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**Title:** Philosophy in the age of modern technology: the challenge of Michel Henry’s approach

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**Keywords:** Michel Henry; phenomenology; phenomenology of life; *techné*; technology

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# Philosophy in the age of modern technology: the challenge of Michel Henry's approach

Prof. Dr. Pedro José Grande Sánchez<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

The progress of science does not seem to have brought more culture and well-being to today's world. For Michel Henry, the elimination of the world of the spirit has irretrievably led us to the "disease of life". An objective and homogenising conception of the world that has little or nothing to do with life itself. In this sense, the task of philosophy would consist precisely in highlighting the activities that the world of science has decided to reject. Considering the world of life from techno-scientific categories has meant eliminating the dimensions that have served humanity for millennia to answer the question: What is life? The philosopher refers to religion, aesthetics and ethics. Throughout this paper we will analyse the characteristics that, in the words of the philosopher Michel Henry, are the foundations of the "ideologies of barbarism" produced by technology.

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## Introduction

Following on from his analysis of material phenomenology, Michel Henry makes a critique of the technique of the modern world. His work operates in a deeper and radical dimension, which consists in retrieving the path that leads to a philosophy of life.

Henry's gaze may seem metaphysical and to a certain extent distant from the modern world, which lives immersed in the world of technology. "Techno-science" –as he calls it– is part of our culture and its rejection in our days is not so evident. So, why be suspicious of it in the first place, if it is backed up by the extraordinary results and progress made in the 20th century, as well as the rapid advances we are discovering in the 21st? But, above all, what alternative, if any, does Henry offer, and on

what basis should we accept that it is better than the one offered by the technique?

## Archaeology of technology

One of the fundamental questions in Henry's philosophy is to elucidate what he means by technique, because sometimes technique can be confused with science.

There are several ways of understanding technique. A first way could be the one that people commonly identify with progress, with the development of science. In the light of science, we can see that man has advanced in the mastery and control of nature. Our world is certainly different from the world of our parents' generation, and even more so from that of our grandparents, and we can say that it will be different for generations to come. Mod-

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ern technology implies continuous progress in the sense of advancing, we can say “without measure”, towards total mastery of the physical world. In this sense, technology is therefore presented as an unrestrained and limitless capacity, marked by its own development or self-growth, that is to say, it would itself be its own end.

The second sense refers rather to the devices, to the instruments that science uses, whose ontological veracity depends on their pure functioning, in order to be able to modify nature. It is thus about those processes and devices which are used to objectify nature and which constitute the essence of modern technology. However, these devices have no purpose other than their own functioning. Thus, the transformation of the world would respond to the machines, determined by an objectivist conception of scientific knowledge.

An archaeology of the term *techné*, in the sense of a *logos* on its *arché*, takes us to the very root of the human being. Indeed, technique in a third, proper or original sense would be the one that would form a constitutive part of our essence. Michel Henry considers that this way of conceiving technique, different from its modern version, refers us directly to life in its most fundamental dimension. But how does this sense differ from the first two? Henry’s project is presented as an attempt at retrieving the primordial matter of all original manifestation, that is to say, Life. And for the philosopher, life consists of a phenomenon that does not manifest itself externally; it is, in fact, a pure essence that feels itself. Life is self-affection, pure subjectivity, invisible *pathos* in which the production of things responds to the interiority

of the living.

The question that is at work in the first two modalities, which are but two sides of the same coin, consists in understanding that technique has ended up being something alien and external to the human being. Its reality is such that it has become not only invasive with respect to nature, including human nature, but has also been able to transform the world and exclude from it any other reality than its own. In Nietzschean terms we could identify it with the will to power (*Der Wille zur Macht*) as a capacity that asserts itself, that is, that not only transforms things, but also transforms itself and grows out of itself. Henry speaks of the *depreciation* of the world and the *destruction* of human life as such. And he recalls that human history has lived for millennia without having the slightest idea of this question, nor of feeling the need to modify and transform life as it is being done in modern times.

Indeed, we live in what is known as the *fourth industrial revolution*.<sup>2</sup> The hyper-development of science has continued to grow since the philosopher’s death. What he condemned in his prophetic analyses, especially in his book *Barbarism*, published in 1987, has only confirmed the malaise and danger of a society that is capable, Henry writes, of “making gold, of going to the moon, of building self-steering missiles capable of self-surveillance, before deciding themselves the moment of their destruction, and ours”.<sup>3</sup> And a few years later he will state that “war, everything that is prepared for it or that has anything to do with it, was, as we know, one of the main causes of technical progress, at least as long as it served an end other than itself”<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> The term was coined by economist Klaus Schwab at the World Economic Forum (2016). The technological advances of the so-called “digital revolution” known as the third revolution are said to have given rise to a new revolution associated with the “second machine age”. The development of artificial intelligence would be giving rise to an era characterised by the blurring of the boundaries between the physical, the digital and biological. Michel Henry, who died in 2002, had already intuited these movements in his philosophical analyses.

<sup>3</sup> Michel Henry, *La Barbarie* (Paris: Grasset, 1987), 94.

<sup>4</sup> Michel Henry, *C'est moi la Vérité. Pour une philosophie du christianisme* (Paris: Seuil, 1996).

The problem is that technology has become disconnected from life. Its development has entailed a teleological inversion of what could have been the path that would have led us to an essential appropriation of life. Authors such as Heidegger see technique as nothing more than the logical process of the idea that connects reason with utility and the natural processes of the world.<sup>5</sup> But Henry questions this development. This way of thinking about technology is rather a representation of entities as things. Reality would be what knowledge offers us on the basis of its physical-mathematical laws.

But what kind of knowledge is this knowledge capable of modifying the world, values, and even the human being? For Henry, there are three types of knowledge, which he explains using a biology textbook as an example. What the student reads when he opens the pages of this book is a theoretical knowledge of life, that is, “scientific knowledge”. But in this work of reading and comprehension, a second type of knowledge is also operating, which is what he calls “knowledge of consciousness”, through which the student puts into action the apprehension of the meaning of the words. And, finally, the knowledge that Henry calls “knowledge of life” is that which makes possible the movement of the eyes to read the lines, the movement of the hands to turn the pages, the rest when tired from reading and getting up to walk or go to drink or eat, etc.

Michel Henry asks us which of these three forms of knowledge we believe to be the fundamental knowledge. The question is undoubtedly crucial for the understanding of our world. From the outset, one might think that of the three, only scientific knowledge can be classified as knowledge and, in any case, if we accept consciousness as knowledge, it could be equated with scientific knowledge insofar as both have an object of knowledge. How-

ever, this is not the case with the knowledge of life, which does not seem to relate to anything other than itself. There is no distance in this knowledge because it is not about relating to any object, the movement of hands, eyes, etc., corresponds only to the absolute immanence of the subjectivity of Life. Henry speaks of the knowledge of life as a knowledge that “excludes from itself all *ek-stasis*” in order to underline that it is produced in the most intimate and deepest part of life. Life is not to be found in the “Outside”, hence whatever happens in the world cannot be explained from the world. That is why for Michel Henry the knowledge of life constitutes the fundamental knowledge, because the other two knowledges need and are given beforehand in this immanent reality.

Michel Henry defines technique as the “solitude of science”. The scientific knowledge that would have taken root in our world under the influence of Galileo and would later have had its continuity with Descartes. The reduction of nature to mathematics would have meant the exclusion of the secondary qualities of the universe. The truth of the world constitutes the truth provided by scientific, universal and objective thought. So, life ends up becoming something abstract and ideal from this dimension, because the sphere of the sensible has been eliminated for the sake of a greater –the only– objectivity.

## Phenomenology of life

Henry takes Husserl’s *Krisis*<sup>6</sup> as a starting point, this book is a good beginning to remember that the sciences, although they speak to us of the world, ignore life, because they do nothing more than study it from abstraction, from mathematical idealities. However, Henry considers that the father of phenomenology falls into the same error into which modern philoso-

<sup>5</sup> Cfr. Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche I, Gesamtausgabe*, 6.1 (Frankfurt: Vittorio Klostermann, 1996), 480.

<sup>6</sup> Edmund Husserl, *Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendente Phänomenologie*. Husserliana Band VI (La Haya: Martinus Nijhoff, 1954).

phers fell. The question of intentionality as a cognitive foundation refers us to phenomena, that is, to the world of objects that manifest themselves in consciousness, but Henry wants to go a step further and speaks of radical phenomenology.

This phenomenology, also called material, explains that the horizon of manifestation of phenomena would be the space of interiority. The horizon would not be consciousness, nor being, but Life as the ultimate matter of appearing. But how to understand this novel phenomenology? For Henry the manifestation of matter would have a passive character, it would be a form of experiencing oneself that he calls self-affection. This philosophy is presented as an alternative to the “phenomenology of the world or of being”.

The structure of knowledge referring to the other that presents itself in the world or exteriority is not limited to the visible face of what is seen. The outward movement of intentionality lies in pure phenomenicity and links man with being or “intentional correlate”. However, it does not seem that we can assure this ontological principle of “as much appearance as being” (*So viel Schein, so viel Sein*) when we speak of a phenomenology of the world, because the appearing of the world is incapable of giving an account of that which is revealed in it. Intentionality does not produce the immediate donation of the thing; it does not give it its existence. That is why we say that the real content of the world does not depend on its phenomenological structure.

So, what is it that founds reality? Michel Henry calls it “the masterpiece of the inversion of phenomenology”: the phenomenology of impression. The reality of a sensible apparition, such as colour, lies only where it is felt by us. But the question is to know how we can

unveil intentionality itself without falling into the aporia of a new intentionality. Well, with the analysis of the impression we overcome the regressions to infinity, since “consciousness would impress itself, in such a way that it would be its original self-impression that would reveal itself to itself, making its own revelation possible”.<sup>7</sup> In the same way, the Husserlian distinction of the reality of consciousness “between a non-intentional impressionary element and the intentional element, and this in favour of the impression” would also be overcome.

The point is that the original appearing of the impression reveals itself to be life and not the world. We discover that in that immanence which means experiencing oneself, the original passivity of the impression, which constitutes the essence of life and which Husserl ignored, manifests itself to us. And this pathos of life, opposed to the ek-static appearing of the world, is invisible. “As living beings, we are beings of the invisible. We are intelligible only in and from the invisible. Therefore, our true nature cannot be understood in the world”.<sup>8</sup>

The phenomenological method after undergoing a thematic turn towards a transcendental phenomenology of subjectivity, shows us Husserl’s effort to go beyond sensibility in order to save factual life from Heraclitus’ river or the form of flux where it annihilates itself. Life, as singular cogitatio, vanishes before the gaze of intentionality, so Husserl replaces it by a universal and founding object of science, which is the essence of transcendental life, where the fundamental intuition of the 1907 lessons<sup>9</sup> is possible: *cogitatio* as clear and distinct evidence means that this life, clear and distinct, assures me of all existence and reality. But this clear and distinct perception is incapable of grasping the whole *cogitatio* in its reality, because the invisible reality, which constitutes the pa-

<sup>7</sup> Michel Henry, *Incarnation. Une philosophie de la chair* (Paris: Seuil, 2000), 70.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 168.

<sup>9</sup> These are the lessons that appeared later under the title: *Die idee der Phänomenologie. Fünf Vorlesungen* (La Haya: Martinus Nijhoff, 1950).

thetic flesh, never shows itself in the world. The new phenomenology, by locating transcendental life outside itself, is “endowing it with a mode of appearing incompatible with its essence”. Descartes’ unheard-of intuition of attaining life, which, according to Michel Henry, Husserl misrepresents, because “*cogitatio* is not attained in the evidence of a *clara et distincta perceptio*, but in the absence of it, at the end of the doubt that has disqualified all evidence. *Cogitatio* reveals itself. Therein lies its essence: in the fact of revealing itself in the absence of the world and of all that is seen in it. *Cogitatio* is a self-revelation”.<sup>10</sup> For Henry the best Cartesian expression that connects with this interpretation of life is “*sentimus nos videre*”.<sup>11</sup>

Therefore, the task of the phenomenology proposed by Michel Henry is to grasp life from its pathetic flesh. This is the ultimate meaning of the inversion: the substitution of the bodies that appear in the world, by life, in whose transcendental affectivity all flesh is possible. The fundamental question of philosophy for Michel Henry is not the forgetting of being, as Heidegger believes, but rather the forgetting of life. The error consists in believing that being can be thought, but Henry flatly denies that this can be done.<sup>12</sup> In this sense, technique, according to Henry, is inscribed in the history of being. Paraphrasing Marx, he argues that “*it is not the consciousness of men that determines their life*, not because this consciousness is imperfect or provisional, but because the medium in which it moves, the being extended forward, which it wants to take in its reunifying perception and offer in the light of intelligibility, does not contain the essence of life, but rather

excludes it”.<sup>13</sup>

For Henry, life is praxis and the changes that human beings produce in the world obey this essential unfolding. There is no exteriority, no end other than the self. But what happens when changes are produced without life, and is this possible? This is the accusation that Michel Henry directs at techno-science, which presents itself as a type of knowledge that reveals the impossibility of life being revealed.

Henry’s analyses closely follow Marx’s observations. Two centuries after Descartes, the German philosopher denounced the increasing objectification of the production process. Henry’s interpretation is that science through technology has objectified nature, has become independent of subjectivity. Production has been transformed into an economic paradigm, things are no longer valuable because they are necessary and useful for life, because now it is a question of another kind of value, of money as exchange value. Production is linked to consumption, whether it is necessary or not. The capitalist system generates an increase in desires that cannot be fulfilled and that has repercussions in the dissatisfaction and emptiness of the living who seek to go outside themselves. “The expansion of this unrestrained capitalism, writes Henry, goes hand in hand with its internal destruction as a result of the hyperdevelopment of modern technology”.<sup>14</sup> Henry emphasizes that is this new reality manifests itself as indifferent to life.

Henry’s philosophy constitutes a plea against modern philosophy, which has not only failed to preserve the essence or true being of man, but has also conferred an absolute value on sci-

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

<sup>11</sup> Expression quoted by Henry from the letter addressed to Plempius on October 3, 1637, in: Michel Henry, “Descartes et la question de la technique”, in *Le Discours et sa méthode*, ed. Nicolas Grimaldi & Jean-Luc Marion. (Paris: PUF, 1987), 292.

<sup>12</sup> Michel Henry, *Phénoménologie de la vie*, vol. I: *De la phénoménologie* (Paris: PUF, 2003), 50.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 50-51.

<sup>14</sup> Michel Henry, *C’est moi la Vérité. Pour une philosophie du christianisme* (Paris: Seuil, 1996), 341.

ence in order to know him. Henry's challenge consists of reversing the process of objectivity so that the absolute subjectivity that constitutes the essence of what we are can be revealed and which Michel Henry calls Ipseity, life as a radical reality that knows no otherness or objectivity.

### **Culture of life vs. the technique of barbarism**

Technique produces visible consequences in the world, and culture is one of its clearest manifestations. However, culture in the modern world is the culture of techno-science. Michel Henry calls for a culture of life, that is, a culture that is capable of reconstructing what modern science has taken care of eliminating. But how does Henry understand culture? First of all, he conceives culture as the development of life. The philosopher refers to all the activities necessary for human existence. Social organisation, as well as the spheres of art, morality and religion would be part of Henry's understanding of culture.

For the philosopher, the culture of life would be that which embraces the invisible, which is why, according to Henry, culture has nothing to do with science, it flees from it, because it is its enemy. Modern science, scientific materialism, has excluded subjectivity, the simple and decisive fact, for example, of admitting beliefs. Life, which rests in the sensible world, which feels itself and whose discovery consists above all in self-revelation, cannot be objectified by science.

Modern technology has expelled from society all the interlocutors of absolute life. Henry points out that the "clerics", the "intellectu-

als", we also add the "philosophers", have been replaced by the "new masters who are the blind servants of the universe of technology and the media, journalists and politicians".<sup>15</sup> The agenda of the techno-scientific world has driven the critics of this system, which Henry does not hesitate to describe as barbaric, underground. This is not a crisis of culture, but rather its own destruction, and in Henry's work there is little optimism that this can be overcome.

Michel Henry called "ideologies of barbarism" all thoughts which, in order to refer to the real being of things, set themselves up as unique and objectively true. On the other hand, he calls "practices of barbarism" those modes of existence in which life is carried out in a rough and crude way, in short, practices far removed from the bonds of social affectivity, ethics, religion and art.

For Henry, one of the most paradigmatic examples of modern technology is television.<sup>16</sup> The philosopher affirms that it is the "truth of technology". Its development is a clear example of how a human creation from a material state of affairs has grown autonomously and blindly to the point of becoming independent of its own will. In its manufacture, there was no prior ethical decision. We can simply say that it could be done, and it was done. This is the rule of technology. Henry quotes Gilbert Hottois to refer to technique as a "black transcendence"<sup>17</sup>, that is, a transcendence that he does not hesitate to describe as absolute and that reveals itself without face and without reason.

<sup>15</sup> Henry, *La Barbarie*, 239.

<sup>16</sup> The rise and development of social media since Henry's death has demonstrated a more personal use of technology. However, this has not meant an increase in culture in the philosopher's sense. These could also be described as "practices of barbarism". The use of social media corroborates his ideas by hiding the authentic manifestation of Life (self-affectation) in screens and material devices.

<sup>17</sup> Henry quotes Gilles Hottois, *Le signe et la technique* (Paris: Aubier, 1984), 152.

## Conclusion

Modern technology ends up dehumanising people, enslaving them and determining their way of life. Television, as an example par excellence, designates a mode of existence that turns life into something empty. Its function is to fill the lives of viewers with absurd images, turning them into unsatisfied voyeurs. Real life has been suppressed by this technological object. But more examples could be given to explain this phenomenon, such as today's mobile devices, smart watches, and so on. What technology has achieved is that life has been turned outwards. And the result of this development is a culture of death, a world in which human beings are lost, disoriented. Michel Henry speaks of the boredom that generates the "idle energy" that culminates in anguish. Our societies living in the computer age, according to Henry, the "age of the cretins", is the age of anguish.

But what is to be done? As I said above, Henry did not hold out much hope that this could change. In this sense, the role of philosophy is essential to counteract the effects of technology before the earth is completely devastated by it. "Philosophy has always recognised as its own the task of defending the true man, the transcendental man".<sup>18</sup> For Henry, the salvation of humanity is in the hands of a god, but not just any god, nor of technology, but of a "god who is alive".<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Henry, *C'est moi la Vérité*, 333.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 345.



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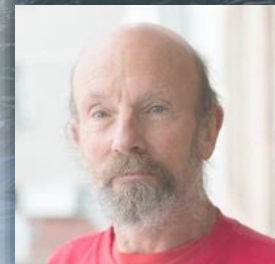
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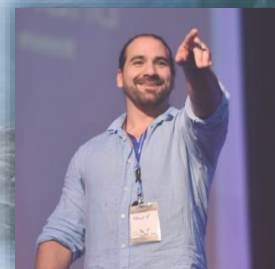
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