of knowledge that not only recovers theology, but recovers it in terms of the absolute knowledge we have of ourselves and our body. Future work could build on this thesis by continuing to make Henry’s phenomenologically rigorous methodology, and his transformation of phenomenology itself, more transparent and available, connecting it to his theological work in greater depth, and, ultimately, considering Henry’s conception of the body as an especially productive lens to understand his historical and conceptual significance for both theology and phenomenology.

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 15 [9].

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