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On the 'Absolute Relation' of the Spread Body (Falque) and the Flesh (Henry)

A response to Karl Hefty

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Introduction

A response to a response forms a kind of 'antiphony' or responsorial relation that calls out across a void between participants, sounding out its contours and its depth, letting it take shape in the interstice. In the space left in the midst of this antiphony, calling out across the distance between Falque, Hefty, and now me, there is a body. This is precisely the image of the loving struggle, with the body, on this occasion, as the 'thing itself' in question. What follows takes advantage of the friendly and loving nature of this struggle and puts forward a decidedly speculative and experimental response. It performs, then, a series of gesture that have or will be more fully developed elsewhere.

Before doing so, however, it is necessary, first of all, to outline the stakes. In this responsorial, there is, on one side, the more classical phenomenological question of the 'how' of appearing, privileging this over the mere fact that something has appeared, and the need for duplicity (or dualism) in order to account for the difference between the 'eyes of faith' that see the Incarnate Word and the 'eyes of the world' that see only Jesus, the ordinary man. This is, too briefly put, Karl Hefty's position. On the other side, there are questions concerning the non- or – to draw upon more recent work – extra-phenomenon of the 'weight' and 'thickness' of this body and the need for this to be included in a full account of the *human* and *ordinary* dimension of the Incarnation. This is Emmanuel Falque's position. In short, there is

the immanent *pathos* of the flesh (Henry) as necessary condition for the possibility of experience, on one side, and the real body, on the other, as extra-phenomenal reality.

There appears, on first view, then, to be an insuperable distance between these two positions. This is borne out by Hefty's reassertion of the need for ontological dualism in order to retain the integrity of incarnate auto-affective experience. But Hefty is too hasty in inscribing the body Falque describes within the transcendent horizon of the 'world'. The body in question is not an object, thing, or *res extensa*, but a *spread* body.

§1 The 'spread body' is not a *res extensa*

Hefty reiterates Henry's unyielding critical stance against the technical manipulation and reduction of embodied life to objectified things as well as the difference between scientific observation of this same life and its phenomenological condition. Both Henry and Hefty assert the need for ontological dualism in order to resist the 'barbarism' of monism that subsumes life into the horizon of objects and ideal or alienated conceptual representation. In brief, they both resist the dissolution of singularity into the anonymising force of general ontology and the technical reduction of the living to objects and things.

The formulation of the 'spread body' in Falque's *Éthique du corps épandu* (2018) describes a body that is neither objective (*res extensa*) nor pure interiority (flesh). It is important to note, then, that the 'spread body' questions precisely the reduction of the human body to objective material *at the same time as* certain ethical approaches that exclude the animal body, seeking, instead, to focus on precisely the interior, subjective experience of suffering. On this point, Hefty and Falque are in agreement. Both wish to avoid reducing embodied life to scientific measure. But Falque introduces an ambiguity when drawing attention to the "weight of our own body (and its kilos, we dare to say!)" as well as the flesh in the 2016 article under discussion. While the parenthetical remark refers to the objective measure of this body, the 'weight' refers to the 'fatigue' and 'riveting' of this flesh to a material body that Falque, a few years later, characterises as a *spread* body. It is important to note, then, that the spread body is not a *res extensa* or straightforwardly an external, transcendent entity. This is, perhaps, the only interpretative issue with Hefty's response. The 'weight' of the body Falque mentions in his 'Is there a flesh without body?' is that of the later *spread*, not *objective* body. "Entre le « corps étendu » (Descartes) et le « corps vécu » (Husserl)," writes Falque, there is "un troisième type

du corps – que nommons ici « cors épandu ».”¹ It is a body that occupies this ‘mid-place’ between objective bodies and subjective embodied experience. Neither inner experience of flesh (Henry) nor external object of technical manipulation, the spread body is a non- or extra-phenomenal dimension to embodied life. It is a neologism that designates the animal-human body – that is, the body that is seen at once as animal *and* human, rather than only human (subjective) or animal or material (objective). This is precisely the ‘weight’ of the body that is felt at the same time as the flesh.

On this point, the spread body is closer, perhaps, to Maine de Biran’s ‘organic body’ that occupies a curious, ‘middle’ status within Henry’s early engagement with the spiritualist realist thinker. “C’est ainsi qu’à l’être originaire de notre corps est lié une sorte de *corps organique*,” writes Henry, “dont l’âme n’est, selon un mot de Leibniz que cite Maine de Biran, jamais séparée.”² The originary body, later called the flesh, is irrevocably linked to the organic body. One cannot be thought or conceived without the other. This is, indeed, Falque’s point viz. Henry’s account of the incarnation. The organic body escapes reduction, just as much as flesh : “l’être de notre corps transcendant ne se réduit pas, en effet, à celui de notre corps organique.”³ There must be body *and* flesh.

In the usual accounts of Maine de Biran’s philosophy, the organic body marks the resistant term in the differential relation between force and resistance that forms the basis for the ‘hyper-organic’ feeling of effort. But Henry resolves the active and the passive into a single, absolute sphere of immanence in order to account for the unity of activity (effort) and passivity (bodies) in the originary body. The organic body, however, ultimately draws its unity and identity from the transcendental unity of the subjective body.⁴ It lacks the same ontological dignity of the flesh, and, indeed, when considered alone, is merely an abstraction: “l’être du corps organique est un être abstrait.”⁵ There can, indeed, be no body without flesh.

But this is not the whole story. Within this reduction to immanent flesh, the organic body occupies a curious position. This body is, as said, irreducible to the transcendent body (objective body).⁶ It is neither a representation nor an epistemological object, but rather the “inner extension” of the absolute life of the subjective body – that is, the flesh: “l’étendu intérieure du corps organique [...]

¹ Emmanuel Falque and Sabine Fos-Falque, *Éthique du corps épandu suivi de Une chair épandue sur le divan*, (Paris: Cerf, 2018), pp. 38-39

² Michel Henry, *Philosophie et phénoménologie du corps, Essai sur l’ontologie biranienne*, (Paris: PUF, 1965) p. 169

³ Ibid, p. 177

⁴ Ibid, p. 172

⁵ Ibid, p. 174

⁶ See *ibid*, p. 177

que'elle est immanent au mouvement [subjectif] et lui appartient."⁷ Henry claims that this inner extension of the organic body in the flesh constitutes an 'absolute relation'.⁸ Both are irreducible to the world. Each counts as an absolute term and form, together, an absolute relation. This relation does not, importantly, operate within the horizon of phenomenological transcendence; there is no spatialised exchange between the organic body and the flesh. There is, moreover no constitution of their unity via a dialectical co-determination of some kind. It can no longer really be understood as one term in a differential relation. Henry thus departs from the usual reading of Maine de Biran.

Despite the lack of any 'worldly' or 'spatialised' relation, the organic body is nevertheless the 'immediate term' for the subjective body.⁹ The organic body thus occupies a curious 'middle' state: it lacks ontological consistency, requiring the unity of absolute life, but remains irreducible to the world and ontological monism. There is thus 'conceptual space' within Henry's phenomenology of the body to think this organic – indeed, *animal* – body otherwise than as *res extensa* in the way Falque suggests. The spread body operates within this space left by Henry. It accounts, as said, for a body that is neither an object for science (*res extensa*) nor a given subjective experience. But it does so in a manner that is, in certain important respects, consistent with Henry's own insights with respect to embodied life. The spread body opens the way to thinking the real of this flesh – that is, its 'inner extension'.

§2 Phenomenology and the Real

This touches upon a more crucial question viz. realism and phenomenology. The positions outlined in Hefty's response, briefly and, perhaps, too simply put are (a) the naïve realism of scientific observation and naturalising of phenomenology, on one side, and (b) the auto-affective flesh as condition for experience (and, therefore, scientific observation), on the other. In the simplest terms, without the auto-affective flesh experiencing itself, undergoing itself, there is no experience of anything at all. The flesh is the principle of their unity that guarantees the singularity of embodied life over and against the anonymous realm of objects and things. It is precisely this singular flesh, irreducible to essence or ideal meaning-intention (Husserl), that precedes and unites experience. This is the reason why the 'weight' of the spread body insofar as outside or extra to auto-affective flesh falls, therefore, within the scheme of ontological dualism at least, within external world.

⁷ Ibid, p. 181

⁸ See *ibid*, pp. 175-176

⁹ Ibid, p. 179

But the foregoing suggests another way to think about the relation between the flesh and the real. The world of objects and things is not the only way to think the real; indeed, recent iterations of realism articulate what I think Falque searches for via the spread body and recent explorations of the extra-phenomenon. It is not a realism of objects and things (naïve realism) but rather contingency and accident.¹⁰ This reformulation of realism dispenses with the subject of predication, that is, thing = x , in favour of the chaos and pell-mell of the real that is irreducible to regional essences (Husserl) and other iterations of the post-Kantian epistemological relation between subject and object. This real does not constitute the 'object' for a phenomenology of night, Falque observes, but rather the night of phenomenology; it is not the invisible *pathos*, but the hitherside of this night.¹¹ In this night, very briefly put, the flesh is invaded by the real of the body¹² or the trauma of the accident.¹³

The most straightforward counter-argument would be simply that accidents, contingency, invasion, and so on, nevertheless rely upon a *prior* auto-affective flesh to account for the unity experience and the conditions that make any such experience at all possible – that is, flesh as the undergoing of life (suffering), including the chaos of the real. The world can be experienced and make sense only on the basis of subjective flesh undergoing and suffering itself. But the foregoing indicates that the organic body marks a term in this 'absolute relation' with the flesh, without exchange in the world, the irreducible status of which remains insufficiently determined. If the subjective life of the flesh is absolute, that is, without relation to the world, then so too must the organic body. This is Henry's point (see above). But, furthermore, and perhaps more importantly, if this organic body lacks relation with the world, at least insofar as it (a) remains irreducible to a *res extensa* and the objective body and (b) remains within an 'invisible sphere' (i.e., non-representation, non-given), then this retains a certain autonomy or at least irreducible status with respect to the flesh, too. They are, recall, two absolute terms in an absolute relation. The absolute status of the flesh is determined, certainly, as auto-affection, via ontological dualism, but the absolute status of the body in its own right remains undetermined insofar as it is irreducible neither to flesh nor to world. If the organic-animal body is absolute, like the flesh, then it is also irreducible to the flesh. This is something that both Henry and Hefty would accept; the flesh does not equate to

¹⁰ See, for example, Catherine Malabou, *Ontology of the Accident*, trans by C Shread (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012) and Quentin Meillassoux *précis* of this emergent realism and novel account of contingency in *After Finitude*, trans by R Brassier (London: Continuum, 2009)

¹¹ See Falque, *op. cit.*, pp. 25-26

¹² See, for example, Emmanuel Levinas, *Le temps et l'autre*, (Paris : PUF, 1979)

¹³ See, for example, Catherine Malabou, *Ontology of the Accident*, trans by C Shread. Cambridge: Polity, 2012

the organic body. But the organic body under discussion does not equate to the world (in the phenomenological sense). The philosophical and phenomenological significance of these incommensurables remains to be determined. But the spread body offers, perhaps, a novel way to account for this organic body. It names the 'inner extension' within absolute life – the 'back door' through which the real enters, even invades, the flesh.

This is, of course, a very brief and too hasty formulation of a much wider deconstruction of the auto-affective flesh indicated and developed elsewhere.¹⁴ It rests on the claim that the organic body is irreducible to the phenomenological logic of auto-affection that sustains the consistency of the flesh and resolves everything in advance into the order of auto-donation. Falque is right to question this tendency in phenomenology with the figure of the spread body, and, later, resistance.¹⁵ The claim that the organic body is irreducible to the flesh is, in some respects, consistent with Henry's own reading of Maine de Biran (see above), although, of course, ultimately the unity of this animal body rests on the flesh. Nevertheless, the logic of auto-affection goes too far and repeats the error Jocelyn Benoist identifies in phenomenological idealism, namely the assertion that the syntax or logic of phenomenological experience – that is, meaning-intention, essence, pure *ego* in Husserl's writings, for example – is autonomous and *a priori*, in some sense or other, the real.¹⁶ Even though Henry's flesh is 'non-intentional', and so no longer relies upon the syntax of intentionality and transcendence (Husserl), nevertheless the *essential* determination of experience *tout court* remains always auto-affection. It is the sole phenomenological operator into which any and every experience finds itself ultimately resolved. The origin and genesis of each and every experience resolves itself into the invisible presence of auto-affective flesh. Realism, by contrast, privileges, as the name suggests, the autonomy of the real with respect to sense, meaning, and syntax with the former determining the latter; in short, sense is not wholly autonomous from the real.¹⁷ It designates what is given (*datum*) without an operation of phenomenological donation.

Yet this does not necessarily equate to a naïve assertion that objects, things, entities, etc., *really* exist autonomously and prior to or independently of experience. The 'new realisms' that have emerged over the past 15 or so years offer novel ways to think the real of the organic body or spread body. Far from undermining the importance of Henry's phenomenology of the body, the foregoing opens the way to

¹⁴ This is indicated in "Toward a Contemporary Grammar of Experience" (forthcoming) and developed in *Le grammaire de l'âme* (forthcoming)

¹⁵ See Falque, *op. cit.*, p. 25

¹⁶ Jocelyn Benoist, 2005. *Les limites de l'intentionnalité : recherches phénoménologiques et analytiques*, (Paris : VRIN, 2005), p. 271

¹⁷ Ibid.

deepening understanding of his wider phenomenology of life. The issues raised thus far are, indeed, internal to Henry's own thinking about the body and the flesh. While Henry himself acknowledges that the originary or subjective body (i.e., the flesh) is unthinkable without the organic body (see above), only the status of the flesh as absolute finds itself developed and fully determined as auto-affective. The absolute status of organic body, the nature of this 'inner extension', and so on, remains undetermined. It stands in the 'mid-place', perhaps with Falque's spread body: "le corps épandu tiendra de l'une et d'autre, de la mécanique et de la mystique, de l'étendu et du vécu," writes Falque, as an "*espace intermédiaire*" or "*zone frontalière*".¹⁸ It is neither the "récit de son histoire" nor "l'épreuve de son vécu" that can be gathered together once more into the order of donation, but a 'liminal' site for an encounter with this real, where the surprise of the body that lives me, not just the auto-affective experience of an incarnate subject, finds itself encountered.¹⁹

§3 An Ordinary Christ

With respect to the Incarnation, the argument Falque makes is simply that this 'idealism' leaves the question of the organic-animal body (*caro*) that Tertullian poses with little or no response. "Where did his body [*unde corpus*] come from, if his body is not flesh [*si non caro corpus*]?"²⁰ This question seeks an account of this body that is born, suffers, and dies; in short, a body that has a *human, organic* genesis ('where does his body come from?'). But the foregoing indicates how this might not necessarily amount to questions about the world, objects, and things nor that the body (*caro*) in question is reducible to *res extensa*. This is something that the 'weight' of the spread body seeks to articulate.

The spread body concerns, implicitly at least, the way the body of Christ is given and received, something indicated in the following quote: "le corps anesthésié, endormi, ou crucifié, apparaît et s'apparaît à lui-même d'abord comme « corps » (*Körper*) dans une organicité [...] et ensuite comme « chair » (*Leib*) dans la visée que pourtant moi-même, ou un autre, ne cesse de lui attribuer."²¹ While this passage concerns chiefly Husserl's distinction between body and flesh, there are nevertheless lessons to draw for this brief antiphony. The foregoing discussion indicates at least that there is a *weight* to the body that the flesh undergoes that is at once *outside* the world of objects, *res extensa*, etc., and irreducible to the *pathos* of the flesh. This 'weight' is the spread body. It does not necessarily amount to the

¹⁸ Falque, *op. cit.*, p. 50

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 46

²⁰ Falque, "Is there a flesh without body? A Debate with Michel Henry" in *Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy*, vol XXIV, no 1 (2016), p. 161

²¹ Falque, *op. cit.*, p. 40 (my emphasis)

exteriorisation of flesh, at the level of the ontic (if this is understood to be reducible to objects and things), as Hefty claims; rather, it is the organic 'inner extension' (above) of this invisible flesh toward the real in the night of phenomenology. It is the flesh open to the surprises and contingencies of the real – that is, the strikes and blows of life. What Christ offers is not just flesh but also the burden, suffering, fatigue as well as joy of his ordinary body. It signals the 'weak force' of grace, in the real of this ordinary body, and precisely the 'low' status of Falque's Christology.

In response to Hefty, one could say that the body of Christ is, then, given *as body* (organic) but *without donation*, in the phenomenological sense at least, and, one could say, received *in flesh* (subjective) through the 'eyes of faith'. This responds to the need for 'duplicity', as Hefty calls it, with regard to this body. It is possible to see only the ordinary body of Jesus, certainly, but also the Lord. Yet Henry and Falque acknowledge that the organic and the flesh cannot be thought apart, and so must be thought together. The spread body offers a way to think precisely this ordinary, animal body in a way that Henry's auto-affective flesh does not permit.

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If there is, indeed, an absolute relation between the flesh (Henry) and organic, spread body (Falque), as suggested, then this requires a novel 'grammar' or economy of experience, which is the focus of my own research. While others, like Merleau-Ponty, account for the difference between flesh and body via a *chiasm* or similar interweaving of the visible and invisible, which qualify as more sophisticated iterations of ontological monism, Henry insists upon an ontological dualism, as Hefty reminds us, between two distinct, irreducible modes of experience – life and the world. This dualism counters, however, only a specific mode of phenomenological transcendence as well as naïve realism(s).

In this rather speculative response, the 'night of phenomenology' that Falque articulates via the 'spread body' offers, perhaps, a way to formulate a conception of the real that is not quite the same as the mode of transcendence Henry critiques and, perhaps, opens the way to rethinking the relation between phenomenology and the real otherwise than Husserl, Heidegger, and Henry. It would be a style of phenomenology that looks out, with the scientist, into the night.