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Is There a Body without Flesh?

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In this paper I investigate the theme of sense and nonsense as it pertains to the phenomenological problem of “flesh.” My remarks here also respond to the two-fold, intellectual invitation Emmanuel Falque has extended to philosophy to embark into theological territory and to engage without polemic or fear in a combat amoureux over the things that matter—the things themselves. Struggle can be loving only if the work itself is motivated by a love, and a love of what we can still dare to call truth. It is in this same spirit, which I recognize and esteem in Falque, that I wish to address here the question of body and flesh that is central to his work, as it is for many others.

I will raise two main sets of questions that have been the subject of historical debate, and Falque knows them well, because they are also his questions: 1) How should we describe and understand the relationship of flesh [Leib] to body [Körper] and body to flesh? Can we give legitimate status to the materiality of the corporeal condition while maintaining the phenomenological privilege of flesh and life? Or, alternatively, should we deny the privilege of flesh in favor of a more moderate “balance” of flesh and body, and so rescue material embodiment from the oblivion to which a naive priority of flesh would consign it? 2) By extension, how should we describe and understand the relationship of flesh and body, in their phenomenality, to the theological reality of the Incarnation of the Word?¹ How is the passage into theology effected in phenomenology when it is a question of body and flesh?

¹ Falque has also raised the important question of “Incorporation,” but since “Incarnation” retains the historical and conceptual primacy in *theological* dogma, I will limit my remarks to it here.

In a way that has not yet been acknowledged adequately, these questions bear on the relationship of phenomenology and the sciences, which also deal with “bodies,” perhaps exclusively and with greater rigor than phenomenology. What do we gain from recognizing this bearing? It is explicitly against what he perceives to be rampant Western materialism and its unilateral science that Michel Henry frames the phenomenology of life. It is also in the name of material, embodied reality that Falque objects to Henry’s approach. For reasons I will spell out in detail, and while I recognize his theological hesitations and share his theological commitments, I think Falque’s objections misconstrue Henry’s position. We have good reason to doubt that the phenomenality of incarnation, in either its philosophical or theological senses, can be adequately described by a phenomenology in which perception is ultimate.

§1. The Myth of Experience

Is there a body without flesh? The question seems as rhetorical as the inverse one Falque poses to Henry. We already know Henry’s answer: A body cannot appear, and thus be, unless it is first given to flesh. This rule applies whether I am dealing with a material body in the world or with the *corps propre*, my own body.² In the one case as in the other, a body cannot appear unless it is first given to sensibility, and nothing is given to the senses I call mine unless it affects me. Apart from this affective instance, without a flesh that is impressional, I have no way of saying whether I am dealing with the front of a thing or its backside, its blue hue or hardness, girth or speed, or with its disappearance, because I know nothing about it. I can offer no description, phenomenological or otherwise. Of what would it be the description? I have no access to a thing unless it is given to me in experience, or in imagination, as composed of what is so given.³ Unless I can be affected, unless I am

² For the classical analyses, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London and New York: Routledge, 2002) / *Phénoménologie de la perception* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1945), I, §§ 3-4, and II, §1.

³ “For even when painters try to create sirens and satyrs with the most extraordinary bodies, they cannot give them natures which are new in all respects; they simply jumble up the limbs of different animals. Or if perhaps they manage to think up something so new that nothing remotely similar has ever been seen before—something which is therefore completely fictitious and unreal—at least the colours used in the composition must be real.” René Descartes, *First Meditation, Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, Vol II, trans. John Cottingham, et al (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 13-14, *Oeuvres de Descartes*, ed. Ch. Adam and P. Tannery (Paris: Vrin, 1996), [hereafter AT] VII, 20, 2-8.

endowed with flesh, nothing like a body can appear and I am simply not entitled to speak of a body, not even as an idea.⁴

Why then ask whether there is a body without flesh if such a possibility for these decisive reasons is unintelligible? Can any further precision show the question to be worth the annoyance of posing and the labor of investigating? What is a body and what is flesh? According to the standard definition, a body in general is a material thing bearing sensible or intelligible properties—the categories of Aristotle (time, change, motion, quality, size, place, etc.), or the sensible qualities of Galileo or Descartes (extension, figure, etc.), the pure forms of intuition of Kant (space and time), or the properties of sub-atomic physics (spin, location, charge, mass, etc.). Even in the latter cases, where the properties of a body are not known through the senses, but through instruments of measurement that have been designed to detect and record what the senses cannot, senses nevertheless must intervene to “read” such instruments. The physicist that denies that our senses tell us the truth of the universe must consult the senses in some way in order to arrive at that conclusion.⁵

The question can nevertheless be answered affirmatively. Yes, there is a body without flesh. The universe is populated with bodies of this sort, which are what they are independently of any appeal to flesh for their appearance. First, for the strict reason that they do not appear to flesh and do not affect it directly. In itself, flesh knows nothing about them. Second, because they are what they are, and will be what

⁴ In her famous “Letter to Dr. Findlay,” Jan. 13, 1932, the blind and deaf Helen Keller describes her sight from atop the Empire State Building: “Frankly, I was so entranced ‘seeing’ that I did not think about the sight” (my emphasis). She is not appealing to the vivid imagination of one who dreams, but to the feeling of seeing, in the absence of anything visible. One can compare the claim, of course, to many texts from Descartes: “It is the soul which sees, and not the eye” *Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, Vol I, trans. John Cottingham, et al (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981) p. 174, AT VI, 141, 5-6.); “the ‘I’ who imagines is the same ‘I’. For even if, as I have supposed, none of the objects of imagination are real, the power of imagination is something which really exists and is part of my thinking. Lastly, it is also the same ‘I’ who has sensory perceptions, or is aware of bodily things as it were through the senses. For example, I am now seeing light, hearing a noise, feeling heat. But I am asleep, so all this is false. Yet I certainly seem to see, to hear, and to be warmed. This cannot be false...” What is called ‘having a sensory perception’ is strictly just this, and in this restricted sense of the term it is simply thinking.” (*Second Meditation, Writings*, Vol. II, op. cit., p. 19, AT VII, II, 29, 6-15); and, finally, we may be misled “regarding the *perceptions* which refer to certain parts of our body. But we cannot be misled in the same way regarding the passions, in that they are so close and so internal to our soul that it cannot possibly feel them unless they are truly as it feels them to be...” (*Passions of the Soul*, 26, *Writings I*, 338, my emphasis) and still others—For the key analysis of these texts see Michel Henry, *Genealogy of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Douglas Brick (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993) / *Généalogie de la psychanalyse* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1985), ch. 1.

⁵ The point will seem trivial, and with respect to the insight the physicist seeks, it is. But the study of physics happens in a lifeworld, and not only in a world.

they will be, whatever we may wish to assert about flesh, or even if we wish to ignore flesh, and what is given to it, altogether. It is not even obvious that someone must observe the Large Hadron Collider, since programs can be designed for that purpose, and register the events in question with more subtlety and precision than the “naked eye.” If we were smart enough, we would program those computers also to interpret the data better than we can, find errors in our assumptions, mistakes in our models, and so on. From this perspective, not only is there a body without flesh, perhaps an infinite number of them; in addition, if we are to arrive at the truth of the bodies that populate the universe, we must ignore flesh altogether.

Including our own? Nothing prohibits the positive sciences from applying the same methods to the human body they apply to the cosmos. Whether we are dealing with cell biology, genetics, neuroscience, or the other cognitive sciences, no reference to flesh is required, and it is not obvious how any discussion of flesh, in Henry’s sense, can be included in either the assumptions, methods, or results of these fields. It is true that some forms of cognitive research on so-called “live” subjects do involve prompting the subject of research to “think about” or “imagine” an object, and so forth. Through a process of trial and error, it is possible to correlate material events in the brain with reported experiences, so that eventually consciousness would be, as Daniel Dennett says, “explained.”⁶ What seems to be, and is called, an experience of something, is in fact, caused or occasioned by material episodes of which we are entirely unaware. Edit the episode (or what codes for it), edit the experience. Even if some are uncomfortable with the idea of dismissing human experience as entirely illusory, the scientific position is clear: the material, bodily event is phenomenal; the experience of sensing and of sensed, scientifically speaking at least, is epiphenomenal, or worse, illusory.

If such a conclusion seems difficult to accept, resolving it goes beyond the purview of science. Let politicians, therapists, pharmaceutical companies, social workers, school teachers, and prison guards deal with the consequences. Science must tell us only what is true. We must dare, precisely not to think anymore, but to experiment.⁷ It is no longer the philosopher who dethrones the gods of the mythmakers, but the scientist; and in the universe of science, only one god is worthy of the name. Evidence. But the etymology of the word is no longer its meaning. If *e-videre* means to come from seeing, here in question is not seeing, nor even what is seen, at least if that must involve and depend upon sensibility. Rather, a certain way of determining and “explaining” the material world, including what we do see, that is the arche and

⁶ Daniel C. Dennett, *Consciousness Explained* (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1991).

⁷ *Sapere aude*, originally from Horace, “Letter to Lolius,” *Epistulae*, 1, 2, 40, when taken up by Kant, in his Sept. 30, 1784 Letter to Zöllner, “Answering the Question: What is Enlightenment?” becomes an injunction: “Have courage to use your own understanding.” Immanuel Kant, *Practical Philosophy*, trans. Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 11-22.

telos of science, the limits of its *veritas* and its *realitas*. Is the ambition of science anything but to establish once and for all a correct explanatory account of the universe in all its dimensions on the basis of an exact understanding of the causal relationships that govern its constituent parts?

In any case, we are up against a problem. We have in phenomenology a reference to flesh and to the sensing body as a necessary condition of experience and definition of reality, and the exclusion of any such reference in the natural sciences, as a condition of any experimentation and also as a definition of reality. How should one respond intellectually or practically to this apparently-unresolvable dilemma cutting the history of reason in two? On the one hand, the world of our experience, with all its sensible delight—our ambitions, aims, and hopes, fears and regrets, joys and sorrows, love and hate—this world of meaning, of sense, of value. On the other, the empirically-observable, material world of bodies visible to us, or detectable in dimensions far beyond what we can see—this material world, the better understanding of which continues to benefit humanity in myriad ways.

An objection arises: Where is the dilemma? If the visible universe is an element, and a marvelous element, of the world of experience, as of creation, then no rational person ought to resist the desire to understand the mechanisms by which it operates. Can one really suppose it to be a world of inert bodies in which no meaning, no sense, can be found? The apparent contradiction between sense and nonsense—here, the world of meaning and the world of senseless bodies—covers over another one that is more difficult. We are up against two incompatible definitions of the real. If so-called “first-person” experience cannot be reduced, and what is observed in the third-person can never be raised to the level of experiencing itself, for what kind of correlation can we hope?

§2. Embodied Mind: Thinking Matter

The opposition just posited—between the world of meaning, on the one hand, and the world of senseless, inert bodies, on the other—is it artificial or contrived? Far from being a contradiction needing resolution, are these worlds not already, originally and always, conjoined, as Merleau-Ponty has taught us? Flesh is a body that is part—a body-part—of this great body that is the universe (we leave aside the question of whether another, or an infinite number of others, is possible). Flesh, the living, sensing body, is a constituent part of the universe, even if it has raised itself—but why “raised”?—to the level of self-awareness. Admitting the worldly nature of flesh does not require us to nullify or diminish the realm of meaning, the so-called “space” of reasons. “Meaning is not a mysterious gift from outside nature,” John

McDowell reminds us; to think so would commit us to a “rampant platonism.”⁸ Cognition, and the mind as such, is “embodied.” In its acts of knowing it need neither be absorbed by nor separated from what it knows, but is or at least can be “simply present and available.”⁹

In significant continuity with Merleau-Ponty’s work, a growing field of research now seeks to demonstrate the thesis that the fleshly body is a worldly body, and to do so while respecting the prerogatives of both phenomenology and science.¹⁰ To take one notable example, Evan Thompson in *Mind in Life* aims to integrate phenomenology and cognitive science in an “enactive” approach that promises to describe and explain at once: “Starting from a recognition of the transcendental and hence ineliminable status of experience, the aim would be to search for morphodynamical principles that can both integrate the orders of matter, life, and mind, and account for the originality of each order.”¹¹ Once a dynamic morphology of sufficient complexity is recognized—made possible by new topologies, differential geometry, etc.—it is possible to “map,” and then to demonstrate, dynamic and isomorphic relations that arise between physiological systems and perceptual forms.

The effort to achieve such a demonstration, Thompson thinks, would have been embraced by Merleau-Ponty, had a morphology of sufficient richness and complexity been available to him. From this perspective, the remove at which classical phenomenology stands vis-à-vis science, emblematic of Husserl’s *Krisis* (to say nothing of Heidegger’s position), is not a matter of principle, but only a contingent, conceptual constraint, bounded as it was by the limits of the sciences then-available.¹² In any case, if Husserl thinks it is the task of phenomenology to assign

⁸ John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994, 2nd ed. 1996), p. 88.

⁹ Eleanor Rosch, “Introduction to the Revised Edition,” *The Embodied Mind*, eds Francisco J. Varela, Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch (Boston: MIT Press, 1991, rev. ed. 2016), p. xl. In her 2016 introduction, in the context of prospective remarks on the future of “enaction,” Rosch herself admits, “Where science, as it is done now with its mechanistic and materialist assumptions, meets experience, Buddhism, or anything else, the science simply takes over like a colonial ruler. This is body imperialism...” p. lii.

¹⁰ In addition to Rosch, Varela, and Thompson, among others, see also Shaun Gallagher and Dan Zahavi, *The Phenomenological Mind* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2012).

¹¹ Evan Thompson, *Mind in Life: Biology, Phenomenology, and the Sciences of Mind* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007, 2010), p. 87. One will notice these as analogs of the classical Aristotelian framework, certain vestiges of which one can find, in some sense, still in Augustine.

¹² For Thompson, the notion of phenomenal form must be broadened and enriched by biology, physics, and mathematics in order to achieve the desired adequate description-explanation. Merleau-Ponty’s statement that “a physiological analysis of perception would be purely and simply impossible” does not count as an objection to such an approach, Thompson contends, provided that Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of physiological analysis is limited to a lower-order, neuronal level. If, on the

the sciences their ultimate meaning, it cannot accomplish this task unless a genuine connection arises between phenomenology and the sciences it purports to ground. Otherwise, phenomenology amounts to little more than a series of one-sided assertions and pronouncements about the world of experience, which the world of science can safely ignore. But if the results of the sciences can be altered by taking into account phenomenological insight, as advocates of this approach have shown, then the sciences cannot afford to ignore it.

How should we account for this development phenomenologically? How is it possible that a phenomenological analysis according to the strict phenomenological reduction of what is given in intuition, far from providing the antidote to materialism, naturalism, or reductionism, is now enriched by it, to the point of morphing into a “naturalized phenomenology”?¹³ We should not fail to notice that protagonists of the enactive approach refuse “objectivism” quite explicitly, and insist on the irreducible, transcendental character of “experience” as the condition for the possibility of the appearance of any object. In addition, and this point is perhaps more important, we are not dealing with a conflation of methods or perspectives, since the engagement with science goes hand in hand with and is predicated upon the insistence on the importance and irreducibility of the phenomenological perspective. One might reasonably consider such an approach to offer a kind of concrete synthesis of mind and world, rather than the a priori one Kant sought. If the world of experience is irreducible to the world of science and yet integrated with it, is that not what we ought to expect and indicative of a certain correctness? Or, alternatively, in order to effect such an integration of phenomenology and science, has the concept of experience, necessarily, become a concept of scientific experience alone? Or, yet again, are we dealing with a Malebranchian parallelism that is simply harder to detect because the lines now overlap, or intertwine, to use Merleau-Ponty’s word? What is involved in the reduction of experience to scientific experience (that is, the experience of the scientist) and what are its consequences? I will offer three objections, which will lead us into a more refined and direct

contrary, it is expanded to include what Thompson calls a “higher-level, morphodynamic level of explanation,” then a physiological analysis of perception is entirely conceivable. Thompson, *Mind in Life*, p. 85. Thompson does not deny that the approach he recommends can alter the notion of the phenomenal domain; the possibility of such an alteration is built into it: the enrichment of form “can circulate back to modify and reshape” what counts as a phenomenon. *Ibid.* p. 86. Nevertheless, when it comes time to harmonize the so-called “enactive” approach with, for example, the claims of Merleau-Ponty or Husserl, it is not clear that the phenomenological perspective has been preserved without distortion.

¹³ See, in particular, Jean Petitot et al, *Naturalizing Phenomenology: Issues in Contemporary Phenomenology and Cognitive Science* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).

engagement with the question of flesh and its relation to the body before opening onto a theological question.

First, properly speaking, I do not and cannot have an experience of my neurons as objects. It is true that I can connect my own skull, let us call it *le crâne propre*, to a brain scanner, and vary my thinking as I watch correlating parts of my brain light up on a screen. On the basis of such correlations between my thought and my body, can I ever claim to have an (original) experience of my neurons as sensible or intellectual objects? It would be a reflective experience, and nothing would keep me from learning something perceptually about my body in this way. But what I observe on the screen is not my body and can never be, at least if by body we mean the original, subjective body in its original givenness to itself, its auto-affection, or pre-reflective awareness.

Second, if what I observe is not my body, but only a visual representation, can we say that the correlation has proved successful, that we have evidence for it? Even if one embraces the brilliant level of engagement of phenomenology with science, even if one were to achieve the perfect accord of carnal affectivity with the perception of the body, the problem of principle remains: these are two irreducible orders of givenness, of phenomenality. A fundamental practical problem also remains: Imagine a real-time projection of every dynamic alteration of the organic body flashed on a optic lens, available to the concrete perception of my eye—visible. Is it even possible to perceive, organically, the immense complex that is the organic body, all in one view?

A third and parallel objection can also be raised. The possibility of such a perception is highly-specific, and more often than not, prohibitively expensive. What is given in it goes well beyond what is given in the range of perceptual experience available to anyone. If the notion of what is phenomenal—and, even more, its phenomenality—however broadened and enriched, is available only to one who has already entered into the scientific perspective, and if such a perspective excludes in principle the subject that perceives, feels, or enjoys, then such an approach can indeed admit perception, feeling, or enjoyment, but only on the condition that they become what they are not, which is to say, reports of a perception, feeling, or enjoyment. The problem is not that such reports can be mistaken, which in any case might prove relevant for the experiment, but rather that, in the phenomenality of such a report, the original phenomenon is torn from its original givenness, apart from the world, in order to disclose it in a visibility that is foreign to it. Yes, the scientist engrossed practically in an experiment, or theoretically in the effort to design or modify a model for what is observed experimentally, also perceives—that is, sees through forms, however rarified they may be. But experience has here been reduced to scientific experience. It can be extended to the universal—taken as universal experience—only by a decision.

If many suspect the world of science and with it virtual reality, automation, and so-called artificial intelligence have encroached too far, it is because the lifeworld as living has been colonized by technology.¹⁴ That is why those who adopt it, who prefer to experience the world or themselves as mediated by technology, risk losing knowledge of the world or themselves apart from it. “The information age will be the age of idiots,” claims Henry in 1987.¹⁵ The orgasm-feigning robot that will cater to your every wish, or discipline you as programmed, perhaps when you least expect it—or can it learn that you expect that?—is indeed a body without flesh. “Life is but a motion of the limbs... why may we not say , that all Automata... have an artificial life?”¹⁶

§3. Touching Flesh: Sensing Nonsense

In light of Michel Henry’s phenomenology of life and its critique of scientism, such a decision stands out in all clarity, but in order to admit it must we follow his characterization of flesh as originally auto-impressional? For Henry, the reality of flesh is invisible, irreducibly and in principle. In its original givenness, where it is given to itself as auto-impressional and the only place its givenness is original, it does not and cannot appear in the exteriority of world. Nor can flesh be extended to the world in the manner of Merleau-Ponty’s touching-touched, sensing-sensed, feeling-felt chiasm.¹⁷ Endowed with a power the world forever lacks, the hand that is touched, when it is a question of one’s own body, can become the hand that touches. That is correct. But the in-principle reversibility of touching and touched that characterizes the living body does not extend to the material world. No coffee cup “touches” the hand that holds it, nor has a stone ever picked up the hand that throws it.¹⁸ The ontological duplicity that distinguishes phenomenologically the body of flesh from the worldly body seems unassailable.

¹⁴ The claim that all my experience is only a simulation, and that, in any case, I have no way of proving it is not, depends for its compelling force on the concept of reality that is contained in the idea of a simulation, the concept of reality as represented. It is difficult to see how a notion of flesh, the reality of which is first or exclusively in the sensed-body, has any power against such arguments.

¹⁵ Michel Henry, *Barbarism*, trans. Scott Davidson (London: Continuum, 2012) p. 51 / *La barbarie* (Paris : PUF 1987, 2nd ed. Quadrige, 2004), p. 93.

¹⁶ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 9.

¹⁷ Henry’s refutation of this position appears at *Incarnation : A Philosophy of Flesh*, trans. Karl Hefty (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2015) / *Incarnation : une philosophie de la chair* (Paris : Seuil, 2000), §21. The original arguments arise in Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968) / *Le visible et l’invisible* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1964), §4; cf. *Phenomenology of perception*, op. cit., I, 2, p. 106ff.

¹⁸ Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 19th ed. 2006), H 55; cf. Henry, *Incarnation*, III, §47, p. 242ff / p. 345ff.

But have we lost the body in its worldly reality in the process? Emmanuel Falque thinks so.¹⁹ In his view, Henry's thesis concerning auto-affection, and originary flesh as auto-impressional, fails to account for anything like the body, or the embodied condition as we actually experience it, in "flesh and bone," as he says: "[N]othing indicates, beyond his masterful descriptive analyses, that there is a genuine access to the body through the flesh. Put otherwise, everything happens as if the flesh, that is to say the experience of our own life, becomes so invasive here that we would come to forget that it is possessed and even experienced, at least materially and visibly, in and through a body."²⁰ For Falque, the flesh that is ours is not only seeing but also visible. It can indeed be seen and touched. This visibility is not simply one way of access to flesh, and to flesh that is ours, but the first way of access.²¹ We experience and possess flesh also through our body; and there is no flesh, for us, that we cannot also see or touch.

¹⁹ Emmanuel Falque, "Is There a Flesh Without Body? A Debate with Michel Henry," trans. Scott Davidson, *Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy*, Vol XXIV, No 1 (2016), pp. 139–66 / "Y a-t-il une chair sans corps," *Transversalités*, Janvier-Mars, 2002: 44 – 75, republished in Philippe Capelle, ed., *Phénoménologie et christianisme chez Michel Henry* (Paris: Cerf, 2004), 95–133 ; this objection to Henry also appears *Le Combat amoureux* (Paris: Hermann, 2014) / *The Loving Struggle* (London & New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), Ch. 5. The *Transversalités* edition is cited here. For some subsequent development, see also Emmanuel Falque, *The Metamorphosis of Finitude* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), pp. 16ff & 136ff. Falque does acknowledge a minimal presence of a "verbal indicator" of a "body of flesh [*Leibkörper*]" in *Incarnation*, and offers what we find to be a more moderate claim later: "it is not, properly speaking, the case that there is a *flesh without body* but simply that any *passage from the flesh to the body* whatsoever remains unexplained in *Incarnation*, since everything is already constituted on the basis of an originary flesh (the auto-impression), which explains the intentionality of the flesh (feeling), but not the thickness of the body (the felt)." *Ibid.* p. 162 / p. 72 (trans. modified).

²⁰ Emmanuel Falque, "Is There a Flesh Without Body?" pp. 139–40 / "Y a-t-il une chair sans corps," p. 44. In fact, for Henry, "access" to the body through the flesh is both impressional and practical. Henry will not equate the experience of flesh with the experience of life, however.

²¹ Falque claims that, "initially," we are an "organic and thingly lives *before* being an affective pathos." In addition, "All 'pleasure' as well as all 'suffering' takes place *initially* through the body, without being reduced to the lived experience of its originary flesh in its simple pathos" (*Ibid.* p. 159 / p. 68, my emphasis). Falque here seems to be appealing to the sensed body, and to sense as intentional, in the manner of Scheler. Henry's critique of this position, to which Falque does not respond directly, can be found in *The Essence of Manifestation*, IV, §§ 54 and 64. One might still wonder: What scientific description of a pure organic body can account, phenomenologically, for what it is in itself? Simply by reference to what takes place visibly? The completion of biology in its full development, one might say. Then we would have a correct account of the full set of relations, for example, that unite the microbiome of the bowels to the neurology of the brain, and we would be able to describe and characterize these relations accurately, because we perceive them. On the basis of such a correct perception of the organic body, a doctor can recommend to a patient to avoid certain items in the diet, in order to ensure better brain function, and so on. But how can what is perceived in this way be called our *initial* or *first* experience of the body? To take another example, the infant that spits up her

Falque and Henry thus offer two quite distinct conceptions of flesh that seem incompatible. For Falque, Henry's flesh "disincorporates," "absorbs," and ultimately "destroys" the body, and with it all the "thickness" of what is felt.²² After all, "it is also necessary to recognize the weight of our own body (and its kilos, we dare to say!) without which this pain [of a steep climb, for example] would never be experienced" (157).²³ What phenomenological reality would such a pain have, if not for the fact of the body's quite material weight, which does not simply explain or measure the pain at a causal level, as the reference to kilos might suggest, but is also involved in the very fact and event of it? Falque certainly must have the phenomenality of weight in mind, precisely its heaviness, and not only the relative scientific measure of a primary quality.

On the other hand, there is no question that in Henry's approach only an auto-impressional flesh can experience its own heaviness or lightness. I feel the weight of another not perceptually, by seeing it, but only and at most when the other (the other's weight) is quite strictly bearing down upon me. But even in this case, I do not feel the weight of the other, properly speaking—that is, its heaviness for the other, which remains strictly invisible (an object not of sensibility, but impressionality). Its impressional status does not make it inhuman. Quite the contrary. For Henry, the heaviness or lightness of flesh can be felt only because it is capable of feeling itself, and a worldly body—the strict concept we all have in mind when we speak of a worldly body—is not so capable, even if it can be assigned a weight value. For Falque,

mother's milk and soils diapers day after day surely gives all the signs of being alive in a quite organic way. In the horizon of the world's exteriority, she is organic in this sense before any obvious signs of joy or anxiety, which do indeed come at a later stage of development. But if her body were not subjective, auto-impressional flesh, why the signs of facial relief? Must we not say *she* is relieved, rather than just that her pure organic body is relieved?

²² *Ibid.* p. 163 / p. 73.

²³ I am not persuaded by Falque's general objections, because I do not think he has adequately accounted for Henry's position. The charge that Henry falls prey to dualism glosses over the rejection of soul-body dualism that is explicit in the text, begs the question of the thesis at issue (the duplicity of appearing), and sits uneasily with the charge of monism later applied to Henry. The charge that Henry resurrects a tired form of de-mythologization does not stick either. Henry's reading of the Fathers is anything but Bultmann's. In any case, if Greek thinking were so compatible with Christian faith, why would it be so unthinkable for God to be born in flesh like ours, as it was to the Greek mind? Why the debates or councils? We can call this enculturation, but we must not do so at the expense of admitting what remains distinctively Christian in it. The charge that Henry rejects the "model" of the visible is also somewhat question-begging, since we are here dealing with a phenomenology of the invisible. Nevertheless, these are not the charges Falque wishes to defend vigorously. And these objections do not prevent Falque from recognizing phenomenological descriptions of great value in Henry. The most compelling, and in my view correct, claims Falque makes are in the sections of the paper that describe what Falque takes to be original in Henry, but these are the very parts of Henry's work Falque embraces.

heaviness or lightness can be felt only by a flesh that also weighs something, and thus also bears the properties of a worldly body. Otherwise, how can we say that is its own heaviness? I think such a question motivates Falque's objections. The phenomenology of incorporation, and not only of incarnation, has its own legitimacy, but seems impossible if the phenomenological distinction of flesh is not first admitted. Of course, we can question whether kilos, to use one of Falque's examples, is an essential characteristic of the body, or only of its relation to the earth. The physicist will speak of gravity, but not flesh, and nothing keeps gravity from serving as a total principle of explanation in a so-called "unified theory."

In Henry's perspective, I do not experience the "weight" of my body, which strictly speaking is an abstract measure. Rather, I experience, as a resisting continuum, the resistance of the body I am; and I experience fatigue in my effort to overcome it. A worldly body, from this angle, experiences no such resistance or fatigue, but friction and entropy. Moreover, the fatigue of my flesh is not fatigue at a distance, but my own proper exhaustion. If the weight of my flesh is felt, it is felt because my flesh feels it in itself, not because it senses it at a distance, as a sensed body. I can always form the intention of the object "weight," assign it to my body, which I also see, and appeal to my perception of the weight and the body to gather these two distinct objects together in a unity. But no fatigue is felt in such a perception, since fatigue is affective. I feel the fatigue, before I have a perception of it, and whether or not the thought of it ever crosses my mind. That is why, for Henry, the flesh is auto-impresional, without any reference to the sensed body.

In my own view, though I do not pretend to have fully demonstrated it here, I think Henry's position is necessary if Falque is to have what he wants, which is the body in its visible, material, incorporated reality—and to have this together with flesh—in a way that also supports a genuinely theological conception of incarnation and incorporation. Moreover, I think Falque gets a deeper version of what he wants if he embraces Henry's perspective, for only what transpires in flesh can account phenomenologically for what we "observe" in the living body, not only the phenomena of birth and growth in the mundane sense, but also of distress, sorrow or joy, which do not register visibly in the body at random, but account phenomenologically for, indeed explain, what so registers (the lines of distress in a face, tears of joy upon seeing a loved one, etc.).

§4. Eyes of Faith: Flesh of the Theological

These questions as far as they go remain phenomenological and do not depend upon articles of faith. Nevertheless, Falque correctly detects in Henry's *Incarnation* a liaison between Part II and Part III, between the phenomenology of flesh *stricto sensu*, and *Incarnation* in "the Christian sense." Here, Falque advances a second

principle objection and a positive claim: “[N]othing ensures, at least in reading Michel Henry’s work, that the divine incarnation in a flesh pure and simple [Inkarnation] also expresses the becoming human of God [Menschwerdung]... Only a theology of the body or of the purely organic, rather than a unilateral phenomenology of the flesh, will be able to produce the identification, frequently avoided by Michel Henry, between the carnal incarnation of God and his historical and corporeal humanization in the figure of the incarnate Word.”²⁴

Falque seems to suspect that Henry subsumes “Incarnation in the Christian Sense” under a general and also inadequate phenomenology of incarnation.²⁵ Far from providing an account of incarnation in the Christian sense, Henry’s phenomenology of life glosses over it and renders it equivalent to the fleshly condition of anyone. At best, Revelation becomes a mere moment of phenomenology, rather than the absolute Transcendent.²⁶ What is worse, it can hardly be called “incarnate” or even “human,” since it is fundamentally dis-incorporated. Flesh without body, in this precise sense, is finally a gnostic flesh, as a-corporal as a-cosmic. It is neither Christian nor human. “A monadism and a modalism of the Henryan flesh would thus become all the more dis-incorporated as the body would be destroyed and absorbed into it.”²⁷

In response to this precise objection, let us consider more closely a text that Falque cites in support of these claims and that seems to invite the charge of Spinozism. Henry describes the living person [vivant] as “no more than a mode of it [auto-

²⁴ *Ibid.* pp. 140 – 1 / p. 145 (my emphasis). Henry in no way denies that the body is also an object, and also organic. It is a question, rather, of describing adequately the body’s phenomenality in its entirety, which Henry thinks is not possible if we seek to account for flesh in terms of the organic body or in terms of the objective body alone. Falque seems primarily worried that Henry’s flesh is too *unilateral*. It *seems* as if Falque wants a single notion of phenomenality that accounts for both sensing flesh and sensed body, but wants to get there starting from the body alone. Though I cannot address the issue here, it is for me unclear what a *theological* concept of incarnation (or incorporation) would be, that would be adequately describable as the Word assuming a purely organic matter. As we know from Maximus the Confessor, and so many others, human salvation is affected in the Christ, not because the Word assumes a purely organic matter, which has no freedom or agency, but also because of his obedience, in his human will, to the divine will. Such obedience is not possible unless the flesh is also subjective, capable of a will that can exert or not exert force in the limbs of the body it is, whether to accept ignominy and death, or to resist it, for example.

²⁵ Forget the “theological turn of French phenomenology.” Falque detects in Henry’s final section that is supposed to treat “Incarnation in the Christian Sense” a near-total “*avoidance of the theological*.” Or, if he does not succeed in totally avoiding it, at least “a probable attempt to avoid the theological” (*Ibid.* pp. 149, 147 / pp. 56, 52). I find these claims unfounded. Nowhere in Henry’s *oeuvre* does he evince the least fear of theology, or any attempt to avoid it. He is and remains a phenomenologist, and his theologically-motivated critics ought not gloss over this fact, or take it as a demerit.

²⁶ *Ibid.* p. 150 / p. 56.

²⁷ *Ibid.* pp. 162 – 3 / pp. 72 – 3.

impressionality]. In other words, it is something that has no consistency by itself, but only as a manifestation, modification, or peripeteia of a reality that is other than it.”²⁸ Read one way (as Falque reads it), this passage seems to deny the integrity of creation, and to assert a strange, if not to say false, relation with an a-cosmic, unworldly, dis-incorporated reality. One cannot even say it is a relation of dependence, which would already imply a consistency of its own, but rather a relation that merely, as Spinoza might say, expresses the absolute. If Henry means what Falque thinks he means here, Falque would be right to reject it. But I think Henry is saying something else entirely, and a better understanding of it will also shed light on Falque’s other objections.

I read Henry’s phrase, “has no consistency by itself,” with Augustine rather than Spinoza in mind. If Henry means that apart from Life and, in a deeper sense, apart from God’s own life given in Christ, human living dis-integrates, and lacks unity or consistency, then Henry’s claim is impeccably phenomenologically and theologically precise. Neither here nor elsewhere does Henry turn finite flesh into a dis-incorporate epiphenomenon lacking all reality. Nor does he claim it is only a “mode” of absolute life in the manner of Spinoza. Henry is claiming, instead, at least three things: 1) Finite flesh is not autonomous absolutely. The pretense to be itself on its own, by its own power, is illusory.²⁹ It cannot give itself its own law if it cannot give itself its own life. 2) Flesh can be a site in which life manifests itself, or alternatively can be a site where life is denatured. Whether one or the other eventuality ensues is, in part, a function of the kind of relation flesh maintains with the life that gives it to itself. 3) Infinite Life, strictly speaking—insofar as it brings itself about in itself [se porte soi-même en soi]—is, with respect to finite life, an alterity, “a reality that is other than it.”

Here we have a fundamental distinction between finite and infinite flesh, an alterity not reducible to the alterity of the finite other. It expresses in phenomenological terms what the creature-creator distinction expresses theologically. As fundamental as it is, however, that distinction does not destroy the fundamental relation that is creation. But Falque does not see this distinction in Henry, or does not find it strong enough: “There is a distance in the relation of the human to God... that is not identical to the distance of sin.”³⁰ For Henry, once again, finite life cannot “bring itself about in itself.” The power to give life, even life to itself—a power at infinite remove from any human power—it forever lacks. I am not “my own” life and will never be. Is this not, in fact, the orthodox concept of creation? God is Life and the

²⁸ *Ibid.* p. 162 / p. 72, citing Henry, *Incarnation*, III, §35, p. 178 / p. 255 (my emphasis).

²⁹ For Henry, the statement of Christ to Pilate (Jn. 19:11)—“You would have no power over me...” —is an absolute claim, applying not only to the political power of the first-century provincial prefect, but also to all power at his disposal, the brute force of a soldier, for example, and any power like it.

³⁰ *Ibid.* p. 160 / p. 69.

giver of life, and all the living bear a relation to God by virtue of their living condition.³¹

It is not simply creation that Falque finds missing, but also an orthodox concept of incarnation. Somewhat surprisingly, he suspects that Henry denies that the Son of God has taken on the human condition in every way but sin. Where Henry writes that the “one who took on flesh in Christ was not an ordinary man but the Word of God” (160 / 69, Falque’s emphasis, citing *Incarnation*, 231 / 331), Falque interprets Henry as denying that Jesus was born in human likeness, just like any of us, with a carnal body of visible matter. But here again nothing prohibits us from reading this differently. The one who has taken on human likeness in the man Jesus is not just anyone, is not you or me, but rather the One who is in himself the Word. Of course Jesus is a man like any other, but he is not only a man like any other, since he is in his person the very Word of God. Falque wants to compliment an emphasis on the “exemplary” with an emphasis on “the ordinary life and common fleshly humanity of the Son of God.”³²

In addition to an adequate conception of the humanity of Jesus, it is also the uniqueness or singularity of the incarnation that Falque wishes to safeguard. Now citing “the philosopher” Merleau-Ponty: “the Incarnation changes everything.”³³ And Falque is right. Incarnation in the Christian sense does change everything. But Falque thinks incarnation in Henry’s sense, like the astral flesh of Marcion, or the angelic flesh of Jakob Böhme, cannot “change” anything, strictly speaking. How could it if the auto-impressional flesh it involves is forever a-temporal, invisible, dis-incorporated, and thus entirely unlike the temporal, visible, bodily appearance of the Word made flesh, which in the words of John, “we have heard... we have seen with our eyes... we have looked at and touched with our hands”?³⁴ If we are to affirm these words, as we do, must we not side with Falque against Henry on this point? The theology Falque wishes to preserve is not in question here, but only the phenomenology, and thus the conditions under which (the way) the revelation of God in Christ comes to manifestation.

How does the affirmation that the Word was made flesh in a flesh like ours go together phenomenologically with the theological singularity of the Word made

³¹ “The God who made the world and everything in it... does not live in shrines made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all men life and breath and everything.” Ac. 17:24-25.

³² Emmanuel Falque, *The Metamorphosis of Finitude*, op. cit., p. 19.

³³ Which continues: “Since the incarnation, God has been externalized [*a été dans l’extérieur*].” Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Faith and Good Faith,” in *Sense and Non-sense*, tr. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Patricia Alley Dreyfus (Evanston: Northwestern University Press 1964), 174-5/ *Sens et non-sens* (Paris: Les Éditions Nagel, 4th ed, 1945), p. 310.

³⁴ 1 Jn. 1:1 (NRSV).

flesh, indeed its primacy? For as we have seen, it is not just any incarnation in question, in your flesh or mine, but the incarnation of the One who is the Word. To be more precise, how must we describe, following Nicholas of Cusa but this time phenomenologically, the co-occurrence of the following two apparently-irreconcilable opposites: The man Jesus is both seen and heard, and rejected as God by many?³⁵ Can a phenomenology that starts with visible body tout court do it? We should avoid any hasty appeal to faith to explain the difference between acceptance and rejection. Falque's intuitions are correct: it is not only the eyes of faith that see God in Jesus, but the sensible eyes of the body, and also the intellectual "eyes" of those who contemplate him.

But by insisting that the one who sees Jesus—i.e. sees him "bodily"—does indeed perceive God in the flesh, has Falque left any room for those who wish to deny it, as many did and still do? After all, they do not reject what they see, a man in space and time, visible like any other. Nor is it a different man, but the same one his followers also see. What they reject is that this appearing man is God. (In this precise respect Falque claims about the priority of the body are correct. In the order of historical time, they see Jesus first, before some come to believe he is the Christ.) But can the humanity of precisely the Word made flesh be recognized as such by appealing first or exclusively to the visibility of it, where the meaning of "flesh" is blended with, and finally phenomenal as, the visible body? How then could we come to terms with the invisibility of the Father? In the Johannine text, Jesus says: "No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me... Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me. Not that anyone has seen the Father except the one who is from God; he has seen the Father."³⁶

By refusing the phenomenological privilege of invisible, auto-impressional flesh, not just the experience of flesh or life, but flesh as it undergoes experiencing itself—is Falque committed to an exclusivism of the sensed?³⁷ Not necessarily. He does not refuse the fact of an invisible dimension of flesh, but refuses it priority, and refuses to sever its (visible) bond with the irreducibly visible, the "spread body." He refuses the notion that flesh is invisible alone, sensing alone, touching alone, in favor

³⁵ "The infinite form is received only in a finite way; consequently, every creature is, as it were, a finite infinity or a created god, so that it exists in the way in which this could best be." *De docta ignorantia* 1440, II, 2, 104, in *Nicholas of Cusa: Selected Spiritual Writings* trans. H. Lawrence Bond (Mahway, NY: Paulist Press, 1997), p. 134. A form of this aporia has been described by Jean-Luc Marion, "The Aporia of the Concept of Revelation: The Epistemological Interpretation," *Givenness and Revelation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 8-29.

³⁶ Jn. 6:44-46.

³⁷ Falque frequently renders Henry as suggesting an experience of life, but Henry instead understands life as experiencing undergoing itself, not as an object of experience, where *experiencing* as such would be taken for granted as given.

of a view that it is also, and at the same time, visible, sensed, and touched—which is to say, is also body. Of course, at one level, Falque’s claims are entirely legitimate. This “thing” I call my flesh “is” also this “thing” I call my body. The distinctions Henry and others make between the subjective body, the living body, the organic body, the objective body, and so on, these are phenomenological declinations of the body as such. The body, as such, “is” their unity. But only in flesh and as flesh is that unity self-given. It is not given in its original phenomenality either in perception or in sensibility.

If we wish to follow Merleau-Ponty’s path, as Falque does, either we must remain in an ontic register that denies the fundamental, original, phenomenological irreducibility of visible and invisible, world and life, and finally flesh and Life, or we must enter into theological territory and with eyes of faith recognize these twos as ones. One can offer a kind of phenomenology from faith, as Emmanuel Falque does so well, but one can also wonder whether, because this is a phenomenology of faith and from the perspective of faith, it is theology more from “from above” than “from below,” despite everything. “Eyes of faith” here means, minimally, hearing the Words of Christ and believing, and maximally, participating fully in sacramental life. If we remain in the realm of sense perception and confine our understanding of these realities to the sheer ontic unities of flesh and body, body and world, flesh and world, we seem committed to a theologically- and phenomenologically-questionable materialism. If, instead, we understand seeing as seeing in the light of faith, we must admit that it is faith that gives the incarnate unity in question, Word and flesh, and Word made flesh. In the order of perception, it is faith and not sensibility, or better faith with sensibility, that gives the unity in question. The one who denies that Jesus is Lord also sees Jesus, or could do so. In seeing Jesus they also see the Lord, and deny him. But they do not deny what they see, Jesus.

Without the duplicity of appearing, one has either a kind of ontic phenomenality, so to speak, or faith. But then the phenomenality of faith, properly speaking, would seem to remain out of reach, since the sensible has already, of itself, been so fully loaded with faith. It is a way of thinking the unity of faith and phenomenological reason, but perhaps one that risks compromising something of both. The theologian must still bear the burden of describing phenomenologically what life means, and what it means for that Word to give its life for the world, for you and for me, what it means to live with it and in it and from it, to “participate” in precisely that Life and no other, and to be made able to do so. I am not confident all this can be done on the basis of the phenomenality of the world alone. Of course, I understand “world” here in Henry’s sense and not that of Merleau-Ponty, and an objection to the position I am sketching here might find in that fact a point of dispute.

The charges of Gnosticism and Spinozism, in any case, are misapplied and ultimately unhelpful, at least when it comes to what clearly becomes the trajectory of Henry’s

final writings on Christianity. Like Kierkegaard says life must be lived, Henry's writings on Christianity must be read forward, but can only be understood backward. Life does not save me from the world, nor do I need saving from it. It simply gives itself otherwise and differently than what the world gives and how the world gives. The givenness of the world (as much as of the body and its bones) is and remains a givenness, but never a self-givenness. This is a phenomenological claim, not a soteriological one. The two should not be confused. But the decision to limit one's understanding or definition of reality to the unilateral exteriority of the world may indeed have soteriological implications. We may never come to terms with what faith means, what faith is about—to say nothing of creation, which is not a mere concept but also reality itself—if we remain so limited.

* * *

A word remains to be said about the engagement of phenomenology with science and its place in these reflections. That area of study has its own merit, legitimacy, and interest. The protagonists of such research deserve enormous praise, with two small qualifications. First, the effort to correlate first- and third-person perspectives risks slipping to a kind of scientism if only those correlations ground the phenomenality and phenomenological legitimacy of experiencing undergoing itself in flesh. The phenomena arising in flesh are proper to flesh. The varying worldly vestiges of it, including its practical action, illuminate only what a world can be (including the world of science). They do not give or illuminate or justify what is given in flesh in itself, which has its own phenomenological integrity. Secondly, and for a related reason, science will never prove God (and here we mean “science” and not “reason”). Nor will it ever prove, for example, that Jesus is Lord. “If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.”³⁸ None of this can count in any way as a failure of science, but only as a difference from phenomenology, and in another way, a difference from faith.

Falque's phenomenology of flesh and bone is clearly distinct from Henry's phenomenology of life, and the distinctions between them merit further investigation. I share the same theological commitments as Falque, and I hold in high regard the profound spirit of his theological vision. These objections are only about phenomenology, and in a secondary way about how phenomenology relates to Christian faith, tactically speaking. I suspect that ultimately Falque's objections to Henry presuppose that one has already refused Henry's basic theses concerning phenomenality and the duplicity of appearing. But new questions can also now be

³⁸ Lk. 16:31.

posed, this time to Falque: Does the phenomenological priority of the body to the flesh assume a theological acceptance of the body as sacramental, and thus as theologically meaningful, as significant? If so, should we not understand this to be a sacramental phenomenology? And if that is the case, does it presuppose and depend upon the eyes of faith, or even sacramental experience, for its phenomenality? In my view, the further development of the phenomenology of life may also go in a sacramental direction. Henry himself invites it, and it is not clear that a rapprochement between their positions could not be found there.³⁹

In any case, one cannot avoid being struck by the subtle moments Falque expresses thanks for the reprieve that arrives when Henry admits a kind of “transcendent” life. But Falque does not put much stock in it. Why? Because admitting it, he thinks, would make of Henry’s work a total contradiction and destroy its most important theses. But I think Falque and with him almost all readers of Henry have missed something very important. The phenomenology of life Henry finds in Christianity is not reducible to his own. Henry discovers in Christianity a depth (of life) that offers more than his own phenomenology on its own can provide, a depth which later involves a reproach that overturns the entire affective economy and the world of ethics it presupposes. If we must turn to Words of Christ to see its contours and extent, nothing prohibits us from reading Henry’s final text, in part, as a response to Falque’s objections. If that is in any way the fruit of a combat amoureux, for this we can also thank Emmanuel Falque.

³⁹ See, in particular, *Words of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012) p. 124 / *Paroles du Christ* (Paris: Seuil, 2002), p. 155; cf. “Archi-christologie,” in *Phénoménologie de la vie, Tome IV : sur l'éthique et la religion* (Paris : Presses Universitaires de France, 2004), p. 113 ff.