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"Michel Henry's Practical Philosophy"

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**Jeffrey Hanson, Brian Harding, and Michael R. Kelly, (Eds.).** *Michel Henry's Practical Philosophy*. Bloomsbury Academic 2022. 208 pp. \$115.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9781350202764); \$39.95 USD (Paperback ISBN 9781350202801).

Michel Henry was a brilliant philosopher who sadly went under the radar – to some degree in his native France and Europe, and much more so in North America. Born in 1922 and active from the '60s to the '90s, Henry's work was overshadowed by contemporaries like Derrida, Foucault, Deleuze, and Lyotard. However, there has been a resurgence in Henry's thought, especially as his works have been translated and there have been studies dedicated to his work. What makes *Michel Henry's Practical Philosophy* different from other monographs or collections on Henry is its focus on the practical aspects of Henry's thought, where other works have tended to focus on the phenomenological and theological aspects of his work. These latter approaches tend to turn the whole focus of his philosophy—an 'intimate and intense reality' he calls Life—into an '*entia rationis*' or 'will-o-the-wisp,' according to the editors (4). But Life is in the living, and this collection brings together 10 original essays by leading Henry scholars engaging specifically with the practical aspects of Henry's thought; or, in ensuring that his philosophy as a whole be read practically. The essays are split into two parts: Part I deals with interpretations of Henry's thought primarily around praxis, labour, and spirituality; Part II works through some possible applications of Henry's thought in the areas of politics, education, art, and community. Instead of commenting on each essay, I will engage with a few of the exemplary ones.

Three of the essays in Part I engage with Henry on the themes of work and labour. Scott Davidson's essay looks at affective labour and the Henry-Ricoeur debate over how to interpret Marx. In examining affective labour, Davidson examines labour that would have been quite alien to Marx: where workers are 'expected to either evoke or suppress their own feelings in order to display a feeling and produce a corresponding feeling in customers,' and thus a 'performance that involves the production or manipulation of affects' (27). Affective labour has become a commodity that alienates workers from themselves. Henry's 1976 two-volume work *Marx* sought to save Marx from Marxism, which meant recovering Marx's emphasis on subjectivity and the living individual. For Henry, there is a clear equation between Marx's ideas on subjectivity and his own idea of Life. Davidson argues, via Henry, that the contemporary commodification of affect—'the display of a warm smile, the enthusiastic recitation of a company script' (27)—'signifies an ontological form of alienation...[that] encroaches on the authenticity of one's own affective life' (33). Jeffrey Hanson's essay also looks at Henry's engagement with Marx on themes of subjective labour. He highlights very clearly that, for Henry, work is completely subjective and has no objective dimension to it; what we think of as the objectivity of work, and what is described by economics, is 'an *ersatz* simulacrum of the living dynamism that is work' (67). Hanson further makes clear, in ways that he says even Henry does not fully develop, that work is actually fundamental and central in Henry's thought. In his 1990 *From Communism to Capitalism*, Henry writes that 'force is just another name for labor' (57), and thus Hanson points out the equivalency of Life, force, labour, and work (71). Life, and the power of Life, is what is truly at the root of any society and economic system (74). Hanson thus argues that work



and labour are a fruitful bridge between Life and world in Henry's thought, for it is the living and subjective force of labour that is productive of the world and its goods.

Neal DeRoo's essay sidesteps the explicitly theological engagements found primarily in Henry's late works, to engage with his writing on spirituality. He does this by looking predominantly at Henry's 1987 *Barbarism*, because in his introduction, Henry labels the various productions of human beings as 'civilizations and spiritualities' (3). DeRoo first examines the close connections between Henry's writing in *Barbarism* and Husserl's late writings, that discuss spirit and spirituality as a living and dynamic force (47-8). The 'spiritual diagnosis' (50) that Henry engages in is thus very much derived from a Husserlian impulse, and indicates that the barbarism that he was describing (primarily modern, objective science and its sequelae in the rest of society) was of a spiritual nature. In the same way that Hanson argues for the subjective force of labour as the connection between Life and world in Henry, DeRoo argues that what 'connects Life to the world in the human is spirituality' (51). In both cases, however, what is at root is the dynamism of Life expressing itself. But what DeRoo highlights so well in his essay is that the barbarism that Henry is describing and decrying is itself a spirituality, i.e., an expression of Life, even though it is destructive of Life. The question, then, is not about recovering a spirituality in our barbaric age, but in recovering a better *form* of spirituality. This 'better' form, for DeRoo, is not a universal normative claim, however, but 'a grounded and contextual normativity' that will enable us to 'to "love" better'" (57). The practical element that DeRoo urges here is a spiritual discernment that will be attuned to the form of spirituality that is being expressed in a given culture; only after this is done can we properly aim at shaping culture in a more Life-giving manner.

I now turn to a few of the essays in the second part of this collection, which engage with applications of Henry's practical philosophy. Carrying on with the discussion of *Barbarism*, Brian Harding engages with Henry's very critical assessment of the (French) university, where he argues that the university has ceased to pass on culture and create noble individuals but has rather become a ground of technical and professional training, treating students like automatons and information banks (142). Henry's ideal university is, of course, the opposite. Although Harding accepts Henry's lament for the current state of the educational system, he points out that Henry projects modern, especially Germanic, educational reforms back into the mediaeval system that he espouses, without seeing the ways in which these reforms have contributed to the state of the university that he decries as barbaristic. Harding concludes by offering three points of what an educational system based on Henry's principles would look like: 1) educators should ennoble and elevate rather than degrade students, 2) educators should pass on culture rather than just engaging in professional and technical training, and 3) students should be active participants in their education rather than passive voyeurs (153-4).

Lastly, J. Aaron Simmons and Maia Wellborn write a piece that examines Henry's thought in relation to community, culture, and social life. They do this by looking at affectivity, which has been a main focus in a number of disciplines since the early 2000s, researching embodiment, emotions, and the mind-body connection. The authors argue, however, that the researchers in the 'affective turn' have generally overlooked phenomenology as part of its philosophical lineage, focussing

primarily on the vitalists (e.g., Spinoza, Bergson, Nietzsche, Deleuze, Guattari) (182). Affectivity, and especially auto-affection, are core ideas for Henry, and offer a boon to this research. In Henry's thought, affects are not something that we have, like 'physiological or psychological "things"'; rather, we come to focus on 'how auto-impressions *do* us as embodied individuals' (197). When we see others not as things, or objective bodies in the world, but as living flesh in a shared lifeworld, then '*lived affectivity can effect social transformation*' in positive and meaningful ways (198).

Overall, *Michel Henry's Practical Philosophy* is a welcome text when it comes to secondary works on Henry. The majority of Henry's thought has not made the impact or received the attention that it deserves; this volume again displays that his philosophy is well worth reading and wrestling with. The impact of the collection is also this: that Michel Henry's philosophy is from beginning to end a philosophy of Life, and therefore it is a practical philosophy. While there are of course dense philosophical analyses in his work, he is concerned with how Life is lived in art, religion, education, economic relations, culture, and more. The essays here will be more graspable to, and probably most read by, those readers who are quite familiar with Henry's thought, and French phenomenology more broadly. That said, the authors—especially in the first part 'Interpretations'—provide substantive enough summaries of Henry's thought to allow novice readers access into the practical workings of his philosophy.

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