

## Community from the Perspective of Life

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My question is whether a phenomenology of community is possible. Phenomenology starts from experience, in the Husserlian sense of *Erlebnis*. Now, can a community be experienced, and not empirically but rather phenomenologically understood? What is a community from the viewpoint of experience? In this text, I will respond to, and elaborate on, this question. More specifically, I will attempt to understand community from the perspective of life by drawing on the work of Michel Henry.

Henry takes up the question of a phenomenology of community on several occasions in his work. It plays a role in his writings on Marx, but also in his later “Christian” works. The most evident text in which Henry elaborates on the question is the chapter “Pathos-with,” in *Material Phenomenology*.<sup>1</sup> In the second part of his text, Henry confronts Max Scheler (1874 -1928). In the middle section of the following contribution, I will elaborate on both the explicit and the implicit relation between the phenomenologies of Henry and Scheler, in order to address, and to answer, this question of community. Yet, it is not my intention to give an encyclopedic overview of what Henry says about community, but to pose the question of community in a radical, phenomenological way.<sup>2</sup>

First, I will elaborate on the question itself. Second, I will read Henry along with Scheler in order to formulate some outcomes in terms of Marx and Christianity; two perspectives unexpectedly close in Henry’s thought, especially when it comes to the question of community. Finally, I will argue for what I shall call, not without its Chalcedonian connotation, “The Twofold Nature of Community.”

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<sup>1</sup> Michel Henry, “Pathos-With,” in *Material Phenomenology* (New York: Fordham, 2008), 101-34. If available, I cite from English translations of Henry’s works.

<sup>2</sup> See Olivier Ducharme, *Michel Henry et le problème de la communauté. Pour une communauté d’habitus* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2013); Raphaël Gély, *Rôles, action sociale et vie subjective. Recherches à partir de la phénoménologie de Michel Henry* (Bruxelles: PIE Peter Lang, 2007). According to Gély, social life is elaborated in a radical phenomenological way according to the roles of individuals.

## Two Meanings of Community

Before I come to Michel Henry, let me sketch a rough dichotomy, in order to make clear what I have in mind by speaking about the experience of community. The concept “community” is usually understood in at least two senses: first, the term possesses a wide range of socio-political meanings. Community, then, is understood as a *sharing* of, for instance, a belief or ideal, e.g., democracy or a religious tradition. The Greek *polis* is such a community. One might also think of people who share the same enthusiasm for a musician or a sports team, and thus form a community. Communities exist because of tradition or identity, shared history or shared convictions. “Community,” here, is primarily understood as a social phenomenon. In this acceptance, community is characterized by a *shared* feeling or *shared* preference of which the community is the cement. It is this sharing that is the experience of it, a sharing that is recognizable also by members outside of the community. In most cases, it takes care and organization to keep communities “alive.” This is the first cluster of possible meanings of “community.”

There is a second way in which “community” is used; one that refers to any kind of *union* of different parts. Marriage or love, even in the erotic sense of the term, is often understood as the experience of a union between two individuals. Or take the meaning of “community” in Christian theology: in that case, community refers to a union between man and God, realized in the “holy communion.” In the example of love, community is understood as a union of two persons; in the Christian example, of man and God. In the Cantic of Canticles, or in bridal mysticism such as in the poetry of John of the Cross, these two come together—though still within the connotation of community—in *union*. Still, the example of human eroticism makes clear that the second way of talking about “community” is not reserved to religion or mysticism.

One might object that these are two completely different ways of using the word “community.” While this might be true on empirical grounds, I take this difference between the two clusters of possible meanings as a point of entrance into two different phenomenologies. The first concerns a classical, intentional phenomenology; the second I will try to elucidate from a radical, Henrian point of view.

## A Phenomenology of Community as Seen “From my Window”

Let me explain this further. From a general phenomenological viewpoint there is an important difference between the first cluster of meanings of community and the second. The first refers to an *objective* phenomenon. It is a phenomenon that can be found in the world, or simply said, it concerns a “visible community.”<sup>3</sup> The individual as a person can plug into the network of such a community, or resist doing so. Further, such a community can be represented by a person (as, e.g., a king), a symbol, or a flag. It can be photographed or painted. All these representations are visible, because of the visibility of the community itself. In

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<sup>3</sup> See Max Weber, *Economy and Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 1204.

other words, it is an empirical phenomenon, as is a crowd, mass, audience or church community taken as an organization. It is, so to say, an *object* for sociology, cultural studies, or political science. It can be observed from an *external* viewpoint and, therefore, can appear as an object of science. It is a community “out there.” Even many so-called “phenomenological” analyses of communities are from this kind.<sup>4</sup> Take Jean-Paul Sartre’s famous analysis of the group.<sup>5</sup> In his *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, Sartre is trying to get a grasp on the experience of the mechanisms of groups. His viewpoint on groups, and other kinds of communities, is taken “from my window.” He describes how a road-mender and a gardener are working outside. He observes them, as he says, *from his window*.<sup>6</sup> The unity of the two as workers exists only as a unity from the perspective of the third person, the observer, looking from above. For an individual, the group will always be entered from the perspective of a third (*le tiers*).

### **The Quest for an Internal Phenomenology of Community**

From a phenomenological viewpoint, there would seem to be a difference between a community as observed “from my window,” and a community observed “from within.” It is nonsensical to speak about cars in a garage, or trees in the forest, as a community. Usually, community is a term reserved for human beings. One might doubt whether even animals in a group might be called a community. They typically are not, but bear names that are particular to species, like a “flock,” a “herd,” or a “swarm.” The point I would make is that a community as understood in the second meaning of the word must be a community that is experienced as such *from within*. One might argue that animal communities are exactly like that, but if we make such a claim, we immediately make the community an object as seen from the outside. It is a biological, scientific claim. An animal community is an empirical phenomenon found in the world, not in my experience as being a part of the community. It is a visible “community.”

My choice for the metaphor “from my window” above was not arbitrary. After all, it implies a way of looking, a viewpoint in the world. It is a phrase used by Sartre but also by Kandinsky, whose importance readers of Henry will recognize immediately. In his book on the Russian painter and theorist of art, Henry starts with a quote from the master: “Every phenomenon can be experienced in two ways. These two ways are not random, but are bound up with the phenomena—they are derived from the nature of the phenomena, from two characteristics of the same: External/Internal.”<sup>7</sup> I would cite Kandinsky’s text further:

The street may be observed through the window pane, causing its noises to become diminished, its movements ghostly, and the street itself, seen

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<sup>4</sup> The most famous example is the work of Alfred Schütz (1899-1959).

<sup>5</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, vol. I (London: Verso 2004).

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 100. Note that Sartre uses this metaphor often, on *ibid.*, 100, 104, 221, 264, 324 and 370.

<sup>7</sup> Henry, *Seeing the Invisible. On Kandinsky* (London/New York: Continuum, 2009), 5.

through the transparent but hard and firm pane, to appear as a separate organism, pulsating “out there.” Or one can open the door: one can emerge from one’s isolation, immerse oneself in this organism, actively involve oneself in it and experience its pulsating life with all one’s senses. Sound, with its constantly changing frequencies and rhythms, weaves itself around the individual, spiraling to a crescendo and suddenly falling away as if lamed.<sup>8</sup>

The question is: what does “community” mean for an “internal” phenomenology, instead of a community “out there—as seen from my window”? Or is such a question nonsensical, because only individuals can “have” a “within”?

To answer this question, we must first discover what a subject is from a phenomenological viewpoint. Can a community be thought of as a subject? In *City of God*, Augustine writes: “The source of a community’s felicity is no different from that of one man, since a community is simply a united multitude of individuals.”<sup>9</sup> How to understand such a multitude as, nevertheless, one? The phenomenological content of experience seems to be “personal,” or “individual.” This would make the suffering of a people a deceptive metaphor, derivative of real experienced pain.<sup>10</sup> Even in phenomenological debates, lived experience is often reserved to “inwardness.” If I follow this line, inwardness, then, is understood as personal experience. Memory and imagination are experienced “within” the self, in contrast to things we communicate and share with others, or that can be recognized from the outside. This means that community is reserved to an outer sphere. The subject is invisible (the other is not able to see my thoughts), whereas community is visible. Memory becomes collective memory and thereby changes its form. Phenomenology should be reserved to the first order; sociology to the second.<sup>11</sup> But does this dichotomy of the “inner self” and “the outer community” makes sense? One might doubt this. What I am searching for is not the identification of, on the one hand, “interiority” and individuality, and on the other hand, “exteriority” and community. What I’m searching for is *the interiority of community*.

### Self–Affection

Clearly, more will be required in order that a phenomenology of community maintain that such a community is something that can be experienced. After all, observing others from my window is an experience as well. The question, then, must be posed whether community can be understood as interior, as a phenomenological *subject*, instead of an object “out there,” in a way that is yet irreducible to a *psychological* individual. This is exactly the way that Kandinsky described it. Let me recall that a subject is not a psychological person *per se*, already determined

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<sup>8</sup> Wassily Kandinsky, *Complete Writings on Art* (Boston: Da Capo Press, 1982), 532.

<sup>9</sup> St. Augustine, *City of God* (London: Penguin Books, 1984), 25.

<sup>10</sup> See Avishai Margalit, *The Ethics of Memory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 2004), 49.

<sup>11</sup> See Paul Ricœur, *Memory, History, Forgetting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 21 ff.

as a single human being, capable to relating herself to others. What I intend to describe is the phenomenological ability to be affected by others. Affection here is not to be understood psychologically, as if it were a certain trait of human beings. We have to understand affection phenomenologically. Phenomenology puts all kinds of knowledge—such as the assumption according to which we are already thinking about psychological human beings, possessors of “brains” with certain capacities or characteristics—in brackets. This is the famous phenomenological reduction. What remains is the experience of affection. Now, the classic Husserlian phenomenological position describes affection in terms of its object. After all—and this is the kernel of Husserlian phenomenology—affection must be affected *by something*. Affection, therefore, is intentional. The noema of the affection is something other than the noesis. The noema indicates the thing intended by the affection, whereas the noesis indicates intentionality itself. To Henry, this phenomenology is erroneous for two reasons. First, it fails to understand that affection is passive. It wants nothing and nothing is intended. It occurs. It is endured, like pain. It is, so to say, non-intentional. The second fault of the Husserlian position is that it takes apart the noema and the noesis of affection. To Husserl, these are two different elements. To Henry, affection is first and foremost affected *by itself*. Affection is, so to say, one and the same.

This sounds quite abstract. An example taken from life might clarify. If, a friend of mine is in grief for the recent loss of his wife, I, as a friend, feel for him. The fact that it is not my wife, but rather his, who has passed away, does not make my grief a representation of his grief. On the contrary, I feel “for him.” This is by no means a *shared* feeling. In order to share something, we need to communicate. Sharing is an activity of both of us that requires an investment by both of us. But here, we take part in the very same grief that remains invisible, incommunicable. I feel that he misses her desperately. I am, as language says, “touched by his grief.” That is what friendship is. I sympathize with him, which means that we feel the same. Still, my grief is my grief. It is real and not a representation of his grief. It is affected by grief. But it is not *caused* by the grief of my friend. If that would be the case, my grief would be something other than his grief. It would, for instance, be “grief” as a result of the fact that, e.g., my planned trip with my friend has to be postponed. This is not about feeling the same.

What I have in mind is a grief that is really *endured* as my grief. So, it is grief that affects grief. Once on this level, there’s no difference whether it is my, or his, grief. Grief affects itself; the affection is affected by itself. Henry names this self-affection *Life*. Life is self-affection. Therefore, in daily language we are completely right in saying, about the sad situation above, that after all “this is life.” Neither the house of my friend and his wife, nor their car, nor their garden are affected by her passing-away. There was no intentionality involved. It happened to us. It was life that affected us; or better: it was life affected by itself.

For Henry, this is what it is to be alive. Life *is* this self-affection. Phenomenologically speaking, the term *pathos*, used so often by Henry, describes this

correctly.<sup>12</sup> Pathos is non-intentional; it is something to endure. Pathos is life itself. Pathos cannot be understood in transcendental terms, as something-outside-itself. It is, as Henry says, immanent, without any difference or distance. As soon as we situate ourselves on the psychological level of life (and I add to that the suspicion that we usually are), the problem of understanding this is not its complexity, but its simplicity. If we, in daily life, try to understand what life is, we start by thinking in scientific terms. If I don't feel well, I think that I'm going to be ill. I say: "I think I've caught a virus." Although accepted as everyday language, it is impossible to experience a virus: a virus is a scientific, medical concept. What we do feel is fatigue, pain, heat on my forehead, etc... Even if there is something as a real ontology of a real existing virus, we don't feel the virus, whereas the uncomfortable heat on my forehead is the description of an experience. In phenomenology, there is a difference between words and feelings, however difficult it might be to maintain this difference as soon as we start to talk or write. As Husserl noticed, the natural and scientific attitude are both laden with pre-suppositions.<sup>13</sup> It is right to say that Henry is a classic phenomenologist, *in the sense* that he brackets the ways we enter the world in everyday terms or scientific concepts. Henry is a thinker of the phenomenological reduction indeed, Husserl's reduction is not radical enough, and by consequence fails as a reduction. To be sure, this changes phenomenology entirely, and this is why Henry's phenomenology is a radical phenomenology. What the reduction reveals is not consciousness or intentionality, as Husserl states, but life itself. At the end, we do not find ourselves as intentional beings, or scientific facts, but as living beings. Life, as Henry repeats incessantly, is experience that experiences itself. It no longer makes sense to speak of "living beings," as it is not the beings that are alive, but life itself. Life is not a characteristic of certain beings, as would be the case in a biological discourse.<sup>14</sup>

The example of grief makes clear that, in such a serious situation as the loss of a beloved, a "phenomenological reduction" occurs: all other values (the joy of a planned trip) are postponed. So, the "phenomenological reduction" doesn't have to be a rational, intended activity of the mind. Sometimes it overtakes me. In grief, even knowledge is of no use. After all, it doesn't make any sense to *know* scientifically or factually that, sooner or later, "one dies." Nothing would be more coarse to reply to my friend, when learning about his sad news, that "you knew that she would die sooner or later anyway," that "human beings are finite after all."

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<sup>12</sup> "Pathos" is a key term in Henry's *I Am the Truth. Toward a Philosophy of Christianity*, trans. Susan Emanuel (California: Stanford University Press, 2003). See Hanne De Jaegher, "How We Affect Each Other: Michel Henry's 'Pathos-With' and the Enactive Approach to Intersubjectivity," *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 22 (2015) 1-2: 112-32, esp. at 21.

<sup>13</sup> Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy. First Book: General Introduction to a Pure Phenomenology*, trans. F. Kersten (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publisher, 1983), 51-146.

<sup>14</sup> Both Scheler, of whom I will speak later, and Henry reject any kind of "metaphysical biology," as was popular among Scheler's contemporaries like Bergson. Life is not a metaphysical condition for the living, nor is it a characteristic of them, but fully experienced.

To be sure, this is coarse not because it is untrue,<sup>15</sup> but life is not about such “factual, scientific knowledge.” It won’t help us from a hermeneutical viewpoint to “know” what life is, even if we could. The reason for that is that life is not an object, but is rather self-affection. Therefore, the passing away of your beloved is experienced as unique; as if for the first time in history that someone dies. The death of all others is only factual; it is not experienced. There is an unbridgeable difference between the scientific fact of life, and the experience of it.

Pathos or self-affection is neither the being of life, nor a characteristic of highly developed organisms capable of self-reflection. It is the manifestation or revelation of life to itself. Pathos is not a pole in a dialectical relation. It does not obtain as a result of an objectivity. It is affection of life. Life is not the cause of, for instance, movement or intentionality; it is self-revelation. Note that Henry leaves behind the quasi-dialectical function of the subject and the object, and the Husserlian noesis- noema. The subject is understood as fully *non-intentional*, without any distance or externalization. It is intentionality itself that is put in the brackets of the phenomenological reduction. It is pathos, like the grief one feels with a friend.

Pathos makes something else clear as well: pathos is affection and affection is passive. We may think again of grief; grief is something that happens to one, without any intention. Now, an interior community is not a community that is actively created, organized efficiently to reach a goal. I made a distinction above between sharing a feeling and feeling the same. Sharing is always active. It requires effort, whereas pathos happens to one. And as the case of grief shows, it is something that might happen to *us*. Here we are at the beginnings of a phenomenology of community.

### **Henry with Scheler**

We now are ready to return to our initial question regarding the phenomenological interiority of community. What we’ve just described with the example of the grief suffered with a friend, is what Henry calls a “pathos-with,” not a sharing. What has also been put in the brackets of the phenomenological reduction, is the supposition that the subject is already a human being, a brain or an animal. Now where does this lead? What might it mean to understand community as a subject, as pathos? Since we do not begin from empirical, psychological persons, but from the self-affection of life, there is no longer any possibility of understanding community as a gathering of persons. This then excludes any understanding of community as a mere sharing of individualities. Individuality is not to be understood phenomenologically as a psychological identity attributed to a person, but rather as experience. This means that we must leave aside any search for a visible community, based on such a sharing; as we are speaking of a union, there can be no question of a sharing. If community is undivided, it is not shared. We leave behind the dichotomy of the

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<sup>15</sup> Unlike Seneca in his famous *Consolations*, as Seneca tries to convince the mourners to make use of their knowledge.

individual versus community. Taken radically phenomenologically, we must understand community as the undivided affection of life.

In order to elucidate my point, I will return to the situation of the grief of my friend. The grief of my friend, once sympathized with, forms a community according to the second cluster of meanings of the word, as sketched in the introduction. Grief, as I said, is phenomenologically speaking self-affection. Only then can we understand why and how we feel *the same*. This does not imply the formal obligatory formulation “with deepest sympathy” on a postcard. The sympathy I have in mind is not a shared one, but an invisible, experienced one. The word sympathy seems to lead us to the right direction. In this respect, Max Scheler, the early phenomenologist well-known for his phenomenological work on sympathy, is close to Henry.<sup>16</sup>

For Scheler, the generic term sympathy includes many different phenomena. He distinguishes *Einsgefühl* (empathy) from *Nachfühlung* (vicarious feeling). The first is the imagination of, for instance, the child who empathizes with the role she plays, while the second refers to the emotional ability to feel the sorrow of the actor on stage during the play. It is, so to say, a reproduction of a feeling of the other. *Mitgefühl*, the narrow meaning of sympathy, is the feeling we can have toward somebody close to us. *Mitgefühl* is intentional. All these phenomena are to be understood as social, relational feelings. But the one I have in mind is called by Scheler *Mit-einanderfühlen* that usually is translated as “community of feeling.” An alternative, more literal translation might be “feeling with each other.” Scheler sketches an example not unlike that of my friend and I, as above: “Two parents stand beside the dead body of a beloved child. They feel in common the “same” sorrow, the “same” anguish. It is not that *A* feels this sorrow and *B* feels it also, and moreover that they both know they are feeling it. No, it is a *feeling-in-common*.”<sup>17</sup> What is of importance in this quotation is that the *feeling-in-common* is not a social form of emotion: both parents recognize each other’s feelings. Nor is there any intentionality from one to the other. Their sorrow and grief are not mediated by a message, deliberation or language. They both feel the very same sorrow. And yet, it wouldn’t make any sense to say that consequently it is a “general” or abstract feeling. On the contrary, it is felt both fully individual and fully in common. I’ll come back later to what I will call the “twofold nature” of this *Mit-einanderfühlen*.

Scheler’s project is motivated by the question whether contact with the other in an authentic and not symbolized (mediated by language) manner is possible. To Scheler, this is one of the most important criteria for phenomenology: “Phenomenological experience, understood in this sense, can be distinguished from all other experience, such as that of the natural world view or that of science, by two criteria. Phenomenological experience alone yields facts “themselves” and, hence, immediately, i.e., not in a way mediated by symbols, signs, or instructions

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<sup>16</sup> See Henry, *The Essence of Manifestation*, § 64; see also Carole Talon-Hugon, “Affectivité et révélation: Michel Henry lecteur de Scheler,” in *Michel Henry. Les dossiers H*, ed. Jean-Marie Brohm and Jean Leclercq (Lausanne: L’Âge d’Homme, 2009), 304-12.

<sup>17</sup> Scheler, *The Nature of Sympathy* (London/Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979), 12-13.



of any kind.”<sup>18</sup> Although it would be premature and unjust to consider Scheler as a phenomenologist of life or self-affection, Scheler was trying to describe a feeling that transcends any feelings felt individually. This is the reason why Scheler is of crucial importance in our quest for a phenomenology of community. It is noteworthy that Scheler considered himself as a sociologist, yet not in the contemporary use of the term. Modern sociology has abandoned every kind of phenomenological interiority of communities. It is a science of communities as seen “from my window,” commenting upon the community “out there”—from a safe distance; behind glass. It has become an empirical “human science.” It is focused on external phenomena, like behavior. It searches for things that can be measured. Any reading of Scheler as a mere precursor of social science of human emotion or moralistic defense of sympathy misses completely the kernel of the philosophical claim of his groundbreaking work *The Nature of Sympathy*. The book elaborates on a phenomenology that is able to describe an immediate community of feelings. Of course, sympathy, shame and love are also to be understood as “social feelings.” However, Scheler is searching for a sympathy that only occurs on a transcendental level. In the end, his analysis is of metaphysical importance, since it opens a sphere that cannot be reduced to social behavior. It is not people, as reduced to empirical data, that are of interest to Scheler, but the phenomenological interior meaning of sympathy.

In his *Formalism in Ethics* and *The Nature of Sympathy*, the German philosopher tries to understand human community—as I called it above—“from within” or “interiorly.” Let me cite *Formalism in Ethics*: “With regard to the possible factualness of community, it appears in *re-experiencing and coexperiencing, refeeling and cofeeling*, as the basic acts of inner perception of the other. At least the very sense of community and its possible existence is not an assumption that requires empirical establishment.”<sup>19</sup> I think that Scheler’s *feeling-in-common* is a good candidate for the interior community we are searching for. Technically speaking, the *feeling-in-common* is without intentionality. It gives an answer to the question how the other enters my experience, a question posed by Henry as such.<sup>20</sup> In Husserlian phenomenology, the other does not enter my experience, other than being a noema of intentionality. As Henry writes: “Let us place ourselves outside this presupposition and ask ourselves what experience of the other is such as it is really experienced by each one of us *within ourselves*.”<sup>21</sup> He continues:

It is a desire seeking out some sort of response or nonresponse, an emotion before the reciprocity of this desire, a feeling of presence or absence, solitude, love, hate, resentment, boredom, forgiveness, exaltation, sorrow,

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<sup>18</sup> Scheler, *Formalism in Ethics and Non-formal Ethics of Values. A New Attempt Toward the Foundation of an Ethical Personalism* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 50.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 519.

<sup>20</sup> Henry, *Material Phenomenology*, 101.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 102 (Emphasis added).

joy, or wonder. Those are the concrete modalities of our life as a life with the other, as a pathos-with, and as a sympathy underlying all its forms.<sup>22</sup>

Our life is a life with the other, and this “with” is understood as a *pathos*. Pathos here is nothing more or less than the phenomenological mode of experience. (Each of the verbs in the quotation above is, not by chance, key terms to Scheler). It is the mode of what I described by affection. Henry reminds us of Kierkegaard’s phrase “the strange acoustics of the spiritual world,” which refers to an invisible, passive layer on which all human beings are apt to “hear” each other.<sup>23</sup> Scheler’s *Mit-einanderfühlen* is such a strange acoustics, without intentionality and fully interior, even without a possible representation. It is what Henry calls *Life*. *Mit-einanderfühlen* isn’t just a human behavior. It brings us to the meaning of life. It is about “the reality that is held in common.”<sup>24</sup>

Both Scheler and Henry describe an *acosmic* phenomenology. This means that phenomenological givenness cannot be understood as a matter of worldly appearance. Scheler often writes of spiritual reality. On Scheler’s account, emotion cannot be understood as a mere reception of stimuli. He writes that “the emotive elements of spirit, such as feeling, preferring, loving, hating, and willing, also possess original a priori contents which are not borrowed from “thinking,” and which ethics must show to be independent of logic.”<sup>25</sup> In Henry’s terms, emotions do not follow nor express the inner life, and cannot be revealed but by themselves. The knowledge of love is love itself, the revelation of pain is pain itself. Of course there are expressions of love or pain, but in radical phenomenology these are not their essences.

Both Henry and Scheler start from an invisible phenomenological sphere of affection. This is the phenomenological reason why the forest is not a community of trees. As seen from my window, I can artificially try to defend that the wood is a community of trees. But taken from within—interiorly—such a claim remains nonsensical. The point is not that interior self-affection is reserved to human beings and not for trees, but that life is affected by itself. The examples I gave above might suggest that *Mit-einanderfühlen* (feeling-in-common) as thus described is reserved for feelings of sorrow and grief. Although, for the reasons mentioned above, grief is a pure emotion—not mediated by “knowledge”—for Scheler it has the same phenomenological structure as love, and of hate. Both love and hate, says Scheler, are not *caused* by something, they are not effects or emotions that result from certain stimuli; they are fundamental dispositions in which something or somebody is approached. They are not judgments but rather are prior to any judgment.<sup>26</sup> It is not our appreciation of things that governs love or hate; rather, the appreciation of values is governed by love and hate.<sup>27</sup> What is more,

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 103-4.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>25</sup> Scheler, *Formalism in Ethics*, 63

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 148.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 149.

love (and hate) are, as Scheler says, movements towards potential values still “higher” than those already given and presented.<sup>28</sup>

For in love there is no attempting to fix an objective, no deliberate shaping of purpose, aimed at the higher value and its realization; love itself, *in the course of its own movement*, is what brings about the continuous *emergence* of ever-higher value in the object—just as if it were streaming out from the object of its own accord, without any sort of exertion (even of wishing) on the part of the lover.<sup>29</sup>

To Scheler, the Christian conception of love implies a great turning-point with respect to ancient conceptions.<sup>30</sup> In Christianity, love is understood and experienced as God himself, not as a mere human intentionality. “The love of God in its highest form is not to have love “for” God the All-merciful—for a mere concept, in effect—it is to participate in His love for the world (*amare mundum in Deo*), and for Himself (*amare Deum in Deo*).”<sup>31</sup> Love is the sphere in which human beings really *live* together, whereas hate destroys on a fundamental level every kind of community.<sup>32</sup> It would take more pages to elaborate on Scheler’s phenomenology of love, but for now, it is sufficient that we’ve identified a phenomenological sphere that is not a result of social community, but that constitutes the essence of every possible community.<sup>33</sup>

I will return now to our quest for an interiority of community. I will do this by introducing a key-author for Michel Henry, one who appears not only in Henry’s monumental monograph dedicated to him, but also in Henry’s so-called “Christian” works; Karl Marx.

## Marx

Like Augustine in the quotation above, Henry holds that community is “nothing but a group of living individuals.”<sup>34</sup> This certainly does *not* mean that the individual and community are two separate entities. Henry unambiguously states: “the attempt to oppose the community and the individual—to establish a hierarchical relation between them—is pure nonsense.”<sup>35</sup> Phenomenologically speaking, it is nonsensical to speak about an individual *against* a community, as it

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 154.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 164.

<sup>32</sup> The sphere of love is described elsewhere by Scheler as the *Ordo Amoris*. The *ordo* is both noetic and noematic, as it is both individual and collective. The *Ordo Amoris* refers to the passive, affective and non-rational order of being human. It is Scheler’s understanding of the famous ‘logic of the heart’ as described by Pascal. It is, in other words, entirely phenomenological. See Scheler, *Selected Philosophical Essays* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 89-134.

<sup>33</sup> Henry, *Material Phenomenology*, 120.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

is counter-intuitive that a community is against the individual. Such a way of thinking and acting implies nothing but the decay of human dignity as the individual would apparently be constituted as something other than the human community. It is a sign of decay to maintain that community implies the dissolution of the living individual. Unfortunately, history shows that this occurs again and again. Take the ill-famed case of communism. Was not this the reproach toward Marxism in the last century; namely, that the individual had to make way for community? And did the practical, political realization of this not result in one of the most horrible humanitarian disasters of the twentieth century, namely Stalinism and its concentration camps? Without going into detail, it is worthwhile to pause over Henry's contrarian reading of Marx, in order not to see him from the viewpoint of twentieth century's political Marxism.

Henry does not read Marx as a political ideologist but as a phenomenologist. One of the most unexpected outcomes of Henry's close reading of Marx—it was quite common in the last century to be a Marxist without ever reading Marx—is that Marx' entire philosophy is a philosophy of the individual.<sup>36</sup> Henry shows how living affection is understood by Marx as human affection and not as an abstract political ideal.<sup>37</sup> Economy is the sphere in which experienced labor, the toil of the experiencing human body, becomes an abstraction, represented in artificial values of prices. According to Henry's Marx, community is only possible on the basis of living labor—of life. Labor implies an embodied pathos par excellence. It is without doubt the individual that is understood as living self-affection, as described above. Henry fiercely criticizes the political reading of Marx, in which the proletariat is understood as the outcome of dialectical struggle. In the article "The Evolution of Class Struggle in Marx," he conscientiously unfolds how class is understood as enduring pathos.<sup>38</sup> Henry reproaches the traditional understanding of the work of Karl Marx as a theory of community above the individual. He refers to the challenging interpretation of the proletariat as Christ. There is a certain tradition that thinks of the proletariat as Christ. The young Marx saw union with Christ as a way for people to overcome adversity.<sup>39</sup> The early Marxist theoretician Karl Kautsky famously interpreted the first Christian community as a kind of prototype for the proletariat.<sup>40</sup> However, Henry's source is the work of Georges Cottier, later Cardinal.<sup>41</sup> Cottier argues that Marx' atheism is founded in his metaphysical struggle against abstract ideology, of which

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<sup>36</sup> Henry, *Marx*, 2 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1976).

<sup>37</sup> See Ruud Welten, "From Marx to Christianity, and back," *Bijdragen* 66 (2005) 4: 415-431. (Trans. of "De Marx au christianisme et retour: la philosophie de la réalité de Michel Henry," *Michel Henry. Les dossiers H*, 361-373)

<sup>38</sup> Henry, "L'évolution du concept de la lutte de classes dans la pensée de Marx," in *Phénoménologie de la vie*. t. III. *De l'art et du politique* (Paris: PUF, 2004), 105-22.

<sup>39</sup> See John 15: 1-14. See also Jan A.B. Jongeneel, *Jesus Christ in World History. His Presence and Representation in Cyclical and Linear Settings* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2009), 254.

<sup>40</sup> Karl Kautsky, *Foundations of Christianity. A Study in Christian Origins* (New York: IMG, 2007) [original german ed. 1908].

<sup>41</sup> Georges M.M. Cottier, *L'Athéisme du Jeune Marx. Ses origines hégéliennes* (Paris: Vrin, 1959), 176.

Christianity to him is the extreme case. However, through his readings of Hegel and Feuerbach, the young Marx takes over Christological arguments. So, there is an important difference between Marx' metaphysical atheism and later political atheism. The proletariat is not, empirically, Christ, but is instead—as in kenotic theology, in which the individual is emptied of all individual longing and consequently becomes receptive of God—of the same nature. Like Christ, the proletariat is a person that suffers, whose entire being is sacrificed, by giving blood and sweat in order to reach the true life. Henry:

On l'a dit à juste titre: le proletariat, c'est le Christ. C'est celui—car, comme le Christ, le proletariat est une personne—qui doit aller jusqu'au fond de la souffrance et du mal, jusqu'au sacrifice de son être, donner sa sueur et son sang et finalement sa vie même, pour parvenir, à travers cet anéantissement complet de soi, à travers cette négation de soi, qui est une négation de la vie, à la vie véritable qui laisse là toute finitude et toute particularité, qui est une vie totale et le salut lui-même.<sup>42</sup>

To say that the proletariat is a person is to say that the proletariat really suffers and that it has to carry out its suffering. Henry quotes Luke 9: 24: “For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake, he is the one who will save it.” The proletariat is not a community because the members are sharing the same ideology, but because it suffers, as one. The members “feel the same.”

Marx' harsh atheism is a criticism of the understanding of human reality in terms of an abstract reality. As long as God is thought as an abstract entity outside human reality, man is subject to abstraction—hence atheism. Labor is the practical, subjective, and individual reality of man. As Henry's later “Christian” phenomenology makes clear, this is exactly the reality of incarnation. God *is* life.<sup>43</sup> So, Marx demolishes a Christianity of abstraction, alienated from human reality. It is a mistake to take Marx (or Christianity) as a political, abstract ideology. In *Marx II*, economy is thought to be the sphere without any living reality, governing over mankind, as a God. Both Marx' philosophy and Christianity are born in life itself. It is clear that Marx refers to a god of idolatry, and in this respect he does the same as Christianity. The real God is a God that is Life itself.

From that viewpoint, Henry defends humanity against alienating ideologies: “human essence is not an abstraction, it is realized and its realization is society.”<sup>44</sup> Henry understands society as the realization of human essence. And yet, humanity can hardly bear its phenomenological essence. In modernity, society has to be a product of council and deliberation, that is; of abstraction.<sup>45</sup> Marx, as Henry

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<sup>42</sup> Henry, *Marx*, vol. I, 143: “As has been rightly said: the proletariat is Christ. The proletariat is the one—for, just like Christ, the proletariat is a person—who must go to the very limit...”

<sup>43</sup> See Ruud Welten, “The Arch-Phenomenology of Christianity. On Michel Henry,” in *God in France. Eight contemporary French philosophers on God and Religion* (Louvain: Peeters, 2005).

<sup>44</sup> Henry, *Marx*, vol. I, 180.

<sup>45</sup> See Henry, *Barbarism*, trans. Scott Davidson (London/New York: Continuum, 2012).

reads him, rejects the concept of society as an autonomous reality.<sup>46</sup> But too often, it is society—and not only Stalinism—that walks over the life of the individual.

This becomes clear in one of Henry's most engaged texts, *From Communism to Capitalism: Theory of a Catastrophe*, published right after the fall of the Soviet Union.<sup>47</sup> Both communism and capitalism have proven to be disastrous for humanity, because each defeats both the individual and the community. Both are scenarios of death, not of life.<sup>48</sup> Community is not a sphere in which one struggles for selfish reasons. Humanity, therefore, is not to be reduced to a mere play of individual interests, as democracy seems to strive after. "Without this original, pre-political, and pre-social community, no common project could ever come to exist."<sup>49</sup> So, there is neither a struggle against community in defend of individuals, nor vice versa. But both communism and capitalism have proven to fail everywhere. They lost all contact with life. In that respect, Henry's phenomenology is a renewal of the original phenomenological project of Edmund Husserl, to restore contact with reality that, for the success of modern science, was lost. All societal entities that pretend to support life—bureaucracy, economy, and even democracy—behave, command and act as if they were autonomous. As Marx and Engels write in what is probably the core book of Marx for Henry, *The German Ideology*:

Life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life. In the first method of approach the starting-point is consciousness taken as the living individual; in the second method, which conforms to real life, it is the real living individuals themselves, and consciousness is considered solely as their consciousness.<sup>50</sup>

Henry's entire philosophy is a critique of abstractions—e.g., economy, politics, democracy or bureaucracy—that would take the place of life "and claims to speak and to act in its name."<sup>51</sup> Regarding economy, it is especially the second volume of *Marx* that elaborates on this criticism. Community is perpetually in danger of becoming such an abstraction. Sooner or later, somebody will take a stand, and claim to speak for all. He will claim to represent the community, and as we have seen, this has nothing in common with the life of a community. The representation of community leads directly to death instead of Life. The real *res publica* is nothing but Life. Life, after all, says Henry, is everybody's affair, which should lead to the

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<sup>46</sup> Henry, *Marx*, vol. I, 187.

<sup>47</sup> Henry, *Du communisme au capitalisme, Théorie d'une catastrophe* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 1990).

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, chapters VI, VII.

<sup>49</sup> Henry, *From Communism to Capitalism: Theory of a Catastrophe*, trans. Scott Davidson (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 103.

<sup>50</sup> Karl Marx and Friederich Engels, *Marx Engels Werke*, vol. III. *Die Deutsche Ideologie* (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1990), 27.

<sup>51</sup> Henry, *Material Phenomenology*, 121. See Frédéric Seyler, "Michel Henry et la critique du politique," *Studia Phaenomenologica* 9 (2009): 351, and also Michael Staudigl, "Die Hypostase des Politischen und das Prinzip des Faschismus: Zur Kritik des Politischen nach Michel Henry," *Studia Phaenomenologica* 9 (2009): 379-401.

care of politics for the general affair.<sup>52</sup> Often, of course, it is not. The general affair becomes an affair of power, or business, and everybody's life is in danger. This, warns Henry us on several occasions, is not only the case with Hitler or Stalin, but also in our so-called modern capitalist democracies.

In the article "Difficult Democracy," Henry goes even further, by showing how modernity's solution, democracy, is not able to solve this problem. Henry describes what he calls the elimination of Christianity in the West. Religion has become politics—not because of religious state politics, but because religion has become a human right. In modernity, humanity as such comes before humanity that is born in God. "To be religious" has become a human right; a personal choice, and I would add, a matter of personal taste and lifestyle. In the terms set out above, in modernity a religious community is often not understood as communion, but as a social bond, constituted by sharing and not by union. It is the individual that comes first and decides to believe or not. God has become dependent on the clemency of the individual, protected by his human rights. The safeguarding of this is called "democracy." It is a right to prefer to believe, or not, and by consequence in the kind of God that fits my lifestyle. This is what Henry describes as the destruction of Christianity in the West. But he reminds us to the most primitive appeal of religion, namely to experience that we are not our own foundation.<sup>53</sup> As he writes, "religion doesn't belong to man as a singular experience but as its essence. It shapes the interior bond of the living with life which holds his condition as living, in which he experiences (*éprouve*) everything he experiences."<sup>54</sup> Community as life is neither a choice, nor a possibility; it is the condition of humanity. Modernity has made this feeling-with, this community, impossible, since community must be formed democratically, by choice, by contract, by struggle.

### **The Twofold Nature of Community**

How to understand, then, Augustine's phrase "a community is simply a united multitude of individuals"? As has become clear, the real challenge is neither the term "community," nor the term "individuals," but the term "united multitude" in this phrase. Notwithstanding Augustine's Trinitarian theology, I would employ a Chalcedonian vocabulary; in a particular sense, mankind has a twofold nature, since it is individual and communal at the same time. By the twofold nature of community I do not mean the two clusters of meanings as sketched in the introduction. What I mean by the twofold nature of community is that the experience of community is, as Augustine says, "no different from that of one man."

On several occasions, Scheler made this point clearly by referring, as did Marx before him, to Robinson Crusoe. Both Marx and Scheler reject the possibility of defining humanity by focusing *first* on a single individual and *subsequently* on

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<sup>52</sup> Henry, "La vie et la république," in *Phénoménologie de la vie*, t. III, 148.

<sup>53</sup> Henry, "Difficile démocratie," in *Phénoménologie de la vie*, t. III, 168.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 168-9.

humanity. Even if Robinson is alone on his island, every possibility of understanding himself is understood through the viewpoint of human community: “an imaginary Robinson Crusoe endowed with cognitive-theoretical faculties would also coexperience his being a member of a social unit in his experiencing the lack of fulfillment of acts of act-types constituting a person in general.”<sup>55</sup> Note that Scheler does not use the language of rationality here, but of experience. What the reference to Robinson Crusoe moreover makes clear is *not* that the individual is dissolved in community. As a matter of fact, Robinson remains fully individual, whereas his essence cannot be formulated without a reference to community—hence “twofold nature.” Scheler writes:

Every false so-called individualism, with its erroneous and pernicious consequences, is excluded in my ethics by the theory of the original co-responsibility of every person for the moral salvation of the whole of all realms of persons (principle of solidarity). What is of moral value, in my view, is not the “isolated” person but the person originally and knowingly joined with God, directed toward the world in love, and feelingly united with the whole of the spiritual world and humanity.<sup>56</sup>

Perhaps, then, there is a connection to Augustine. According to radical, acosmic phenomenology, there are two ways of appearing.<sup>57</sup> These are two ways that connect Kandinsky’s paragraph on the window and the street with Augustine’s *City of God*, in which the declining Roman Empire is separated from God’s city. There is an invisible, interior appearing, which is the appearing of appearing itself. And there is an intentional way of appearing, in which something appears *as* something. This is worldly appearance. It is the city of Caesar, whereas the interior appearing is the city of God. And yet, there is no dualism or Gnosticism involved here.<sup>58</sup> For Henry, the problem is not that worldly phenomenology is in itself abject, while the interior phenomenology of life is preferable. If so, radical phenomenology would collapse, and evaporate into nothingness. The essence of the appearance of the world is self-affection. Without self-appearance, appearance wouldn’t appear. When I feel the heat of the sun on my skin, the appearance of the heat cannot be reduced to the sun as a cause. What is revealed is affection.

In *I Am the Truth*, Henry shows how God according to Christianity undoes “the truth of the world,” that is, the world as seen from the viewpoint of the world. Christianity is the language of humanity according to which the self-affection of life is understood as God. God, then, is not a creator of the world, but is rather nothing other than self-generation, called life. As Henry’s last book *Words of*

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<sup>55</sup> Scheler, *Formalism in Ethics*, 521. See *On the Nature of Sympathy*, 234-5 and *On the Eternal in Man*, 373. On this topic, see Henry, *From Communism to Capitalism*, 50.

<sup>56</sup> Scheler, *Formalism in Ethics*, (ed. 1921 preface) XXIV.

<sup>57</sup> See Henry, *Incarnation. Une philosophie de la chair* (Paris: Seuil, 2000), 137.

<sup>58</sup> Michel Henry is at first critical of Gnosticism. Henry, *Auto-donation. Entretiens et conférences* (Montpellier: Prétentaine, 2002), 109 and 124. However, one should consult the affirmative use of the term in “La vérité de la gnose,” in *Phénoménologie de la vie*, t. IV. *Sur l’éthique et la religion* (Paris: PUF, 2004), 131-44.



*Christ* makes clear, his theo-phenomenology is—if I may risk this usage—Chalcedonian and not Trinitarian. Henry writes: “According to Christian theology (...) Christ’s nature is twofold, at the same time both human and divine.”<sup>59</sup> The twofold nature of Christ in the Gospels is represented in two kinds of language. On the one hand, Christ speaks to his disciples and to other people; on the other, he is the Incarnation of the Word of God, as the first verse of the gospel of John says. This remains the case for the community that is marked by the same twofold nature. Jesus calls us to render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s. To be sure, the difference is radical. Caesar’s city is by no means the city of God; human rights are a secular achievement, and are conditions for religion in only a secular, worldly, political acceptance of the latter. Henry in *Words of Christ*:

It is hence indispensable to recognize the importance of such a rupture with the set of laws that ordinarily rule human conduct, as well as the violence with which it is affirmed by Christ. The emotional and practical modes according to which relations among members of the same family are established are so spontaneous that one calls the “natural,” which in this instance means in conformity with nature and, consequently, in the nature of a human couple and of the family which it generates.<sup>60</sup>

Note Jesus’ words when he is being called to meet his mother and brothers.<sup>61</sup> We know Jesus’ answer: “Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?” Pointing to his disciples, he continues: “Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.” From an inner-worldly viewpoint, this reaction is quite shocking. His answer remains unintelligible without his twofold nature. Henry does not fail to perceive:

These almost inconceivable statements [of Jesus] literally advocate the rupture of these natural and living relations: “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one’s foes will be members of one’s own household” (Matt. 10: 34-36).<sup>62</sup>

The Gospel implies a full reversal of Greek thought, as the first letter to the Corinthians famously states. The family is exactly *not* the germ of community.<sup>63</sup> To be a child of God is not to be a child of your mother. It is not the love of man

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<sup>59</sup> Henry, *Words of Christ*, trans. Christina M. Gschwandtner, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2012), 3.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>61</sup> Matthew 12: 47-49; Mark 3: 34-35. Henry, *I Am the Truth. Toward a Philosophy of Christianity* (California: Stanford University Press, 2003), 80.

<sup>62</sup> Henry, *Words of Christ*, 24.

<sup>63</sup> See Aristotle, *Politics*, book II, according to whom the community is based on the individual, the family and finally the state.

and woman as intentionality; it is the participation in the love of God in which it makes sense to talk about community phenomenologically. I am not advocating here for belief in God; I am indicating the structural similarity between the phenomenology of life and Christianity, as elaborated in Henry's work after 1990. We are not born out of our mother, but born into Life.<sup>64</sup>

Now, whence this religious direction? Would it not be enough to maintain that humanity can find its phenomenological union in itself? Is cosmopolitanism, for instance, not such a sphere, that unites us without making us all the same? After all, the Stoic philosophers described their belonging to the world exactly as a twofold nature: each human being lives in two cities, his own polis and the cosmopolis.<sup>65</sup> True, but is the cosmopolis nothing more than an expansion of the—not ethical, but phenomenological—polis? Wouldn't Stoic cosmopolitanism still remain a phenomenology "from my window" instead of "interiorly"? To think seriously about community in the second acceptance of the term, one must think seriously about the theological foundation of community, that is understood here as a phenomenological foundation. Again, religion means that man is not his own foundation.<sup>66</sup> Community is not a creation of individuals, it is the pathos-with as described above. As Marx's and Scheler's Robinson Crusoe comments make clear, experience is not individual, but rather something we have in common as a living community. It is our mysterious connection. This is why God in monotheism is a personal God and not a God of abstraction. It is a God to identify with, not as an idol, but in order to restore contact with our essence, which is life.

Henry is similar to Scheler on this point as well. To Scheler, the idea of a personal God shows that the idea of the person is not founded in the "ego."<sup>67</sup> Scheler writes:

If, however, the unity and singularity of world are not founded in the unity of logical consciousness..., and if it is a fortiori not founded in "science"... or in any other spiritual root of culture, but in the essence of a concrete personal God, then we must also say that all essential communities of individual persons are not founded in some "rational lawfulness" or in an abstract idea of reason, but solely in the possible community of these persons and the person of the persons, i.e., in the *community with God*. All other communities of a moral and legal character have this community as their *foundation*.<sup>68</sup>

This is why Henry says that every community is religious in essence.<sup>69</sup> The community with God is the essence of the human community, as Paul

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<sup>64</sup> Henry, *I Am the Truth*, 72 and chapter IX, "The Second Birth."

<sup>65</sup> M. Andrew Holowchak, *The Stoics. A guide for the Perplexed* (London: Continuum 2008), 74.

<sup>66</sup> Henry, "Difficile démocratie," 168.

<sup>67</sup> Scheler, *Formalism in Ethics*, 397.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> Henry, "L'expérience d'autrui: phénoménologie et théologie," in *Phénoménologie de la vie*, t. IV, 159.

Claudel says about the church, not as a social community, but as the invisible community with God; “...les rapport de Moi, dans les rapports de l’Eglise, qui n’est autre qu’un Moi complet, avec Dieu.”<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Paul Claudel, *Le cantique des cantiques* (Paris: Gallimard, 1948), 411.