

‡ INDIVIDUATION ET VIE CULTURELLE

Pour une phénoménologie radicale dans la perspective de Michel Henry

By Rolf Kühn, Louvain, Paris: Éditions Peeters, 2012. pp. 200.

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With the posthumous publication of previously undisclosed writings by novelist and philosopher Michel Henry,¹ the last decade has seen numerous attempts at deeper comprehension of the socio-political potency of the French thinker's *material phenomenology*.² One such attempt is Viennese philosopher and long-time Henry scholar Rolf Kühn's *Individuation et vie culturelle*.³ Originally a series of lectures given by Kühn as an invited professor at *Université Catholique de Louvain* in the fall and winter semesters of 2010-2011, this cohesive work offers a thorough investigation of the potential for cultural renewal informed by the affective foundation of representation unveiled by material phenomenology.

Concentrating on the possibilities for collective cultural practices, or *praxes* as described by Henry in his *Marx*,⁴ *Individuation et vie culturelle* can be

1 Notably Michel Henry, *Le bonheur de Spinoza* (Paris: PUF, Épipiméthée, 2003) and the four tomes of Michel Henry, *Phénoménologie de la vie* (Paris: PUF, Épipiméthée, 2003–2004).

2 To cite a few, Raphaël Gély, *Rôles, actions sociales, imaginaire perception, incarnation* (2012); Rolf Kühn, *Radicalité et passibilité* (2003); and not to forget the yearly international colloquia dedicated to Henry's thought, in Cerisy, Beirut, Louvain, Montpellier, etc.

3 Rolf Kühn is the chair of Modern French religious thought at the University of Vienna has authored and edited multiple volumes on Henry's phenomenology of Life, in English, French and German.

4 Michel Henry, *Marx, I: une philosophie de la réalité*; Michel Henry, *Marx, II: une philosophie de l'économie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976).

read as a vibrant manifesto in the name of the priority of lived experience over the advance of techno-scientific reason. Kühn approaches affective experience as the living grounds from which the world of scientific intelligibility springs. Neither a first principle nor an essence, affectivity is described as the condition of possibility for the appearance of any phenomenon. Henry describes affective Life as “a wave that feels itself,” which is to say that, in order to come to existence, every event, each thing of the world must be experienced by an enfleshed individuality pre-existing the worldly plane of its coming into view.⁵ The affected *ipseity* is originary and nonetheless entirely submerged in our living cosmos. Kühn describes enfleshed life as the cosmic substance procuring intimacy to our dwelling. Life is the only universal, and it necessarily finds its concretion in the self-experience of an affected *ipseity*. Within affected life these two levels of universality and particularity remain indistinguishable; hence, for both Henry and Kühn, there lies a pathetic community of enfleshed beings, a togetherness through individuating co-affectivity prior to the emergence of any categorial *ousio*-logies.

This pathetic community, or *co-pathos*, is the raw element from which cultural *praxes* are engendered. For Kühn, the joys and pains of human beings guide cultural practices through representation. They are always lived in common, and offer every situation with its cultural readability. This is designated as the “historiality” of Life, the abyssal but pregnant sedimented history of its internal movement. Stepping stones of human communality, artistic and religious practices serve as revelators of the “abyssality” of Life, as evoked in the mysticism of Meister Eckhart or the poetry of Novalis. The emergence of invisible Life through artistic metaphor opens its truth to subjects who recognize lived affective tonality as their own intimacy. Such a recognition can lead subjects of culture to the humble choice of living up to the demands of pathetic life. Hence, Kühn presents his readers with an ethics of cultural life, in which art and religion, acting as *deixis*, point to the burdened potentiality of lived life. For Kühn, the sacrality of life must act as the ultimate principle guiding all human organization as its only possible justice. Against

5 “Pour moi les êtres humains sont beaucoup plus comme des nageurs lâchés dans un océan, supportés par lui, par ses vagues. Et c’est cela la vie: une vague qui se sent elle-même,” [For me, human beings are much more like swimmers dropped into an ocean, supported by it, by the waves. Just like life: a wave that feels itself. –*Editor’s translation*] Michael Henry “Narrer le pathos,” *Phénoménologie de la vie, Tome III* (Paris: PUF Collection Épiméthée 2004), 321.

the Levinasian commandment of the Other, and the Husserlian telic (and Eurocentric) understanding of the perfection of a community of *alter egos*, Kühn postulates an invisible but undeniable solidarity between every man, one too easily forgotten in our cyber-capitalistic century. In affective Life, Kühn identifies a fundamental ethos of affectivity which consists in recognizing and embracing the immemorial fulguration of Life individuating every living being, whilst gathering all in one infrangible and unsurpassable *us*. As such, it is an attempt to overcome the nihilism following the proclamation of the death of God and the resulting abandonment of grand narratives. The ultimate goal of Kühn's interpretation of material phenomenology would be to allow for the exhilaration of all life, to render it to its internal movement from suffering towards elation.

Interestingly, Kühn's treatment of suffering signals a break from Henry's conception of affectivity. Indeed, for the philosopher of Montpellier, more distant from the Christian doctrine than his Austrian commentator, there is no inherent good in Life, no promise of happiness in the *parousia* of affectivity. Where Kühn elaborates an ethics of Beauty, in which affectivity is to guide action through its elation in the recognition of esthetic forms as just and enjoyable, Henry reiterates that Life is not beautiful *per se*, but always pathetically agonizing. I want to argue that for Henry—as can be read in multiple texts from *L'essence de la manifestation*⁶ to the posthumous “*Narrer le pathos*,” and as testifies to Henry's recurring use of the French word *épreuve* (which translates both as a challenge and a torment to describe life)—Life is first and foremost *suffered* and narrated to consciousness as an inescapable weight. Here thinking along the lines of a young Levinas,⁷ Henry leads us to think that it is through an indescribable, nocturnal suffering—striving to be lived as joy—that cultural forms can emerge, through the co-pathetic coming together of enfleshed beings. In that sense, it could be humbly argued that it is not the plenitude of life experienced as beauty, but rather the despairing affirmation of its impossibility—and the resulting sentiment of unavoidable responsibility for the suffering of all—that would open our community to an ethics of affectivity.

6 Michael Henry, *L'essence de la manifestation* (Paris: PUF Collection Épiméthée 1963).

7 Emmanuel Lévinas, *De l'évasion* (Paris: Le Livre de Poche, 1998).