Article

Sexuality as Unity in Life: An Approach from Michel Henry’s Phenomenology of Incarnation

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Abstract: This article aims to promote the integration of knowledge and life based on a phenomenological description of sexuality and erotic relations. To carry out this task, I will follow the approaches of the French philosopher Michel Henry in order to extract the anthropological consequences of a phenomenology of incarnation pertaining to sexuality. Both the peculiar union produced by the sexual act and its perpetually threatened condition through the “event” of nihilation of the flesh will be the object of reflection throughout this work. In my search for the reintegration of the human being through the sexual act, I will show the importance of woman and her spiritual superiority in deepening the intimate meaning of sexuality. Further, I will argue that the intersubjective experience lived in sexual practice demands a consideration of human beings from their ultimate condition of relational possibility (Life), emphasizing their engendered, not merely created, condition. Thus, the salvation of human beings and their involvement in the coming of Life to them is intrinsically related to that carnal disposition which aids to unify them, beyond their diversity, in their self-revelation in Life.

Keywords: Life; knowledge; flesh; affectivity; sexuality

1. Introduction

The fracturing and subsequent necessity of an integration of knowledge and life is most evident in the exercise and practice of sexuality. Sexuality enables the potential to engage in a uniquely specialized form of action (Henry 2000, p. 297): that which takes place beyond the margins of a merely strict representation. Sexuality as a phenomenon obliges consciousness to acquire, by dissimulation of Life, a privileged means of access to what constitutes the content of its own phenomenality: its carnality. This carnality exists as a dimension purely given in Life and by Life, as Michel Henry has elucidated throughout his work, most poignantly in his phenomenology of incarnation. Through sexuality, human beings discover that the specific content of their consciousness is body (Henry 2014c, p. 271), but more exactly “gift body”, or body “disposed to” a peculiar form of exposure. This corporeal disposition excludes any objective apprehension that pretends to detach the felt from the capacity to feel, that is, from the source that gives the feeling the capacity to take possession of itself.

Sexuality as a privileged phenomenon constitutes an opportunity for human beings to perceive the exercise of their own condition in a way that is not exempt from ambiguity. In sexuality, the impact on the projective possibilities of one’s own consciousness declines when one realizes that the attraction towards another’s body has its phenomenological origin in the abyssal depths (night) of one’s own subjectivity. This background is subtracted from the gaze, that is to say, from projective explicitness. Hence the lovers in the night of their passion are unable to determine the motive leading them to such a form of union (Kierkegaard 1975, p. 49).

In this paper I show that the phenomenological method proposed by Michel Henry, rooted in description of sexual corporeality considering the immanence of Life, constitutes
the most adequate philosophical tool to account for both the phenomenon of sex in its existential aspect and the peculiar type of unity achieved or being achieved in its constant renewal. I will then argue that the adequate application of this method depends on the consideration of the always permanent possibility for human consciousness to subject the reality of the sexual to a growing process of infinite explicitness or justification that could lead to the emptying of sex of its own content: two surrendered carnalities giving themselves to each other. Through Henry’s thought, I examine the metaphysical violent decision culminating in the nihilation of human flesh. Facing that decision, the necessity arises to recover both the way in which women experience their own sexual corporeality and the inter-subjective dimension of sexual activity. This points to the actuality that the ultimate condition of possibility of the relationality between both sexes is Life and not their capacity to determine what they are from abstract considerations. Following Henry, and in the light of this Life resulting in the transcendental condition of the possibility of sexual relationality, I will discuss the necessary replacement of the creature’s understanding of human beings by the processes of engenderment in Life. Salvation takes place in the sexual living being’s assumption of this process of being engendered in Life, and in their willingness and involvement in receiving it where it has been given to them. This salvation is intrinsically related to aiding in the completion of the revelation of Life in the other’s flesh.

To do this, it is necessary to take advantage of a phenomenology of incarnation as presented by Henry: a phenomenology which establishes an unconditional link between an absolute and divine Life and all living subjectivities in their carnal condition. Considering a phenomenology of incarnation, Henry develops an approach to sexuality whose true fruits must not stray from the factual experience of sexual life, but rather take place in the process of assumption and complete transfiguration of human corporeality. It must take place in a phenomenology that seeks to account for the salvation of the flesh, in which the essence of every conceivable self resides. In short, for Henry, an incarnated phenomenology is the key to establishing a concrete and existential approach to sexuality. This approach will be explored through this article.

It may seem surprising that the most profound explorations of sexuality take place in Michel Henry’s philosophy in dialogue with a Christian theological problem: that of the incarnation of the Word. But it turns out that, for Henry, the problem of the coming of man in the flesh can only receive its definitive clarification in the fact that the Word of Life became flesh, basically for two reasons: (a) Only Christianity has come to declare genuinely that human flesh, otherwise apparently contemptible, constitutes the only realm where human beings can come to experience themselves according to what they are, that is, as beings given in Life without any possibility of escaping its unsurmountable embrace. In this sense, for Henry, Christianity, and not the Greek Logos (Henry 2000, pp. 11–12), has helped both not to reduce human corporeality to mere inert substantiality and to grant it the revelatory value of an impressionable substance. (b) Michel Henry establishes the incarnation of the Word, the coming to Life itself in the ipseity of the First Living One (in short, the flesh of Christ, of the Arch-Son) as the transcendental a priori condition of possibility (Henry 1996, p. 143) of the donation of each of the subjectivities to themselves, for in them the revelation of Life always occurs under the modality of an insurmountable passivity. In this respect, human flesh is not the condition of possibility of the effectiveness of the revelation of Life. Human flesh does not generate Life. Rather, it is engendered in it without being able to refer to it as its condition. Only the flesh of Christ, of that ipseity which receives everything from Life, constitutes the condition a priori, and a posteriori, of human beings coming to identify themselves with Life, but not in their confusion with it. Therefore, their generation takes place in the process of coming into Life of the First Living who irrevocably delivers each of the subjectivities to themselves by promoting in them the event of their own transubstantiation, under unexpected and unprecedented modalities. Among these unexpected and unprecedented modalities, which allow human beings to experience themselves as what they are, I want to establish sexual action as a paradigmatic model, due to the peculiar exercise of paradoxical integration that is shown by its exercise.
2. Sexuality as an Exercise of Paradoxical Integration

In a hasty analysis, it is easy to see how the treatment of sexuality in Michel Henry appears to be driven by the search for an encounter between lovers that takes place beyond or independently of any form of mediation. In this way, Henry seems to advocate the need to think about sexual love in which the body of the lovers, in its purely objective aspect, is completely absent (Henry 2014c, p. 302). Adding to the inherent paradox of this question is the fact that, according to Henry, lovers experience the impossibility of true unity through sexual practice, thereby witnessing the frustration of their desire to connect with each other through their bodies. Henry’s philosophy would thus seem to reduce each of the subjectivities to a kind of insurmountable solipsism, a kind of inner experience whose transcendental condition would be Life. However, it should not be forgotten that Michel Henry’s attention to this phenomenon conforms precisely to the idea that through sexuality it is possible to arrive to an adequate reformulation or description of what the relationship with the other means (Ducharme 2014, p. 156); that is, the encounter with the other in Life. Nonetheless, separating the physical experience of the other from my immanent experience of them entails the risk of reducing both my subjectivity and the other’s to an abstract and impersonal generality (Jean 2011, pp. 37–38) that would compromise both lovers in the exercise of their own singularity by making indistinguishable my own experience and the experience of the other throughout its formal consideration, separated from any content (Jean 2011, p. 36; Ducharme 2014, p. 95). This paper aims to circumvent these objections by trying to highlight, from a dynamic ontological perspective given by Life, how an adequate understanding of the phenomenon of sexuality in Michel Henry avoids both solipsism and dissociation of each subject from their own experiences, as they are lived in the world, in a kind of vital generality of an apparent abstract character.

According to Henry, sexuality cannot be summed by a carnal coupling whose objective outcome is the biological attainment of children. It is rather the constantly renewed exercise (Henry 2014c, p. 298) of a subjective and carnal disposition. Consequently, when examining the sexual act, one discovers the body engaged in its own erotic movement, simultaneously given and giving itself. Within this self-giving, which takes place in the lovers’ night, one finds a merging of enthusiasm and self-denial (Florenski 2010, p. 285) intertwined with determinations related to one’s own sexual and bodily constitution. This constitution should not be viewed solely as a biological determination; rather, it is intricately entwined with the dynamism of Life, which, while continually bestowing itself, recedes to enable human beings to acquire (Henry 2002, p. 151) new ways of embracing the gift of existence.

The movement where the sensation of attraction takes place determines the enthusiasm aroused by sexual interaction. This enthusiasm already appears as inclined from the beginning to immerse itself in its own given capacity to feel what is felt, even though it may occur later that consciousness becomes distracted by trying to distance from itself what is happening in its flesh and which in some way concerns it most intimately.

In any case, lovers cannot renounce the attraction that brings them together in a sexual embrace or the desire to feel pleasure where the other feels it, which is the ultimate condition for all erotic relationships. This desire, initiated in the feeling or attraction for the body of the other, culminates in a kind of failure (Henry 2000, p. 298), namely, the impossibility of the lovers’ subjectivity to overcome the division between two paroxysmal sensations (orgasms) (Henry 2000, p. 302), which cannot be dissolved in the supposed unity of an irrevocable donation. The self-donation of one’s own carnality to the loving subjectivities does not lead to the fusion of the subjectivities in Life (Henry 2000, p. 302), but to their paradoxical differentiation in it and through it (Henry 2000, p. 354).

The impossibility of such a fusion, of feeling pleasure where the other feels it, implies not only a failure, but the occasion given to subjectivity to find in its desire—an erotic nature—an irreducible aspect to its own realization. Realized pleasure, like spoken words, does not have the capacity to bring into existence what it says (Henry 2002, p. 91). And yet, this incapacity does not lead to a kind of insurmountable solipsism, as one might think in a hasty analysis. Contrarily, it constitutes the ultimate source of renewal of the sexual
act, preventing it from becoming a mere evasion or distraction (Henry 2000, pp. 314–15), that is, a bare exercise. Thus, dissatisfaction paradoxically redoubles desire. It reflects well the paradox that the invisible (Life) surrenders to the visible (Henry 2000, p. 370), so that desire can be understood not in terms of lack or lack of, but in terms of seeking or, rather, of rendering to that on which one can neither project nor affirm oneself, namely the flesh of the other in its purely given dimension.

In sexual practice, the flesh of the other concerns me in such a way that I can only act with it by assuming the failure of all my attempts to achieve unity with it: in the pleasure of feeling sexuality where it takes place. In the mutual involvement of my flesh and the flesh of the other, desire takes on a certain ascetic disposition (Florenski 2010, p. 285): not for renouncing all forms of pleasure, but for taking the effort of making room in its own erotic movement for the pleasure of the other. This ascetic disposition implies the renouncement of the attainment of a chronological identity of the mode by which the subjectivity of the lovers proceeds to the resolution of their pleasure. That is, the possibility of pretense, which I will develop in the following section.

However, although pleasure cannot be experienced simultaneously, the admission of this renouncement does not lead subjectivity to experience the unreality of the act. Opposingly, this fact drives the subjectivity to a strenuous and renewed exercise of this act in order to generate in oneself that ascetic disposition which implies the constant flowering of sexuality, of the sexual quest, and which, on the other hand, does not suppose its refusal at all (Florenski 2010, p. 283). This means that sexual practice always has a real aspect: the paradoxical unity of two carnalities trying to feel pleasure where it is felt, experiencing themselves as entirely passive regarding their own existence (Henry 2014a, p. 585). In other words, the fact that all sexual intentionality always meets with a failure prescribed by Life, as a condition of ontological possibility of subjectivity itself (Henry 2014c, p. 298), does not imply a delegation of the erotic phenomenon to the unreality of worldly appearance. Nor does it mean the enclosure of subjectivity in a sort of transcendental solipsism. What is more, this very failure constitutes the principle of renewal of an act (the sexual act), but overall, the invitation addressed to the consciousness to leave space within it for the exercise and unfolding of its self-impressive carnality, in which the flesh of the other is somehow profiled without being determined. In this way, an abyss opens up between the two carnalities at play in the sexual act. This abyss establishes a hiatus between two places (Henry 2012, p. 176): on the one hand, that of the essence of my own pleasure and pleasure of the other, and on the other hand, that of the illusory presumptions of my own pleasure. In the immersion of the living being in this gap, an alterity emerges that deeply affects both my own body and how I perceive the body of the beloved. Thus, recognizing the failure of sexual desire is an existential mode of receiving Life that allows the living being to live, being liberated from its own representative capacity. Sexuality in Life is a path to alterity, considering the body without my influence or mediation. This is what the failure of sexual desire shows us.

3. The Annihilation of Sexual Practice: Nudity and Pretense

According to Michel Henry, even though all sexual relationships undeniably involve affective content, it is evident that lovers can choose to overlook the physical aspects during sexual activity. In doing so, they detach the other person’s physicality from the ascetic vitality of their own flesh, instead attributing it to an illusion of power—the “I can” of a self-centered subjectivity—which disregards all sensory, vital, and emotional elements of corporeality. Thus, from this perspective, that Michel Henry does not hesitate to call nihilist (Henry 2000, p. 312), the body of the other appears as a naked object, devoid of its own dynamism. As an outcome, the carnality of the lover ceases to appear as something that moves my dispositions to receive life wherever it is given. Rather, it becomes the object of something that must necessarily lend itself to my consideration, to the transcendental constitution of meaning of which human consciousness is capable by virtue of worldly appearance. It is not surprising that from this perspective the act of undressing (Henry...
2000, p. 311) acquires relevance as a way of considering corporeality as something objective, placed before the gaze.

Nevertheless, the ability to contemplate the nakedness of the other without objectification implies both an accepting of the fact of separation between the two flows of desire brought into play in the sexual act (with the consequent assumption of its failure) and a preventing of the permanent possibility of pretense (Henry 2000, pp. 302–3). Through pretense, the illusion of a union appears. It is in this kind of union that—represented—pleasure assumes the role of a fundamental condition for understanding the dynamism of one’s own sensual potentialities.

Pretense introduces a kind of rupture in the consciousness of the living being. On the one hand, it encourages the desire to see the body of the other reduced to its natural properties (Henry 2000, p. 311). On the other hand, it crystallizes the phenomenon of nudity and undressing as a fundamental erotic act in a kind of violent metaphysical decision (Henry 2000, p. 311). It is that which consciously and deliberately dispenses with the encounter with the other in Life, that is, with that other fundamental relation which establishes in the living the capacity to be absolutely concerned by its pure capacity to feel. The violence of this encounter appears clearly through the following fact: the body of the other appears as a datum to be overcome in the exercise of successive intentionalities. These intentionalities show that the consistency of the own body ultimately depends not on its self-revelation in the immanence of Life but on the abilities of the subject to bring the flesh of the other into the dynamic of unveiling–hiding. In short, the illusion of an endless eroticism which promises everything without delivering anything. This illusion is incapable of bringing into existence that which would initially appear as already explicit or explicable. That is, the capacity to feel pleasure where the other feels it. Ultimately, this capacity brings its singularity and consistency to the living as the receiver of a Life in its pathetic embrace (Henry 1996, p. 43).

When the illusion of never-ending eroticism encourages the transformation of a living body into an inert object, stripped of any dynamic appropriation subjectivity might have, we witness the underlying cause of nihilism as a vital phenomenon. Nihilism is none other than the negation of any form of incarnation of subjectivity (Henry 2000, p. 312). In other words, nihilism supposes, in its genuine essence, that destructive attack is addressed to all subjectivity in its singular and irreducibly incarnated modality. The concrete translation of this nihilism in the sexual phenomenon takes place in the act of undressing. By the act of undressing, the living carnality lends itself to a heterogeneous consideration of itself that excludes any sensitive and affective element, as if these affective or sensitive elements were not determined by the essence of affectivity as it reveals itself in the living through its passion (Henry 2014a, pp. 585–86).

At the moment when this heterogeneous consideration of the self permeates the living and its capacities, that is, at the moment when the living decides that it is only this body insofar as it is shown and made explicit, takes place, that is the moment whereby Life becomes the ultimate condition of the possibility of its own self-destruction (Henry 2014b, p. 115). The way in which the living person receives this possibility generates in them the resolution, or “leap” (Henry 2000, p. 313), not to treat their own carnality and the carnality of the other, but according to the results of the objectification of herself. This exercise translates into an act of profanation of the self (Henry 2000, p. 312), whose ultimate condition of possibility is Life in its immanent dynamism. Thus, Life gathers both the movement of the self-giving of all subjectivities, insofar as they are singular fleshes, and the always latent and destructive possibility of living beings subjecting their own carnalities to an unveiling procedure that makes explicit which is immediately and always irreducibly implicit: Life in the living, the living in Life.

This act of self-profanation (that is, the living person’s surrender of his own carnality and the carnality of the other to the presuppositions of the worldly appearance) acquires two fundamental traits or features that allow us to delve deeper into the debt that the living person acquires by delegating to this appearance (that of the world) the last condition of
possibility of her own showing. These traits are masochism and sadism. Masochism constitutes the outline of a subjectivity abandoned to its own cosmic determination. It is therefore alien to any capacity for feeling (Henry 2000, pp. 313–14). Through masochism, the human spirit, as a living incarnated reality, renounces its own condition to come to consider it as a merely finite and contingent reality awaiting its definitive unveiling in an exterior horizon that resolves or elucidates what it really is without being in any way concerned other than to be that which shows itself in the unfolding of a historical hermeneutics of whatever kind (from Galilean scientific objectivism to Heideggerian considerations of the human being as mere being in the world).

As a result of this reduction to worldly appearance, a second phenomenon appears as an inescapable correlate of masochism: sadism. Sadism constitutes that complacent disposition by which the living places everything that the exercise of their own condition presupposes in its capacity to represent their own reality and the reality of the other (Henry 2000, p. 314). As a result, the living being’s way of resolving the exasperation of its sexual pulsion consists only in its capacity to reduce the other to its bodily-cosmic determination (Henry 2000, p. 313). That is, if the other were an object subject to my whim that requires of me nothing more than the willingness to be reduced, in such a way that it can lend itself to my own erotic game (self-pleasuring desire) in the strictly projected calculation of concealment and unveiling. It is, therefore, that this worldly desire enjoys the suffering of the others, for it demands that they show themselves in such a way that they appear as alien to their own capacity to feel, as alien to that original modesty (Henry 2000, p. 89) by which their own corporeality is constituted as a living carnality. As a result, the corporeality of the other becomes an absurdity that lends itself to the resolute exercise of a self-satisfied desire.

This indifference does not occur as the result of a theoretical exercise, but as the fruit of a disruptive pathetic shock (Henry 2002, p. 153) that, taking place in the heart of existence, produces a decisive shift in the attention that each one of the subjectivities pays to its own sexual condition. Thus, the way in which consciousness positions itself in the face of its own sexual phenomenality tends, after the assumption of this shock, towards a delegation of the very exercise of sexuality in the successive determinations that can be made of it from the horizon of the world, that is, of that which is seen by all objectively. In this way, the phenomenon of voyeurism (Henry 2000, p. 314) is consecrated. Voyeurism is intrinsically related to pornography. The essence of pornography lies in its ability to generate the illusion of sexual pleasure subjecting it to procedures under the ideal of its infinite reproducibility. It is precisely under this ideal that sexual practice finds its social expression not intersubjective but rather “inter-objective” (Henry 2000, p. 315).

This inter-objective expression is also in solidarity with that consideration of sexuality which pretends to underline the objective condition of its transcendence without noticing that the experience of sexuality requires a process of incorporation into the dynamism of Life. This consideration, since it wants to reduce sexuality to biological determinations (male-female) or to the means–ends scheme under the assumption of the procreative purpose of sexuality, presupposes the same scheme indebted to worldly appearance. Moreover, it entails its radicalization by consecrating or justifying, to a more profound degree, the illusion of transcendental egoism (Henry 1996, p. 178). This illusion pertains to the belief that the dynamism of one’s own being, in its sexual action, reaches its fulfillment in the assumption of objectivities—even if these are of a supposedly transcendent character. Moreover, this inter-objective expression of the sexual practice in a conservative or reactionary nature also entails a secret discontentment with itself, wherein a certain phenomenon of resentment produces a shared sexual ideal with that of pornography. This ideal consists in the positioning of conscience before sexuality acquires power over it. In short, a disposition to envy for considering or delegating to the appearance of the world the ultimate condition of possibility of sexual practice. In this way, from both considerations, pornographic and conservative, human beings vilify sex, instead of receiving it in its intimate essence: its self-revelation or self-justification in Life (Henry 2000, p. 320).
This vilification emphasizes the absurd character of sex, when attending the presuppositions of the appearance of the world. Thus, the absurdity of the sexual practice appears in the sight of those who confront the carnalities at stake as autonomous data subject to successive clarifications, as if determinations of an ecstatic nature could come to represent the profound abyss in which the sexual relationship and its peculiar form of union takes place. Forging the illusion of achieving in sex the fulfillment of one’s own desire means surrendering one’s own corporeality and the corporeality of the other to a dynamism of increasing objectification, of reduction of the body to its mere natural properties, which ends up making the latter significantly irrelevant: an object, a dead thing, a web of neurons, a set of natural processes (Henry 1996, p. 272). From this worldly perspective, the corporeality of the living finishes by casting out unreal meanings. It is for this reason that consciousness finds itself considering the fulfillment of its own drive tendencies—the obtaining of pleasure—as something strictly meaningless. Hence it comes to sadly realize that there is more desire for pleasure than there exists a capacity for it. This is a reflection that encloses the dynamism of sexual pleasure in its merely representative dimension, turning sexuality into a contingent and meaningless act beyond its mere need for instinctive fulfillment. Resultingly, sexual practice ends up being the subject of endless proceduralism. It is justified in order to achieve that conclusive consideration of pleasure by which all flesh comes to suffice itself and thus ceases to experience itself in its own indigence; the thickness of which lies in the fact that it sees itself as always given to itself before it is grasped or made explicit by oneself. From this purely pornographic exercise, the body of the other appears as a burden. Physical union appears as something extremely vulgar as it is used in the act of achieving that illusory consummation of pleasure.

The crystallization of these autoerotic dispositions, propitiated by a purely pornographic projective exercise, has not escaped those considerations of sex that have attempted to justify or, rather, limit its practice on the basis of the idea that the pulsion movement of sexual desire, as it is experienced in the flesh, is strictly linked to the need for an absurd character and of a completely arbitrary nature (Henry 2000, p. 313). Ultimately and from this perspective, what would lead me to bond sexually with the other would be a desire for self-satisfaction containing no allowance for any alteration or any willingness to experience already in pleasure itself the dynamism of its absence, that is, of the subtraction from my own powers. In short, the recognition of the incapacity to feel pleasure where it is felt both by myself and by the other. The result of this conception of sexual pleasure is once again the resentment of the living beings against their own interference—that of the sexual pulsion—in their life and their capacity to alter the very movements of our flesh. In short, the metaphysical violent decision of the pornographic ideal consists in the cutting off sensation where it is felt, namely, in the revelatory framework of affectivity, making the erotic relationship objective (Henry 2000, p. 315). As an outcome, sexuality results in a negative movement that limits both the projective possibilities of existence and the degree of unity that human beings can reach with reality, be it that of the world, of others or even of the Absolute itself.

According to Michel Henry, from this conception of sexuality we proceed to the realization of a fundamental oblivion (Henry 1996, p. 150): the oblivion of the irreducible singularity in which finally all capacity of feeling lies. In this way, in sexual practice we do not find two objective bodies relating to each other but two fleshings given to themselves in their pure capacity of an inability to stop feeling that which is given to them in the very movement of their sensation, that is, of their own self-impressionality (Henry 2000, p. 329). Therefore, the essence of the self, as revealed in sex, lies in the corporeal existence of living beings who are perpetually and irrevocably given to themselves in their transcendental possibility, Life. Also, Life, in whose effectiveness and irrevocable donation takes place the paradoxical and non-universalizable communion with the other (Henry 2000, p. 349). Moreover, it is Life that grounds the paradox of the union of subjectivities in their mutual irreducibility.
Therefore, in sex, an exceptional relationship is established between two singularities who, in their willingness to be perturbed by the carnal need of the other, disregard any objective (generic) consideration of what the exercise of their own condition entails. Thus entails the loss of an explicit man or woman in sexual practice. The woman does not have to show that she is a woman, that is, justify that she is a woman, in order to direct her pulsion towards the man, and the man does not have to underline his masculine sexual determination in order to address the woman. This results from the pulsive dynamism itself and in its immanent self-revelation, which removes any attempt to elucidate what constitutes the matter of the sexual act (namely, two given carnalities). Consequently, what happens in the lovers’ night is good without justification (Henry 2000, p. 320), that is, without the need for this act to lend itself to further determinations in order to be weighed, measured or analyzed.

Moreover, the fact that sexuality ends up translating into the experience of a difference is intrinsically related to the impossibility of capturing pleasure where it is felt by the other. Deepening that impossibility, further differences can occur, which correspond not so much to the singular irreducibility of one’s own condition as to a paradoxical disposition of Life. This results in the fact that Life gives its peculiar, invisible relationality to the way in which living beings can make these differences explicit, and, above all, through sexual differentiation understood as a determination of a biological or natural order, namely, as a woman or a man. However, the very paradox by which Life unfolds its own dynamism, given the irrevocable mode (without mode) of it giving itself, prevents an isolated determination of the masculine and the feminine from the transcendental condition of possibility of its own relationality, namely within the self-justification of Life. Life gives each living being the irreducible impression of being concerned by the movement of its own sexual tendency, in which difference no longer takes precedence but only pure communicative expression or exposition. In this sense, supposing the separate existence of a masculine and a feminine sensibility, as if they were two autonomous dimensions, would eliminate this pure capacity of exposure, that is, of self-forgetfulness in merciful work (Henry 1996, pp. 169–70). This pure capacity disposes both men and women as beings given in Life to mutual acceptance in sexual embrace. The immediate consequence of this would be the possibility of an inter-objective communication taking place between them, and conversely, an impossibility of an intersubjective communication. As a result, pure absence and radical evil would take place, (Henry 1996, p. 272) consisting of the annihilation of human flesh and the consecration of the pornographic ideal.

4. The “Privileged” Role of Women in the Reintegration of Sexual Activity

For Michel Henry, we cannot view masculine and feminine determinations in isolation. However, following Henry, it is worth noting that the paradoxical aspect of Life is emphasized in women (Henry 2000, p. 296). Furthermore, women embody the paradox of experiencing their sexual determination as somewhat foreign to their relational capacity, despite being profoundly influenced by it (Henry 2000, p. 296). The reason for this is that the woman’s body is more conditioned than man’s corporeality by sexual determination. This results in a spiritual synthesis of heterogeneous elements constituting subjectivity (soul and body), which becomes even more paradoxical and qualitatively intense in women compared to men. In this context, according to Henry, women tend to be more sensual than men (Henry 2000, p. 296). And, precisely because of her greater sensuality, she is more anguished. This anguish serves as a direct testimony to the unique paradox underlying her existence. It also represents the lasting sign and authentic realization of a woman’s diverse nature, as a spiritual reality distinct from the world and its revelation. Hence, anguish can be redoubled in her in a much more pressing way in her attempt to elucidate that which the exercise of her own pulsion movements entail. Women experience the goodness of sexuality from the movement of immersion in the abyssal depths of her own carnality. In fact, she does not conceive of sexuality from the experience of a difference that has to lend
itself to further clarification in order to be commensurate with the human capacity to make things explicit in the horizon of the world.

In this sense, woman, in the paradox of her sexual determination, given by Life, shows more vividly that sexuality can never be conceived correctly from the phenomenon of the objectification of the self, to which not infrequently the exercise of an erotic activity renders the flesh of the other. Thus, the reality of women makes clear that sexuality is not up to be interpreted by means of opposing or mutually exclusive determinations, but to be lived in its goodness “without a reason” (Henry 2000, p. 285). Therein lies the spiritual superiority of woman, not precisely in an apparent unreal purity, but in her call to live from Life the dynamisms of her flesh fully given to herself and ultimately diversified in her own capacities and potentialities. Among these capacities or potentialities, it is necessary to highlight women’s unique capacity to intervene in the process of forming new lives. Only the corporeality of the woman can undergo the transformation or transfiguration of her own flesh. On the contrary, man’s desire to give life is characterized by the radical impossibility of living this transformation in his own carnality.

Through this fruitful and transformative experience of the sexual encounter, women discover that unity in Life is above the differences projected on the horizon of the world. Sexual practice reveals itself as that activity in which man and woman expose themselves, no longer as man and woman\textsuperscript{15}, but as singular individuals\textsuperscript{16} subject to a self-impressibility grasping only in their poverty: in the inability of the flesh to suffice itself (Henry 2002, p. 7). It is this willingness to welcome the flesh of the other in its poverty, in its inability to translate into existence that which it intimately feels, that is most intensely welcomed by woman in the paradox of her reception of her own condition, namely in her self-revelation in Life. In women, sexual difference is delivered to the dynamism of communication in Life, and not the other way around. Communication is not established from worldly differences. This shows us that, on the one hand, woman transcends all generic determination\textsuperscript{17} and that, on the other hand, we cannot understand sexual acts from the perspective of sexual difference, ontologically postulated and created by the appearance of the world. In fact, when the dynamism of sexual practice is appropriated from Life, it reveals an “integration of the masculine and the feminine that transforms their elements” (Evdokimov 2009, p. 186).

In this sense, even though Henry, in his phenomenology of flesh seems to disregard masculine and feminine determinations (Courtel 2009, p. 84), it is necessary to say that his real aim is to recover them in a phenomenology of incarnation. This results from the fact that it becomes an unavoidable task for concrete human existence to think about how our flesh is saved and lost in the coming of Life to it, that is, how our own flesh is appropriated authentically or inauthentically. The description of the coming of living beings to Life, outlined by Michel Henry, tells us that the body of women and men are called from their own factual state to transfigure themselves into the essence of a mystical body\textsuperscript{18} or the flesh of Christ, that First Living One where the complete realization of the essence of Life takes place (Henry 1996, p. 137). How does this transfiguration of fleshings occur? By both being maintained in their irreducible singularity and subjected to a process of self-growth in Life that makes their essence a becoming (Henry 2000, p. 357), and neither a substance nor a thing. Therefore, the very essence of sexual desire itself does not allow us to experience male and female as opposite or isolated determinations. In fact, the failure of human sexual desire in undertaking the risk\textsuperscript{19} to search for the Absolute in the finite (Ducharme 2014, p. 89) is the necessary condition for the human body to enter into the dynamism and realm of its definitive and absolute incorporation, that is, the process of its birth into Life. Thus, in Henry’s work, the phenomenology of sexuality and the phenomenology of eroticism\textsuperscript{20}, although duly distinguished (Ducharme 2014, p. 92), are not to be understood as mutually exclusive, but rather mutually demanding.
5. Sexuality as an Intersubjective Experience in Life: The Engendered, Not Created, Character of Human Beings

According to Henry, the erotic relationship presupposes the being in common in Life (Henry 2000, p. 347) as a transcendental condition of possibility, and not the appearance in the world of two fleshes as confronted determinations. In this context, the intersubjective experience of sexuality calls on each individual to embrace its unique mode of revelation: Life’s invisible Arch-passibility, leaving aside worldly existence. Thus, men and women in sexual practice contest their supposed creature character. They set out that human essence does not consist fundamentally of its insertion and involvement in the set of worldly relationships.

It is necessary to note that human beings do not experience their own being in a way which marks them a priori and passively in the totality of being, in the whole of the real (Henry 2000, p. 326). This supposed and incontestable radical passivity cannot be the origin of any essential movement in which the being of a subjectivity, whose passibility does not consist precisely in the fact of showing itself as an isolated donation and decreed from the universal process of the divine creation of the world and its presuppositions, is really at stake.

Furthermore, the consequences of the world’s creation, whether viewed as processual or immanent, ultimately do not allow for the radical reversal or upheaval of that totality of being as creation.21 This is namely the experience of a passivity completely given to herself in the movement of an irrevocable donation, that is, the living as given in Life. Note that in this experience of intimate passivity lies the absence of dissolution of the living being’s own individuality. It is contrarily the maintenance of the living being as a singularity irreducible to any other. The very phenomenological realization of Life, its incarnation, invites the living being to the consideration of their own being in their condition of individuality that is not only irreducible but strictly unique (Henry 2000, p. 354).

Worldly passivity, which emerges with the concept of creation, declines to contemplate and also excludes this intimate passivity consisting in the pathetic shock of being namely, the emergence of irrevocable and irreducible singularities to whom the meaning of all that is real appears as given. Moreover, for worldly passivity, the capacity to perceive human existence in the world is related to the way in which things show themselves to it. In the first instance, it should be noted that material things and processes in themselves—which form the backbone of the empirical web of relations that constitute the world—cannot manifest what they are, for they are ultimately inert, lifeless objects (Henry 2000, p. 327). Otherwise, they are not inhabited by sensibility as a power of showing. In fact, material objects become perceptible when our senses engage in a process of revealing and analyzing their sensitive features through successive intentional approximations (Henry 2000, p. 327). These approximations depend in turn on the capacity of sensibility itself to live justified in what is ultimately a kind of movement of radical explicitation or externalization, of the incessant coming of the being of the world into consciousness by which all beings, be they inert or sensible, attain their clarification, remaining at the mercy of their definitive showing, in whatever way this occurs. Therefore, in the being of the world, conceived from its creation, it is possible for everything to occur, given that each thing and even the very reality of sensibility are in some way integrated into the neutral and terrifying whole of the il y a (Henry 1996, p. 24), which finally results independently of any valutative exercise based on affectivity (the revelation of being in its passion). In this sense, everything is justified or is in the process of being justified from the appearance of the world. As an outcome, the very annihilation of the being of subjectivity irrevocably given to itself in the self-revelatory essence of Life takes place. This is the passivity of humans in the world. This is what the consideration of his mere and exclusive creature being leads to.22

It is for this reason that the concept of the human being as a creature and even the very consideration of creation in its broadest sense must be subjected to its radical revision. That is, to the grasping of its being beyond the capacity to give itself to the exercise of a growing exteriorization with conclusive or conclusive dyes in the horizon that Michel
Henry calls the world. This revision reaches its definitive expression from that disposition of consciousness to no longer find itself in need to justify its own being or the essence of human life in general through its integration into a horizon of understanding. Creation, even in its metaphysical understanding, does not reach the being of human essence, since its dynamism is not reduced to immersing itself in the self-explanation of being that render living beings’ participants in the uninterrupted course of the activity of creation.

What is more, this exercise of self-explicitation in radical exteriority, by which things are shown in the consciousness that unveils and ponders them in and with its sensibility, has, as its fundamental condition, affectivity (Henry 2000, p. 328); the revelatory framework of being in its passion, that is, of being insofar as it is fully given to itself. In short, the being of subjectivity. Thus, our capacity to feel what we feel in the world and of the world hangs on a condition that grounds it without being assimilated either with what is felt or with the horizon that allows feeling to unfold in the future, making it the object of successive determinations. The heterogeneous nature (Henry 2000, p. 329) of this condition, framed in a transcendental affectivity—which is not commensurate with our power to make it explicit—speaks to us of something alien which simultaneously intimately grounds all those modalities of passivity that take place in the world.

Further, it is not only that without the revelatory framework of affectivity the very being of the living cannot be understood, but that the very essence of creation would be compromised. Its own goodness would be called into question by being subjected to a process of increasing justification. This process would make impossible the insertion of the living and of the whole of creation in the touching dynamism of affectivity, the self-revelation of Life. Against this background, Life becomes the encounter between the living and the world. Life itself enables the world to deeply engage in the humble and poor exaltation of its self-revelation, giving its unique singularity to living beings. Every reality must be oriented towards the promotion of this singularity. Reality which, on the other hand, is called to be incorporated and incarnated. Therefore, Henry indicates that it is in our finite flesh that both salvation and the world’s doom take place (Henry 2000, p. 333).

6. Conclusions: Salvation through Flesh in the Sexual Encounter

How do human beings deeply engage in their irrevocable self-giving? For Michel Henry, this is the essential question of human salvation, which is intrinsically related to the integration of human beings in their flesh, namely the incorporation of their own reality—and of the whole of reality—in the process of the coming of Life to the living (Henry 1996, p. 152) and, in no case, under the constancy of a mere factual life (Henry 2000, p. 244) that develops its possibilities in the horizon of the world. In other words, reality reaches its fullness in the contact of flesh to flesh, where and as they have been given, that is, under the modality of their pathetic and painful self-impressiveness, and the existential dynamisms that occur in such contact.

In this sense, the salvation of human beings does not imply the acquisition of cognitive knowledge (Henry 2000, p. 334). It does not require an exercise of meaning by which humans acquire full transparency over themselves in their ability to unveil or unravel those meanings latent in the whole of the real. This occurs by way of the hidden meaning from which the whole of reality hangs on a more original and founding condition: that which is related to the event of the practical transfiguration of a flesh in the eternal process of its coming into itself in Life.

This process does not trap subjectivity in overwhelming passivity. Instead, it involves the insertion of the subjectivity of the living in the absolute coming of Life. On the one hand, it requires subjectivity to surrender to its own self-giving, in its poor and humble flesh always rendered to itself in the form of its completely irreducible and entirely singular self-impressiveness. On the other hand, this kind of insertion asks for help (Henry 2014b, p. 124) from subjectivity so that it may really come to recognize in its own factual life and that of other living beings the work of another revelation, that of Life. Unlike the isolating nature of destructive reasoning (conceptual analysis and calculating abstraction) (Henry...
revelation of Life unites subjectivities in their very possibility of relation, whose condition is that absolute Life that shapes them.

However, for this very possibility to take place, it is necessary that the living person abandons their tendency to justify themself for everything that happens to them with the other. It is necessary that they renounce the monadic presupposition (Henry 2000, p. 346) that the experience of the other must go back in one way or another to the factual experience that I make of them. In that sense, the life of the other is not and cannot be that of another as I am. The renunciation of this presupposition is immediately translated into that form of praxis, transformed, and regenerated in the movement of Life, by which the living eliminates from the other any consideration that allows the latter to be understood from a common, abstract determination that does not take into account its singular character.

Concern for the singular character of the other, expressed in that humble condition of suffering flesh, leads to the completion in the flesh of the other of the movement of his self-generation in absolute Life, i.e., the promotion of his goodness without a reason. In this way, a new mode of relationship is achieved where it is no longer essential for subjectivities to show themselves, that is, to acquire a definite appearance or form. Moreover, their growth would no longer be subject to the acquisition of a definite form, but to the detachment of all forms in the unconditional delivery to their irrevocable singularity. In such a detachment, a mysterious synergy takes place which occurs in the experience of two carnalities approaching each other in their mutual pulsion movements and of which sexual action constitutes a paradigmatic example; namely, the experience of two carnalities that, in their mutual interpenetration in Life, help their own bodies to grow in such a way that they find themselves more and more willing to consider themselves from the absolute absence of (sexual) determinations, even if Life in many points condescends with them, that is, leads them to their own self-giving in the assumption of sexual difference. This practical, not theoretical, consideration of the other leads to feeling and living from the exposure to the flesh of the other and their needs. In this way, in sexual action, the living being aids the other in the expression of their need in such a way that the other is not satisfied by their own satisfaction, nor by the satisfaction of the other, but by the growth of both in Life; Life that is completed to the extent that the living let the effectiveness of their revelation shine through in their consciousness. Thus, Life shows its absolute existence in those living beings who assume and complete its revelation. And, on the other hand, the revelation of Life reveals itself dependent on that fulfillment which the living can realize with its factual life.

Suffering in its unrestricted growth and its reception in the living constitutes the mode (without mode) by which Life can remain in its peculiar revelation without thereby eliminating the possibility of its ultimate self-destruction. Life is without a reason, and for that reason, there is no end to human suffering. This is experienced by lovers in their call to perform and constantly renew the sexual act. Through the sexual encounter they can come to experience the radical transformation of their destitution through pleasure as an experience of fullness. And all this in the midst of the reception of their pain, that is, the suffering of being already always given to themselves and involved—by the purification of the heart (Henry 2002, p. 137)—in the immediate and pathetic self-revelation of Life.

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Notes

1 The rupture between knowledge and life is one of the hallmarks of the cultural epoch of today. Michel Henry does not hesitate to describe it as barbarism. Barbarism can be defined as “the scientific explosion and the ruin of man” (Henry 2014b, p. 10).
For Michel Henry, dissimulation means gentleness, the silent movement of Life by which it gives itself without waiting to be received, to be seen (Henry 1996, p. 177).

The specific term that Michel Henry uses for approaching this kind of body, a subjective body, is flesh (chair). This flesh must be understood not intentionally, but self-impressionally. In that sense, Falque distinguishes within Michel Henry’s conception of the body three modes of showing the flesh: objective body, intentional flesh and self-impressive flesh (Falque 2014, p. 209). In dealing with the real meaning of sexual practice, I am trying to focus on the description of the movements of integration (and even transfiguration) that the latter allows.

Michel Henry makes it clear that sexuality and sexual sensations constitute a privileged phenomenon in the experience of otherness. Whenever Michel Henry explicitly addresses the problem of intersubjectivity, he consistently alludes to the phenomenon of sexuality (see, for example, Henry 2012, pp. 175–76). This is because sexuality reveals an encounter, the ultimate condition of which is not the world, but Life. Moreover, the particular failure in sexual encounters, which is not specifically present in all ways of enjoyment and suffering when considered solely from an immanent perspective, better aligns with the paradox of an invisible Life (good without a reason) surrendering to the visible world to provide living beings the occasion to feel what is their real condition. Therefore, sexuality distinctly illustrates that the encounter with Life does not originate solely from Life itself, but from a flesh that is experienced through Life’s own incarnational and paradoxical dynamism.

It is necessary to recall that Michel Henry refers to the effectuation of the revelatory essence of Life in terms of ambiguity (Henry 2000, p. 320).

In his work Barbarism Michel Henry refers to the essence of the subjectivity of the living as night (Henry 2014b, p. 171).

That is the reason why, as Michel Henry points out, “during copulation ( . . .), each pulsion ( . . .) knows only itself, its own movement as well as the sensations felt at the limit of its own invisible organic body” (Henry 2000, p. 302).

It is with these suggestive words that Michel Henry defines erotic desire in one of his notes on the erotic phenomenon: “Desire: attempt to seize the life of the other on his objective body, practice of incantation to [provoke the] incarnation of [one’s] real flesh [in one’s] objective body; feel one’s pleasure on one’s skin, sex . . .” (Henry 2015, p. 41).

The ascetic conception of sexuality, advocated by the Russian philosopher Pavel Florenski, strikingly coincides with Michel Henry’s exploration of sexual reality and its constant renewal in the appearance of Life. In fact, the assumption of the failure of every sexual act and the principle of its incensing repetition (Henry 2014c, p. 298) correspond to Florensky’s statement that: “the painful sacrifice of asceticism and inspired enthusiasm ( . . .) appear antinomically implicated in the question of sexuality” (Florenski 2010, p. 285).

On this point I do not agree with the opinion of Jean Leclercq and Joaquim Hernandez who, in their article “Before Being a Man or Being a Woman: The Question of Eros in the Preparatory Notes to the Trilogy”, point out that Michel Henry in his work Incarnation ends up making the erotic phenomenon unthinkable and finally reduces sexuality to its mundane conception (Leclercq and Hernandez 2012, p. 84). In fact, in a correct understanding of what incarnation means, there is no failure of either Life or the living, but the constant invitation of both to a relationality of a non-conclusive nature.

The notion of “I can” means, for Michel Henry, the awareness of my capacity to feel through the pathetic proof of myself in the original ipseity of absolute Life (Henry 1996, p. 172).

Worldly appearance refers to that violent truth, a mere copy of the appearance of Life, by which all things are to be shown and justified in consciousness from the dynamic horizon of light that makes them explicit, that is, the world (Henry 1996, p. 22).

In Michel Henry’s phenomenology, there is no opposition or difference between spirit and flesh (Henry 2014c, p. 288).

This critique would embrace some developments in the so-called theology of the body. For example, I believe that Yves Semen exaggerates when he places sexual difference in the notion of Imago Dei in an objective and non-paradoxical way: “Man is not yet completely in the image of God. He will only become so with the creation of woman” (Semen 2004, p. 80).

Certainly, Michel Henry’s treatment of sexuality does not consider the homosexual or queer experience of sexuality (Ducharme 2014, p. 143). Moreover, Michel Henry seems to take for granted that sexual desire is exclusively fulfilled by directing it to the other sex. While this perspective may be limiting, Michel’s own phenomenology of sexuality demonstrates that in the intimate and essential experience of the sexual act, the opposite determinations of the sexes remain in the background. According to Michel Henry, during sex, two individualities become exposed to the event of their definitive transfiguration. Thus, although Michel Henry’s phenomenology could be qualified as limited or not entirely free of prejudices, its merit lies in the fact that it doesn’t exclude other forms of sexual experience beyond the scope of this paper’s analysis.

Hence, according to Michel Henry’s phenomenological approach, “to be a man or a woman is quite different from having a certain external appearance, recognizable natural properties, such as an objective sexually differentiated body” (Henry 1996, p. 248).

A woman’s being reflects more intensely the excess in which her sexual condition is given. The woman experiences that her own erotic and relational aim is above any structure or difference that sex shows in order to make it the object of explicit domination. In this sense, in the practice of sexual intercourse, the woman does not seek to crystallize her generic identity but constantly to transcend it (Llevadot 2021, pp. 181–94) or, rather, to make it the “object” of an intimate disposition that does not reduce the lover’s body to its natural properties.
Mystical body, an expression that Michel Henry takes from St. Paul’s Epistle to the Galatians, refers here to a peculiar type of transcendental body, revealed to itself in its full pathetic self-donation, in which the differences between the living beings are not annulled but purified, beyond all their diversity (Henry 2004, p. 137). In such a body, all corporealities are united without confusion but without division.

The philosopher Miguel García Baró has highlighted that Michel Henry saw this feature of risk present in the absolute—and finite—resolution that sexual desire introduces in human existence: “Although Henry has not dwelt on the kind of observations we have just made, his insight into one of the truly philosophical sides of this question can now be seized upon by us as being in perfect continuity with what we have said: the characteristic problem of the sexual is that of the exclusive attention of the singular to the singular. The risk and interest of the sexual is to be found, above all, in the fact that in this domain, when it really prevails existentially, a singular human being ties his life in a radical way to another singular human being” (García Baró 2008, p. 317).

In Michel Henry’s opinion, a phenomenology of eroticism is related to a description of erotic relation beyond the limits and conditioning features of an individualized—not singularized—flesh that tends to its objective consideration, that is, its self-sufficiency (Ducharme 2014, p. 92).

In this sense, Henry points out, “the question of the inner condition of possibility of a reality such as ours has nothing to do neither with the historical and factual appearance of men on earth nor with their empirical development” (Henry 2000, p. 324).

It is for this reason that Michel Henry insists that the concept of creation does not fit well with the reality of the human essence (Henry 1996, p. 105). Humans are sons of Life. In that sense, Michel states that: “human beings are nothing of the world. Nothing in them can be explained by the world” (Henry 2000, p. 327).

Michel Henry argues that creation only attains its full and definitive meaning in the generation of the living in Life (Henry 2000, p. 328).

As Michel Henry identifies, the very essence of the human being is to become (Henry 2000, p. 357). Therefore, human nature requires not only its progressive improvement, but its complete transformation and its transubstantiation, so that it does not yield to the process and structures of its worldly externalization to which evil settled in the heart (the illusion of transcendental egoism) contributes (Henry 2002, p. 31).

It is necessary to recall that revelation of Life happens without expecting to be seen. No intentionality, no vision, can show its peculiar revelation (Henry 1996, p. 147). That is why, revelation of Life occurs in a forgetful mode: a modality without modality.

References

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