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**MICHEL HENRY: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH TO THE SUBJETIVE BODY**  
**contribution towards the epistemology of corporality**

**MICHEL HENRY: UMA APROXIMAÇÃO FENOMENOLÓGICA AO CORPO SUBJETIVO**  
**contribuição para a epistemologia da corporalidade**

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**Abstract:** The main goal of this paper is to show the main concepts of M. Henry's phenomenological approach to corporality in *Philosophie et Phénoménologie du corps* (1965), the principal work where M. Henry develops these analysis. Here he frequently uses Maine de Biran's (1766–1824) arguments to promote his own philosophy. Cartesianism, Empiricism and Kantian philosophy –the same as mainstream Biomedicine– conceive the body as an object. Henry describes the kind of body outlined by Biran as an 'incarnated body', highlighting the role of language operating in how we end considering our body as an 'object'. To Henry, the body is subjective and is the ego itself: *a body which is an "I"*. This is the 'original fact' with which his phenomenology begins. Henry claims for the need of an *ontology of subjectivity*, because an empirical conception of interior life only shows the failure of empirical psychology in the attempt to explain *movement* and *corporality* in general. Henry tries to build a phenomenological ontology of the body. The type of movement which intellectualism attempts to reconstruct is in reality only a representation of movement.

**Keywords:** Phenomenological ontology incarnated. Body. Language. Michel Henry.

**Resumo:** O objetivo deste trabalho é mostrar os principais conceitos da fenomenologia da corporalidade de M. Henry em *Filosofia e Fenomenologia do corpo* (1965), trabalho no qual Henry desenvolve esses conceitos e com frequência utiliza os argumentos de Maine de Biran (1766-1824) para promover sua própria filosofia. O cartesianismo, o empirismo e a filosofia kantiana – assim como a biomedicina tradicional – concebem o corpo como um objeto. Henry descreve o tipo de corpo esboçado por Biran como um “corpo encarnado”, destacando o papel da linguagem que opera na forma como acabamos considerando nosso corpo como um “objeto”. Para Henry, o corpo é subjetivo e é o próprio ego: *um corpo que é um “eu”*. Este é o “fato original” que funda sua fenomenologia. Henry reivindica a necessidade de uma *ontologia da subjetividade*, porque uma concepção empírica da vida interior só mostra o fracasso da psicologia empírica em seu intento de explicar o *movimento* e a *corporalidade* em geral. Henry objetiva construir uma ontologia fenomenológica do corpo. O tipo de movimento que o intelectualismo intenta construir é, na realidade, apenas uma representação do movimento.

**Palavras-chave:** Ontologia fenomenológica encarnada. Corpo. Linguagem. Michel Henry.

**INTRODUCTION. BUILDING A PHENOMENOLOGICAL ONTOLOGY OF THE BODY: A BODY WHICH IS AN “I”**

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The English translation of M. Henry's *Philosophie et Phénoménologie du corps (PP)* (1965) appeared in 1975 as *Philosophy and phenomenology of the body* (Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague). In this book «Henry frequently uses Biran's arguments to promote his own philosophy» (O'SULLIVAN, 2006, p. 48), intending to deploy his first serious approach to a phenomenological ontology of the body, under the strong influence of Maine de Biran (1766–1824) and his analysis towards 'movement' (O'SULLIVAN, 2006, p. 44; COPPLESTON, 1982). Henry is undoubtedly the phenomenological thinker who has been most attentive to the problem of self-manifestation and affectivity, and it would be completely incorrect not to include those concepts within the problem of the body and corporality. *Affectivity, corporality and self-manifestation (self-affection)* (ZAHAVI, 1999, pp. 2-4) are almost impossible to separate in real life experience. At this point, psychoanalytic practice led me to the same conclusion. I shall, unfortunately, be compelled to treat this subject far too briefly, as it can be treated properly only by giving long catalogues of facts.

Maine de Biran «was an opponent of the eighteenth-century philosophy advanced by the English empiricists Locke and Hume» (O'SULLIVAN, 2006, p. 44), who tried to end the problem by treating the body as an object among others. Nowadays, mainstream biomedicine – for example – upholds the same assumption. Conversely, «Henry describes the kind of body outlined by Biran as an 'incarnated body'; it is the 'original fact' with which his phenomenology begins (PP 4) » (O' SULLIVAN, 2006, p. 45). As Henry puts it: «Because *the body, in its original nature, belongs to the sphere of existence which is the sphere of subjectivity itself*» (HENRY, 1975, p. 8). That's why many authors agree with the idea that Henry's phenomenology is chiefly concerned not with what appears, but with the *appearance itself*. Since Henry's work consistently seeks to locate his phenomenology of the body in the joy and pain of 'ordinary reality', specifically located in *praxis* and 'real' life, the way in which he builds the concept of the *subjective body* seems to be a major contribution to the epistemology of corporality. Moreover, Henry spends much of his time arguing against what he describes as an ideology of science that has neglected the fact that our body is much more than a mere 'object', warding off the problem of subjectivity by reducing every notion to materially oriented ideas.

According to Henry, the body must become «the theme of an investigation which takes the real man as its object, not the abstract man of idealism, but this being of flesh and blood which we all are». This is his «project of a first philosophy» (HENRY, 1975, p. 7). For Henry – who follows Biran –, the body is *subjective* and is the *ego* itself: *a body which is*



an "I". «Biran seeks to substitute a transcendental phenomenology for a classical and empirical psychology» (O'SULLIVAN, 2006, p. 47), gesture followed by Henry with his *material phenomenology*. Besides, «Biranism is 'essentially a philosophy of motor effort'» (O'SULLIVAN, 2006, p. 54) that wishes «to move the understanding of the body away from rationalist approaches that regard movement as an '*unconscious or physiological process*' (Henry, 1975, 100)».

Henry «supports Biran's argument against the dominant philosophies of the nineteenth century by writing that contrary to rationalism '*it is necessary to say that all knowledge derives from experience, because the condition of possibility of experience is itself an experience*' (PP 34)» (O'Sullivan, 2006: 48). Henry's later works such as *La barbarie* (1987) and *Incarnation* (2000) are also strongly influenced by Biran's rejection of empiricism and rationalism, which deal with «the abstract man reduced to the condition of a pure subjectivity» (HENRY, 1975, p. 7), as we may find it in Kant. In fact, the rephrasing of being in terms of *effort* and *resistance* brings Biran closer to Spinoza than Descartes, and Henry's affinities with Spinoza are well known by his master degree thesis (*Le bonheur de Spinoza*, 1942). This led us to think that Spinoza remains as a main influence to Henry and his characterisation of affectivity as 'first philosophy', that is, as ontology.

## 1 THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL BACKGROUND. THE REJECTION OF HUME'S EMPIRICISM AND THE ONTOLOGICAL LACK IN KANTIAN PRESUPPOSITIONS

«For Biran, empiricism only knows a region of ontology that describes being as 'transcendent and sensible' in terms of 'facts' regarded 'as natural phenomena' [...]. It conceives of the elements of life as 'purely artificial ideas of class or genre, as collections of abstract modes of sensation'» (HENRY, 1975, pp. 32-33).

Hume understands the body as an «ensemble of transcendent masses», or as he writes himself, as «the interior play of nerves and muscles that the will is supposed to put in action in the movements of our limbs» (HENRY, 1975, p. 87).

In comparing Hume's understanding of the body to that of an *anatomist* or a *physiologist*, Biran asks 'what species of analogy is there between the representative knowledge' of «the play and functions of our organs, that an anatomist or physiologist is capable of knowing, and the *intimate sentiment of existence* which corresponds to these functions? » (HENRY, 1975,



p. 88). Henry points out that Hume does not have any «ontology of subjectivity» (1975, p. 88), that it does not accept Biran's claim that «we are able to have a sentiment without knowing in any way its means», and that it «has no need to speak of our desire, our wish to accomplish movement, since it is not disposed to any theory likely to take account of the belonging of these psychic states to the self [...]» (O'SULLIVAN, 2006, p. 52). As Henry himself puts it:

Once it becomes an instrument, the movement of the body is given to us only in a transcendent experience. The theme of thought would then be this instrument and not the goal of action or of movement which it wishes to accomplish, which is absurd, for, presupposing that the subject can think of both the means and the goal of its action at one and the same time, this does not mean that it would execute this action, it would merely represent it, it would represent to itself its [84] goal and the means for arriving at it, but it would not act. This thought of the goal and of the means surely exists, but the thought of movement is not movement. The latter is an entirely new phenomenon with respect to this thought and this is precisely the phenomenon with which we are dealing. The conception of the body as an instrument of our action is therefore an element of our representation of movement, but it cannot in any way be part of a theory of real movement itself. Hence, we aperceive more and more clearly that the ontological theory of subjective movement, far from reducing movement to its idea, rather makes us arrive at the conception of the only foundation possible for the reality of movement and the body. (HENRY, 1975, p. 61).

That's why «we would have to be in possession of an ontology of subjectivity and not an empirical conception of interior life [...]. Hume, who bears the heavy inheritance of Cartesian dualism, divides into a first phase which is will or desire to accomplish movement and a second phase which consists in the corresponding material process» (HENRY, 1975, p. 63). From the perspective of a phenomenological ontology, «this causality, before being an idea, is a power and this power is revealed to us in the same way as the being of the ego with which it is fused» (HENRY, 1975, p. 71).

Henry points out that «The first condition which a theory of the movement of one's own body must satisfy is to be in a position to account for a feeling of this movement which I accomplish myself, of a power in the course of its exercise, a power which is mine» (HENRY, 1975, p. 65).

This type of analysis also shows the complete failure of empirical psychology, because «the type of movement which intellectualism attempts to reconstruct is in reality *only a representation of movement* whereas the being of movement and the problem of its original

knowledge completely escapes it» (HENRY, 1975, p. 66). While the field of inquiry remains only at the level of *representation*, the variety of modes of givenness of our body



– shown clearly by Henry with the analysis of movement –, many of our direct experiences with our body – mainly *affectivity* – remain unthought. One of the most important contributions of Maine de Biran – recovered brilliantly by Henry – consists in accounting for the fact that the core of our experience with ourselves usually remains far away from theoretical or intellectual knowledge. It is evident that Freud dealt with the same problems, though of course from a different perspective, where the clinical concerns come to first place, because the main analytical task targets *suffering*, and not just *representation*. Continuing along this line, it was Paul Ricœur in *De l'interprétation* (1965) one of the firsts to show the cardinal feature of psychoanalysis: Freud's *mixed epistemology*, mainly built by two different types of concepts and lines of thought: on the one hand, the *energetic* one, where we may locate the concepts of *Trieb* (drive), *Affektbetrag* (quantum of affect), *Libido*, *Wunsch* (wish) and all the processes related to repression in general, which where described by Freud as *Seelenvorgänge*, as processes related to the soul. What the *Metapsychology* names as 'dynamics' and 'economics', in short. On the other hand, the *hermeneutic* one, related to the main issue of interpretation, the meaning of symptoms, phantasies, our history and the whole symbolic dimension which, at last, includes the very notion of 'culture'. According to Freud, the Ego is 'culture' in each one of us.

Returning to our theme, similar objections arise towards *Kantian presuppositions*. In a Kantian perspective, «only two sources of knowledge exist: *sensation* and *judgment*» (Henry, 1975, p. 70). As Henry puts it, the entire philosophy of Maine de Biran

consists precisely in the affirmation that *the feeling of action does not result from a sensation*, that action is known in itself insofar as it pertains to the sphere of subjectivity, insofar as it is a fact of the relationship of immediate knowledge to itself [...] We have asserted that movement is known to us immediately and we have denied that muscular sensation or any other form of mediation plays the smallest role in this primordial knowledge which is ours and which is less a knowledge of our body than the phenomenological being of this body itself. (HENRY, 1975, p. 70).

That's why Henry asks:

Where does the being of the ego find a place in such an ontology, where is its concrete life, its action, its movement? » [...]. «In order to be in a position to answer these questions, which are the lot of first philosophy, we must first reject Kantian ontology and be possessed of an ontology which is first of all an ontology of life, an ontology of subjectivity and the ego. Doubtless, I judge that it is I who act; such a judgment presupposes the intervention within my mind of the idea of causality, but the transcendental deduction of the categories has shown us that the latter do not float in air nor do they occupy our mind by accident; rather they have a foundation which is precisely the



concrete life of the ego, its action and its movement, in a word, its body. Not only [...] the idea of necessity presupposes the idea of causality and that the idea of causality presupposes the idea of action, we must still see that the idea of action presupposes action itself. (HENRY, 1975, p. 71).

At this point, Henry shares the same ideas developed by Freud in his *Project of Psychology* (1895) and the main role of energy and movement in the constitution of subjectivity.

## 2 THE ‘TWOFOLD USAGE OF SIGNS’ AND THE PROBLEM OF THE FUNDAMENTAL ONTOLOGICAL AMBIGUITY WHICH LEADS TO THE ‘BODY-OBJECT’

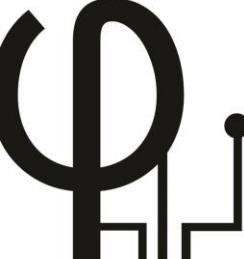
This section discusses the role of language operating in how we end considering our body as an ‘object’. Cartesianism, Empiricism and Kantian philosophy –the same as mainstream Biomedicine– (still) conceive the body as an object. According to these perspectives, in which this *body-object* belongs to nature –*res extensa*–,

everything takes place as if the body were nothing other than this object which we see and as if the original being of the body whose ontological analysis we have given were nothing but a chimera [...]. There is a sort of absorption of the originally subjective being of the body in this body which manifests itself to us among things, the first becomes interior to the second and the entire being of our body is reduced to its constituted being. (HENRY, 1975, p. 109).

Henry –again following Biran– upholds the idea that if the element immanent to my body is considered as the nucleus of the body–object, ‘object’ which I can see or touch, «that which we call immanence has thus become the very essence of the transcendent» (Henry, 1975, 109). But

before clarifying the fundamental ontological ambiguity which presides over the occurrence of such a transformation, we first must show how this transformation is at the origin of the perception or the knowledge which we have of our body, of this knowledge as it is expressed by common sense in everyday language. (HENRY, 1975, p. 109).

After discarding the thesis according to which movement could be known by way of muscular sensation, Henry turns to analyse how we use common language –a method very well known by psychoanalysis– to show how this daily, cultural uses frequently refer to the



implicit assumptions we uphold unconsciously. From his peculiar phenomenological perspective, the eye, the ear and the hand are elements of the *transcendent body*. This *common sense language* says:

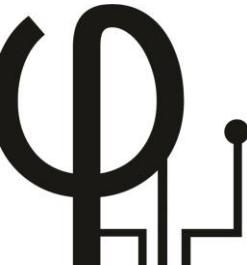
The eye sees the panorama, the hand moves toward the table and touches it, its ear hears the melody. The eye, the hand, the ear are elements of the transcendent body, they manifest themselves to consciousness in the truth of being, there they have a place, a spatial configuration and perceived or scientifically determined relationships with all the objects of nature. It is precisely such transcendent elements which bear within themselves the nucleus of the body, *i.e.* this ensemble of powers whereby the body sees, moves, touches, and hears. Nevertheless, the latter had been characterized by us as belonging to a sphere of radical immanence, as constituting the being of a subjective body. (HENRY, 1975, p. 109).

According to Henry, the results of the ontological analysis of the original being of our body – the transcendent body – constitute a part of *absolute knowledge upon which phenomenological ontology is built*. Here appears what we have referred to as the genuine Biranian contribution. It is therefore clear that Henry uncovers a genuine epistemological problem within empiricism:

Moreover how could we maintain this absurdity whereby ultimately what we see and touch would also be that which sees and touches? This body which we [152] see and which we call our own presupposes, as Biran has shown us, another body which sees and which touches, which sees and touches all things and among them this body which is seen and touched. It is this other body which is the original body, whose being has been determined as belonging to the sphere of absolute subjectivity outside which it was unable to arise without losing everything which makes it what it is. (HENRY, 1975, pp. 109-110).

This original being of our body is an *ontological power* which cannot be identified or incorporated into an element of nature. The arguments that support the impossibility of this identification are given by Henry conjointly when he explains what Biran called “the twofold usage of signs”. In fact – states Henry –

this identification is a naive representation and actually an illusion. It is the general theory of this illusion that Maine de Biran proposes to us in the analysis of what he calls “the twofold usage of signs.” Let us consider the experience of seeing: It is an internal transcendental experience. This experience transcends itself toward a world, but it takes place entirely within a sphere of radical immanence. If we now express in language this experience of vision, we use the word “to see” which is, to speak as Maine de Biran, the “sign” of seeing. How this sign is related to the internal experience of seeing, how, in a general way, language is based on the life of absolute subjectivity



which it expresses, this is what cannot be clarified here. (HENRY, 1975, p. 110).

### 3 THE PROCESS OF FOUNDATION OF REFLECTIVE LANGUAGE IS ULTIMATELY REDUCED TO THAT OF NATURAL LANGUAGE

To Henry, this fundamental ontological ambiguity leads to call attention to language, as many other phenomenological thinkers have remarked; and we may also suspect here the strong influence of Freud's psychoanalysis in this account. Of course, as it is well known, this is a statement often made by psychoanalysts. As Henry puts it:

The process of foundation of reflective language is ultimately reduced to that of natural language. Even if we assume that the words 'I see' designate the representation of my seeing and not my seeing itself, nevertheless, it is upon the latter, upon its radically immanent experience and upon it alone, that their meaning ultimately rests [...]. The entire ontological ambiguity in the phenomenon described by Maine de Biran under the name of the "twofold usage of signs" resides in the fact that a relationship is established between the words 'I see' and a physiological organ, such that the sign 'to see' has a twofold usage and designates both the eye, or at least a property thereof, as well as the internal transcendental experience of seeing. (HENRY, 1975, p. 111).

And a few pages after Henry clarifies the main differences between the 'physiological objectivity' and the 'objectivity of being', highlighting that the individual ego cannot be identified with any organic center:

"From this stems a frequently illusory similarity between the physiologist and the metaphysician who, while using the same terms, believe they are dealing with the same things or subscribing to the same system of ideas". The relationship of the original being of the body to the system of organs which physiology studies can only be, according to Biran, a symbolic relationship at the end of which the physiological division appears as a symbol or a sign of the transcendental division [...]. For example, if we consider movement, physiology will think that it can account for it by imagining a center of action in the brain which will serve as the origin from which this movement begins. "But is this anything other than a symbol? Can the individual ego be identified with any organic center? Is the action which we relate 'objectively' to such a center the same as that which we attribute to ourselves in the intimate consciousness of effort? Are these not two ideas, two facts of a totally different order? How can the mind pass from one to the other?" [158]. (HENRY, 1975, p. 114).



#### 4 CONCLUSIONS: THE ONTOLOGICAL DIFFERENCE. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THESE TWO "FACTS", THE PHYSIOLOGICAL BODY AND THE ORIGINAL BEING OF OUR BODY

To a certain extent, it seems that Henry arrives to Heidegger and his idea of the *ontological difference*, but he uses this concept to clarify the being of our body and its transcendental constitution. Though the similarities, we should remember that Henry aims to rise higher in the scale of understanding the philosophical status of the body, when Heidegger followed another philosophical horizon.

Henry concludes that

since the relationship between these two "facts", i.e. between the physiological body and the original being of our body, is analogous to the relationship between the sign and the thing signified, the philosophical meaning of this relationship is twofold: On the one hand, the sign aids us in our comprehension of the thing signified, "Every metaphysical analysis, confidently basing itself upon a physiological division between the organs, their functions and interplay, receives therefrom this clarity, this apparent facility which images communicate to reflective notions, by uniting themselves with them as symbols destined to explain what is in itself obscure;" on the other hand, this aid is illusory; it makes us believe that "by combining certain organic movements we can deduce... psychological facts which can only be verified by the intimate sense," such that "the so-called explanations teach us nothing about the subject in question and only serve to obscure it by substituting confused images for simple and perfectly clear ideas of reflection". This latter text, which again asserts the absolute character of the evidence inherent in the sphere of transcendental immanence, suggests that we re-question many analyses of Biran in which physiological investigations appear as a necessary and useful complement to peculiarly psychological investigations. (Henry, 1975, pp. 114-115).

Towards circumscribing the problem of the constitution of one's own body and the question of the 'two bodies' and the ontological difference, what Henry intends to signify when he speaks of *ontological dualism* is merely the necessity of the existence of this sphere of *absolute subjectivity*, without which our experience of the world would not be possible. Towards the question of *the two bodies*, the 'subjective–body' and the 'body–object',

it becomes immediately apparent that the duality which splits in an incomprehensible manner the unity of the being of my body and which causes this being to be given to me twice, so to speak, finds its foundation in the ontological structure of truth, a structure in virtue of which something manifests itself to us in the truth of transcendent being only on condition of a



more original revelation in a milieu of absolute immanence. (HENRY, 1975, p. 115).

At last, Henry states that

*Ontological dualism is the foundation for the twofold usage of signs.* Because there exist, as Maine de Biran says, "two sources of evidence", our body is given us in a way such that each of its original powers, concerning which we have an immediate knowledge in the subjective experience of movement which constitutes its essence, also manifests itself to us in the form of an organ or some physiological or spatial determination. The difference between the original being of this power and the organ which seems to be its instrument is in no way situated on an ontic level, it is not a difference between something and something else, it is an ontological difference, not a difference in individuality, but in the manner of being, i.e. relative to the region at the heart of which being manifests itself and exists [161]. (HENRY, 1975, pp. 115-116).

Though the ensemble of problems relative to the body are not –of course– fully solved, *Philosophie et Phénoménologie du corps* let us find ourselves in the presence of certain schemata of thought that will be enlarged in other studies like *Incarnation* (2003), for example. To say that the *ontological dualism is the foundation for the twofold usage of signs* seems to be a quite a Heideggerian conclusion, but with the addition of this new dimensions when referring it to the body and its constitution, and with another ontological horizon interior to which he philosophised. But much deeper and more notorious is the influence of Maine de Biran on Henry, as we have tried to show along this paper. After studying *Philosophie et Phénoménologie du corps*, it is even possible to conjecture that for Henry, Maine de Biran would be a central and founding figure of a phenomenology of movement and action (*J'agis, donc j'existe*, or *j'agis, donc je suis*), as proposed by Vancourt in *La théorie de la connaissance chez Maine de Biran* (1942), who already highlighted the existence of a very precise conception of the nature of unconscious representations in Maine de Biran (1806) (VANCOURT, 1944, p. 10).

We shall thus see that Maine de Biran already referred to the fact that the immediate certainty of the existence of the body is entailed in 'the primitive fact' (the 'first philosophy' to which Henry often refers, ontology), and that

la connaissance que nous avons de ce corps est une connaissance par l'intérieur, par 'sentiment' (...). Sur le terrain de l'apperception immédiate, du sentiment intérieur, l'union de l'âme et du corps s'impose (est une donnée) purement à ma constatation (...). Dans le fait primitif, est une connaissance



par l'intérieur et non une représentation objective par idées. (VANCOURT, 1944, pp. 70-74).

This *connaissance par l'intérieur* (*et non une représentation objective par idées*) defines, in a certain way, one of the main cores of Henry's phenomenology and, as far as I am able to judge, a capital assumption to understand our corporality from the perspective of *absolute subjectivity*.

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