

PASSIVITY AND FUNDAMENTAL LIFE'S
EXPERIENCE IN MICHEL HENRY'S THOUGHT

Reflecting at length¹ on the disastrous consequences of Galilean science for the understanding of life, Michel Henry departs from the *Krisis* to characterize the Galilean legacy as a “archi-founding act”² of modern science and knowledge which excluded phenomenological life by reducing it to the geometrical mathematization of the material universe.³ The rupture between the knowledge (*sagesse*) inherited from the Greeks and Christianity, which survived until the eighteenth century, and the aestheticism of modern culture reflected on the opposition between two matrices: that of moral, religious and political unity of the simultaneously sentient and rational being, conceived in the image of God yet irreducible to all purely conceptual and demonstrable knowledge;⁴ and the scientific-technical matrix of the vision of the world, nature and man. In the latter, the modern concept of *cogito* reflected two major structural epistemological streams of Modernity: the valuing of the ego, the transcendental and timeless subject, with decisive consequences both for the devaluing of the concrete man (man builds his identity by transcending himself through reflection) and for the condition of ‘incommunicability’ of the subject; and the discovery of the body-machine that functions autonomously without the contribution of thought. Marked by the rule of appearance and sensuality, the body of Modernity is governed by duality and separation, adopting some ambiguous attitudes towards the body: valuing it on the one hand yet devaluing it on the other. Modernity has thus radicalized the idea that man is fundamentally a dualistic being, a radicalization that was accompanied by the antagonism between subject and object, nature and society, individual freedom and social/communal laws or norms. The rupture or transformation of the unity of discourse, such as Modernity conceived it, culminated in the workings of the linguistic rules that embodied, in the Kantian system, the transcendental structures of understanding. The whole of post-Cartesian philosophy reflects, therefore, the parallelism between rationality and the systematic foundation of knowledge, resulting from an ontology of transcendental subjectivity and a notion of an all-enveloping human essence of a

practical-ethical order. The methodological-scientistic concerns that became predominant since the seventeenth century overlooked the fact that formed consciousness (*Bildung*) overcomes all natural sense, since, while the latter is always limited by a certain sphere, consciousness “operates in all directions and, as such, is a general sense.”⁵ The classic *visual-objective* model of the *thing* restricts reflective consciousness to the *factum* and its exact observation; science is the measure of all knowledge where space and time are exclusively a system of coordinates for accessing exact and accurate clues about all things. At an anthropological level, this model turned the concepts of *logos* and *space* into the commonplaces between the ‘world’ of nature (the external, the physical) and the “world” of culture (the internal, the reflective consciousness). Man is since seen as an (objectifiable) corporal or biological thing, as a *sum*, a “pure object of the physical or external world, something that can be touched and objectified, i.e., a body comparable to that of an animal yet specifically different from it because it is endowed with something that animals do not have, the *logos* or the *nous*.”⁶ The Western model of man, for which Christianity is strongly responsible as the heir of the platonic concept of the body as a “passing condition of the soul,”⁷ introduces a deeper and more radical distinction⁸: “Flesh and spirit are not anthropologically constitutive elements of the human entity but rather ways of being of man in his referral to divinity. Man ... is not an amalgamation of two completely different substances but a single incarnate subject.”⁹

The crisis in the sciences after the seventeenth century is the crisis of culture (*paideia*), a crisis of existence brought about by the hyper-development that the Galilean legacy generated, with the subsequent multiplication of increasingly specialist knowledge, of new methodologies which opened up new horizons, but whose premises or conditions he did not theorize: the geometrical-mathematical legibility of the universe requires a transcendental performance of consciousness, an act of the spirit creating something that did not exist before.¹⁰ The ideality of Galilean science, which translates into forms and essences, is based upon a “seeing,” as the sum total of the senses, which operates in a phenomenological horizon: it reflects on an exterior world, a pure exteriority, since matter is *res extensa* and only knows idealities if they are presented before its very eyes:

The geometric determinations to which Galilean science tries to reduce the being of things are idealities. These, far from being able to account for the sensory, subjective and relative world in which our daily activity takes place, necessarily refer to this world of life; it is only in relation to this world that they have a meaning; it is on the insurmountable ground of this world that they are built.¹¹