

“The Language of the Self”: Phenomenological Metamorphoses of Inner Experience

Article history:

Received: 06.06.2026

Revised: 02.07.2026

Accepted: 05.07.2026

Available online: 30.09.2026

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<https://doi.org/10.56177/eon.7.3.2026.art.1>

Abstract: The understanding of the self evolved considerably during the 19th and 20th centuries. Initially, tradition equated the self with the “subject of consciousness,” reflection, or the transcendental ego. However, phenomenology shifted emphasis from cognitive formation to how experience is expressed. Despite variations, sources and interpretations consistently highlight the self’s complex and debated nature. Each definitional attempt often critiques earlier views, making the history of self-phenomenology a series of reinterpretations. Husserl initially distances himself from the modern ego concept but later revises his stance on transcendental subjectivity. Heidegger pushes this critique further by dismantling traditional ideas of ego, soul, person, and consciousness, replacing them with the analysis of Dasein, though his own views evolve later. Levinas advances this critique by grounding selfhood in ethical responsibility through relations with otherness. Conversely, Merleau-Ponty dismisses both transcendental and reflexive models, framing self-constitution in bodily experience. Recent discussions avoid seeking a single, clear-cut definition, instead favoring plural, relational, and dynamic models of ipseity.

Keywords: *self, interiority, ipseity, body, consciousness, ontology, phenomenology.*

Titlu: „Limbajul sinelui”: Metamorfoze fenomenologice ale experienței interioare”

Rezumat: Înțelegerea sinelui a evoluat considerabil în secolele al XIX-lea și al XX-lea. Inițial, tradiția echivala sinele cu „subiectul conștiinței”, cu reflecția sau cu eul transcendental. Cu toate acestea, fenomenologia a mutat accentul de la formarea cognitivă la modul în care este exprimată experiența. În ciuda variațiilor, sursele și interpretările evidențiază natura complexă și controversată a sinelui. Fiecare încercare de definire critică adesea viziunile anterioare, transformând istoria fenomenologiei sinelui într-o serie de reinterpretări. Husserl se distanțează inițial de conceptul modern de ego, dar își revizuieste ulterior poziția cu privire la subiectivitatea transcendentală. Heidegger duce această critică mai departe, demontând ideile tradiționale despre ego, suflet, persoană și conștiință, înlocuindu-le cu analiza Dasein-ului, deși propriile sale viziuni evoluează. Levinas dezvoltă această critică, fundamentând identitatea pe responsabilitatea etică prin relațiile cu alteritatea. În schimb, Merleau-Ponty respinge atât modelele transcendentele cât și pe cele reflexive, încadrând constituirea sinelui în experiența corporală. Discuțiile recente evită căutarea unei definiții unice și clare, favorizând în schimb modele plurale, relaționale și dinamice ale ipseității.

Cuvinte-cheie: *sine, interioritate, ipseitate, corp, conștiință, ontologie, fenomenologie.*

Introduction

In the context of the linguistic transformations with the emergence of phenomenology, the relationship between subject and object is no longer in question, but rather the way in which the phenomenon presents itself to consciousness. In Husserlian terminology, “evidence” denotes the experience in which the object presents itself to consciousness as “itself” (*es selbst*), in an immediate and apodictic presence.¹ This requirement that the phenomenon be present as “itself” opens the way for an analysis of the problem of selfhood. From a phenomenological perspective, reflexivity is not identical to selfhood, nor does it necessarily presuppose it. Reflexivity can refer back to the act itself without constituting self-consciousness, amounting merely to a return of experience upon its own actuality: *ipseity* denotes the dimension of the self’s manifestation as itself, an experience prior to any reflexive

¹ Edmund Husserl, *Meditații carteziene* (Humanitas, 1994), 204. (I prefer this translation because it includes notes and commentary.)

thematization.¹ This shift in emphasis also implies a veritable deconstruction of the meanings modern philosophy had attributed to the self. The identification between the self and consciousness, between ipseity and reflection, or between freedom and a self-constituted subject is called into question. Phenomenology shows that neither reflection nor representation can serve as the starting point for analysis, since they presuppose an original relationship of the self to itself. Prior to any act of consciousness, there is an immediate experience through which life manifests itself, and this experience makes possible both reflection and any subsequent form of objectification.² From this perspective, the self does not confer its own existence through its own acts, nor is it constituted as the result of an intellectual operation. The self's capacity to act or to exercise the various faculties of existence presupposes an original *selfhood*, which is not produced by consciousness but precedes it. Radicalizing this perspective in contemporary French phenomenology leads to questioning the very idea of the self's presence.

In Derrida's reading of Husserlian phenomenology, the critique no longer targets only the metaphysical subject, but also the privilege of presence as the foundation of meaning. If the sign no longer expresses an already constituted origin but functions as an "original substitute," then the self, too, can no longer be understood as an identity fully present to itself, but rather as a reality constituted through difference, mediation, and reference. The problem of the self thus ceases to be that of a consciousness that possesses itself directly and becomes the problem of the conditions under which identity can be conceived beyond the metaphysics of presence.³ In this reinterpretation, corporeality takes on decisive significance. The body no longer appears as a mere object of experience or as an instrument of an autonomous consciousness, but as a place where the self manifests itself and receives itself. In this way, phenomenology does not merely propose a new theory of the body, but reconfigures the understanding of the self, shifting the emphasis from the subject of representation to the lived experience of *selfhood* and embodiment.

Although phenomenological analysis serves as the starting point for elucidating the ontological status of the self, possible divergences arise regarding the relationship between phenomenology and ontology. Some authors argue that this transition is direct, identifying the ontology of the self with its very phenomenology. In this vein, Zahavi and Parnas assert that "there is no difference between the phenomenon of the self and its metaphysical (or ontological) nature; here, reality coincides with appearance."⁴ From this perspective, the self's presentation in experience exhausts what it is. Other authors, on the contrary, consider that the ontology of the self cannot be reduced to its phenomenology. Although they admit, like Zahavi and Parnas, that what manifests phenomenally is constitutive of the self's existence, they maintain that this does not exhaust its ontological reality. The self cannot be identified exclusively with what appears in experience, nor can the subject of experience be reduced to a mere experiential phenomenon.⁵ In this regard, Michel Henry is significant for this analysis. He operates at the intersection of phenomenology and theology, facilitating the exchange of ideas and combining the vocabulary of both fields. The organization of philosophy and theology into a common transcendental framework, as Henry proposes, aims to unify them within a self-centered project. Although this method may be interpreted as an academic issue, Henry's view of identity is unitary. However, this positioning seems to oscillate between the

¹ Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 28.

² Michel Henry, *I Am the Truth: Toward a Philosophy of Christianity* (Stanford University Press, 2003), 172-173.

³ Rudolf Bernet, "Derrida and his Master's Voice," in *Derrida and Phenomenology*, ed. William R. McKenna and J. Claude Evans (Springer, 1995), 20, doi: 10.1007/978-94-015-8498-2_1.

⁴ Cf. Dan Zahavi and J. Parnas, "Phenomenal Consciousness and Self Awareness: A Phenomenological Critique of Representational Theory," *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 5, no. 5-6 (1998): 697-698.

⁵ Galen Strawson, "The phenomenology and ontology of the self," *Exploring the self: Philosophical and psychopathological perspectives on self-experience*, ed. Dan Zahavi (John Benjamins Publishing Co., 2000), 41.

interior and the exterior in modernity, extending to post-Kantian reflections on the transcendental “I” and the post-Cartesian cogito.¹

Building on these conceptual transformations, this paper explores how phenomenology and its hermeneutic developments reconfigure the self’s philosophical status. The argument is structured in three sections. The first addresses the deconstruction of the metaphysical subject and the redefinition of the self within phenomenological criticism. The second explores the phenomenality of selfhood by analyzing corporeality, expressivity, and otherness as original modes of the self’s manifestation. The final part examines narrative identity, temporality, and liturgical experience as three indispensable configurations for articulating selfhood, through which the self eludes identification with a self-constituted ego and is understood within an ontology of the self.

A Critique of the Metaphysical Subject

Although the problem of the self runs through the entire analysis of *Dasein* in “Being and Time”, Heidegger never offers an explicit, systematic definition of this concept. For this reason, interpreting the self in Heidegger requires reconstructing it from the body of existential analytics, rather than identifying a passage in which it is treated thematically.² In “Being and Time”, Martin Heidegger explicitly revisits the question of “who” *Dasein* is, calling into question the traditional answer offered by modern philosophy. In the classical conception, the question “who?” finds its answer in the “I,” in the subject or in the self, understood as a self-identical principle that remains the same across the diversity of its acts, experiences, and states. From an ontological perspective, this “who” is conceived as a permanent, present foundation that sustains the person’s identity and guarantees its continuity in the face of change.³ Heidegger, however, challenges this premise. If the “essence” of *Dasein* consists in its existence, then neither the “I” nor, by extension, the “self” can be conceived as substances or as permanent supports of experience. The question regarding “who” cannot be answered by appealing to an already constituted subject, but only through an analysis of *Dasein*’s mode of being.⁴ Consequently, the self does not denote an entity lying behind existence, but rather an existential mode of being. Heidegger shifts the problem of the self from the metaphysics of the subject to existential analytics, a shift that seems to dissolve what tradition identified as the person’s stable “core.”⁵ The dismantling of the metaphysical subject does not, however, affirm an already constituted authentic self. On the contrary, the phenomenological description of *Dasein* in its everyday life reveals its tendency to lose itself in the impersonality of current existence. The answer to the question “Who is *Dasein*?” is therefore not formulated by appealing to an ego or a self-consciousness, but through an analysis of *das Man*. This term does not denote “man” in a generic sense, but rather the impersonal “it.” Thus, “The self of everyday *Da-sein* is the *they-self* which we distinguish from the *authentic self*, the self which has explicitly grasped itself. As the *they-self*, *Da-sein* is *dispersed* in the *they* and must first find itself. This dispersion characterizes the “subject” of the kind of being which we know as heedful absorption in the world nearest encountered. ... Initially, “I” “am” not in the sense of my own self, but I am the others in the mode of the *they*. I”⁶ *Dasein* thus remains permanently exposed to the risk of losing itself in the impersonality of the shared world, identifying with the practices and expectations of others. The self is not annihilated, but rather obscured by this inauthentic existence, in which each person becomes, at once, like everyone else and like no one at all. Authenticity does not, therefore, consist in the discovery of a hidden metaphysical

¹ J. Rivera, “Seeking the Sabbath of Life: Figuring the Theological Self after Michel Henry,” (PhD dissertation, University of Edinburgh Divinity School, 2012), 12.

² Mark A. Wrathall, “Autonomy, Authenticity, and the Self,” in *Heidegger, Authenticity, and the Self: Themes From Division Two of Being and Time*, ed. Denis McManus (Routledge, 2014), 194.

³ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (State University of New York Press, 1996), 108.

⁴ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 110.

⁵ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 110.

⁶ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 121-122.

core of the person, but in an “existential modification of the impersonal ‘it’” and by no means in a departure from existence toward a prior instance.¹

Hannah Arendt will take up the Heideggerian inquiry in a different vein. Whereas for Heidegger it belongs to the same ontological horizon as the problem of the self (*Selbstheit*), for Arendt the agent's identity is revealed not through the objects it produces, but through action itself.² Unlike “labor and work,” whose results persist in the world as tangible realities, action attains its own meaning only through narrative mediation, the only means capable of revealing, albeit indirectly, the agent's identity.³ From this perspective, a person's identity is not reduced to the continuity of a metaphysical subject, but is constituted through a reflexive relationship with the self, unfolding within the very activity of thought. Drawing on Kant, Arendt describes consciousness as an uninterrupted dialogue of the self with itself, through which the person takes responsibility for their own judgments and actions. Moral personality is thus not the result of intellectual abilities, but the effect of a continuous practice of reflection, in which the self becomes the interlocutor of its own consciousness. Consciousness does not denote a faculty constituted prior to experience, but the very experience through which a person constitutes themselves and remains in harmony with themselves.⁴ This shift will constitute one of Ricoeur's starting points, as he reorients his analysis toward the problem of personal identity and embodiment. Without abandoning the phenomenological legacy, he articulates selfhood, temporality, and bodily experience into a unified structure, transposing fundamental intuitions of Husserlian phenomenology into the hermeneutic register.

The Phenomenon of the Self: Investigating Embodied Selfhood from *Leib* to *Körper*

Before the distinction between *Leib* and *Körper* became a central theme of contemporary phenomenology, its development rested on a fundamental question: how is the body present in experience? The body can be understood both as a material object situated in the world, subject to physical determinations (*Körper*), and as the lived body (*Leib*), that is, as the original condition through which the world is perceived, inhabited, and habitable. This distinction transcends the traditional opposition between soul and body, since it does not describe two distinct realities, but rather two phenomenal modes of manifestation of the same corporeality.⁵ The problem of the body thus becomes inseparable from the problem of the self, since selfhood does not reveal itself independently of the experience of embodiment. Ricoeur interprets the self as temporal, even when exploring the body's spatial dimensions.⁶ He draws on the Husserlian distinction between body and flesh (*Leib* - *Körper*) and also acknowledges Husserl's authentic spatial understanding, rooted in the context of experience. As Richard Kearney points out, Ricoeur developed a Husserl-inspired phenomenology of the flesh as early as the 1950s, but with his turn toward textual hermeneutics in the 1960s, this phenomenology took a back seat, only to return in his final writings.⁷

Jenny Slatman, in “The *Körper*-*Leib* Distinction,” analyzes the initial emergence of the distinction between *Körper* and *Leib* within Husserl's exploration of how transcendental consciousness creates meaning in appearances. In “Ideen II”, Husserl observes that the constitution of *Leib*, associated with animate animal nature, differs from the constitution of *Körper*, associated with material nature. It is evident that neither *Leib* nor *Körper* are given

¹ Shaun Gallagher, *Phenomenology* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 123.

² Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed. (University of Chicago Press, 1998), 181. În continuare rămâne Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 58.

³ Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 58-59.

⁴ Ned Curthoys, “Hannah Arendt: A Question of Character,” *New Formations* 71 (2011): 203, doi: 10.3898/NEWF.71.05.2011.

⁵ Jaana Parviainen, “The Performativity of ‘Double Bodies’: Exploring the Phenomenological Conception of the *Leib/Körper* Distinction in Interactive Bodywork,” *International Journal of Work Organization and Emotion* 6, no. 4 (2014): 313, doi: 10.1504/IJWOE.2014.068031.

⁶ Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 325.

⁷ Richard Kearney, “Thinking the Flesh with Paul Ricoeur,” in *Hermeneutics and Phenomenology in Paul Ricoeur*, ed. Scott Davidson and Marc-Antoine Vallée (2016), 31–40, doi: 10.1007/978-3-319-33426-4_3.

directly; on the contrary, both are constituted by consciousness. In other words, they represent two distinct ways in which the body appears to consciousness.¹ This difference becomes especially relevant when analyzing the experience of one's own body. Didier Franck suggests in "Chair et Corps" that the body (*Leib*) is never fully our own; it is always situated in relation to a primordial otherness, primarily to *the other* (ego). Franck notes that Husserl himself saw intercorporeality as a condition for constituting *Leib*.² The constitution of "*Leib*" is grounded in sensations localized in the perceptual organ: tactile sensations are associated with the part of the body involved in contact. Husserl uses the term "*Empfindnisse*" ("sensations") to refer to these localized sensations, which include heat, cold, kinesthetic sensations, and pain. In contrast, visual sensations are not limited to the eyes; they contribute to the perception of the body as an extended entity or *Körper*. For Husserl, the *Leib* serves as the "zero point" for all orientations, characterized by an "absolute here." It is the primary medium of perception, the organ through which all perception takes place.³ Beyond its constructed nature, it is indispensable to the existence of the spatio-temporal world.⁴ This observation connects the carnal dimension of the self with the problem of otherness addressed by Levinas.

Merleau-Ponty takes this distinction to the extreme, insisting that the experience of the body cannot be reduced to the perception of a body situated in space. One's own movement is not experienced as the displacement of an object from one point to another, but as an experience in which one's own body always remains the center of orientation. Even when I am moving, I do not experience the body as an object that changes its position, but as that original "here" from which the entire world derives its coordinates. Therefore, kinesthesia does not describe a mere objective movement, but the way in which space itself is constituted on the basis of bodily experience. From this perspective, corporeality constitutes not only the foundation of our relationship with the world, but also the original condition of our relationship with others. For Merleau-Ponty, following Husserl's later reflections on the Earth as the "horizon" of experience, others are already implicated in the way the world reveals itself to us. In other words, an identity emerges through "the same body-world structure" (BN 45). We do not share the same world because we subsequently encounter other consciousnesses; on the contrary, the possibility of understanding others is already inscribed in the very structure of corporeality. Precisely because one's own body is a *Leib*, not merely an objective *Körper*, it can enter into a relationship of communication and reciprocity with other bodies. Thus, corporeality becomes the original medium of intersubjectivity.⁵ Merleau-Ponty expands this analysis in "The Origin of Geometry", where the horizon of humanity does not denote the totality of human beings, but the condition that makes it possible to share the same world. The shared world is not constituted through empathy (*Einfühlung*) and communication; these presuppose it as an expression of an original corporeality and as belonging to the same horizon of experience.⁶ However, there is a fundamental kinship between the being of the earth and that of the living body (*Leib*). The body is not experienced as an object moving through space, as other bodies are. It always remains the center of orientation. The movement of one's own body does not have the same status as that of an object, since the body does not appear within the horizon of distance but constitutes the "zero point" of any orientation in the world. Corporeality is therefore not merely the property of the subject, but the condition of possibility for any presence in a shared world, as well as the instance through which the other

¹ Jenny Slatman, "The Körper-Leib Distinction," in *50 Concepts for a Critical Phenomenology*, ed. G. Weiss, A. Murphy, and G. Salamon (Northwestern University Press, 2019), 203–209.

² Didier Franck, *Chair et Corps. Sur la phénoménologie de Husserl* (Les Éditions de Minuit, 1981); English trans. by Joseph Rivera and Scott Davidson, *Flesh and Body: On the Phenomenology of Husserl* (Bloomsbury, 2014).

³ Edmund Husserl, *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie. Zweites Buch: Phänomenologische Untersuchungen zur Konstitution*, ed. Marly Biemel (Martinus Nijhoff, 1952), § 18.

⁴ Slatman, "The Körper-Leib Distinction," 203–209.

⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology* (Northwestern University Press, 2002), xviii–xix.

⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology*, xix.

becomes accessible as the other.¹ What manifests itself in this way does not pertain to the order of the objective body, situated in a geographical space, but to that of the living body, through which the lifeworld (*Lebenswelt*) becomes accessible.

Ricoeur observes that, within Heidegger's conceptual framework, the primacy of temporality prevents an authentic phenomenology of spatiality and, consequently, an ontology of the body.² He asks, rhetorically, why Heidegger did not draw upon "the Husserlian notion of 'body'" in his analysis of Dasein. The absence of the theme of embodiment in "Being and Time" is, in his reading, a direct consequence of the subordination of space to time.³ Recent exegesis has taken up this approach, extending Ricoeur's reflection on corporeality to the ethical, cultural, and affective dimensions of embodied existence. The common premise of these contributions is that the lived body cannot be reduced to the status of an object in the world, for our certainty in relating to the world is rooted in the very experience of embodiment.⁴

The Bodily Expression of the Self

In contrast to the tradition that conceived of the body as an instrument of a spirit capable of existing independently of it, phenomenology understands the body as the original locus of the self's manifestation. From this perspective, the self cannot be conceived as a reality separate from corporeality, since its existence is inseparable from how it manifests and is experienced through the body. Bernhard Waldenfels notes that the relationship between the self and the body is not an instrumental one, but a medial one: the body is not an object at the "disposal" of the self, but the medium in which the self constitutes itself and manifests itself. This reconfiguration signals a departure from the conception of a self independent of bodily existence and affirms that the self is accessible only in and through the body.⁵ In this regard, Nietzsche anticipates a fundamental insight of phenomenology when he describes the body as the "great reason" and identifies it with the true self, the "powerful master," and the "unknown sage" who dwells within us.⁶ If the self manifests itself in and through the body, to what extent can reflection still constitute the privileged path of relating to the self?

In contrast to older forms of self-relation, such as self-care, modern philosophy has identified reflection as the privileged path to self-knowledge. This thesis raises significant difficulties. Locke's attempt to treat the self as an object of inner experience, complementary to the objects of outer experience, becomes problematic within phenomenology. For Husserl, reflection is not mere introspection but transcendental reflection, through which intentional acts and their constitutive horizons are thematized. Reflection does not create the self's relationship with itself but merely makes explicit an intentionality already present in experience.⁷ Michel Henry considers that reflection itself presupposes an original form of the self's manifestation. Modern philosophy constantly uses the pronoun "I", without sufficiently explaining the phenomenon through which it comes to manifest itself. The "I" does not result from a reflection on one's own existence but receives itself within the immanence of self-affection through which Life tests itself. For this reason, selfhood is not the product of reflexive consciousness, but its phenomenological condition.⁸

From this perspective, the Cartesian *cogito* takes on a different meaning than in the traditional interpretation. From a phenomenological standpoint, the difficulty does not lie in the mind's ability to affirm its own existence, but rather to the extent to which this affirmation truly provides original access to the self. Although tradition has often summarized Descartes'

¹ Merleau-Ponty, *Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology*, 9.

² Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 405.

³ Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 412.

⁴ Roger W. H. Savage, "Introduction: Paul Ricoeur, the Lived Body, and an Ontology of the Flesh," in *Paul Ricoeur and the Lived Body*, ed. Roger W. H. Savage (Springer, 2016), ix-x.

⁵ Bernhard Waldenfels, *Schița unei fenomenologii responsive*, trans. Ion Tănăsescu (Pelican Publishing, 2006), 10.

⁶ Waldenfels, *Schița unei fenomenologii responsive*, 51.

⁷ Waldenfels, *Schița unei fenomenologii responsive*, 55.

⁸ Henry, *I Am the Truth*, 135–137.

position with the formula “ego cogito, ergo sum”, in “the Meditations” the certainty of existence does not result from an inference, but from the very act of thought itself, whenever it is performed. Nevertheless, this self-evidence does not eliminate the fundamental difficulty. The “cogito” does not capture thought in its original act, but only to the extent that it is already present to reflection. Thought does not manifest itself as the object of its own activity but is recognized retrospectively. For this reason, *ego sum* or *ego existo* does not denote an immediate presence of the self to itself, but rather the result of a reflexive mediation.¹ Certain Cartesian formulations also suggest this interpretation. The “self” does not appear as *res cogitans* but is designated as such only when the act of thinking becomes the object of reflection. Prior to this thematization, consciousness does not encounter an already constituted self but is “affected” by a *cogitatio* that precedes its conceptual articulation. It is within this framework that Descartes’s statements also take on meaning: “ego eram, si quid mihi persuasit”² and “ego etiam sum, si me fallit.”³ Even when consciousness seems to convince itself, the original act of thought is not the product of transparent reflection, but appears as something that is given to it and which it recognizes only subsequently.⁴ The self’s relationship to itself does not coincide with the reflexive identity commonly assumed by interpretations of the cogito. The self discovers itself only after it is engaged in an act of thought that it does not produce as an object of its own consciousness. From this perspective, the *res cogitans* does not denote the originary point of self-experience, but rather the reflexive conceptualization of an activity that precedes any explicit thematization. Phenomenological criticism does not contest the certainty of the cogito but rather calls into question the assumption that this certainty implies an originary and unmediated transparency of the self toward itself. If reflection cannot explain the original relationship of the self to itself, then the foundation of this certainty must be sought at a level prior to representation. Michel Henry’s interpretation aligns with this perspective; he argues that the original evidence of the cogito does not derive from thinking as representation, but from the immanence in which life experiences itself (auto-affectation). Self-consciousness does not result from the representation of one’s own activity, but from an experience that precedes the opposition between subject and object: only on the basis of this immediacy can the self subsequently become the object of reflection.⁵ *Cogitatio* therefore does not denote a mere intellectual act, but this very original experience of the self.

Marion takes the consequences of this analysis to their logical extreme. Representation cannot eliminate the distance between the “I” and the self. On the contrary, any reflection already presupposes an original relationship of the self to itself, which it cannot establish. Far from grounding self-knowledge, reflection requires this relationship as its very condition. The self does not reach itself through an image of itself, but through the immediate experience of its own affectivity.⁶ This observation also allows for a reevaluation of the relationship between consciousness and corporeality. If the original experience of the self is an affective one, then it cannot be separated from the existence of the body. Husserl observes that, although a subject can be imagined without a material body, it cannot be conceived in the absence of a body (*keineswegs ohne Leib überhaupt*). The body is not an object external to consciousness, but the condition of any possible experience. Just as the eye cannot see itself in the act of seeing, so too can consciousness not become fully transparent to itself through mere

¹ Jean-Luc Marion, *In Excess: Studies of Saturated Phenomena*, trans. Robyn Homer and Vincent Berraud (Fordham University Press, 2002), 272–273.

² The Romanian translation “I am, without a doubt, if I have convinced myself” renders the imperfect present tense “eram,” thereby softening the retrospective dimension of the Cartesian formula. Cf. René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy* (Oxford University Press, 2009), 36.

³ Marion, *In Excess*, 275.

⁴ Marion, *In Excess*, 275.

⁵ Henry, *I Am the Truth*, 137–138.

⁶ Marion, *In Excess*, 90–91.

reflection. The relationship of the self to itself is mediated by the original bodily experience.¹ Consequently, the experience of the self cannot be understood independently of corporeality: the self does not, therefore, attach itself to an already constituted body, but always exists as a body.

For Henry, the original reality of the body does not belong to the order of the objects of the world, but to the absolute immanence of life. The body is not a thing among things, nor a mere vehicle of consciousness, but the original mode in which life reveals itself to itself. Any interpretation that treats the body as a constituted or transcendent reality misses its fundamental phenomenological dimension: bodily phenomena belong to the sphere of immediate experience, in which life affects itself before any representation or intentionality.² In J. Rivera's proposed reading, movement, therefore, does not constitute an object of knowledge or an instrument through which the subject acts upon the world. It is experienced without mediation and without phenomenological distance.³ The separation between consciousness and corporeality is rejected by Henry, for whom the subject's original identity is expressed by the statement: "I am my body."⁴ In other words, the body is neither an object that I possess nor the instrument through which the ego enters into a relationship with the world. What we call bodily experience does not, therefore, refer to a subject's encounter with its own body, but rather to the self-revelation of life in the form of corporeality. The body does not precede this experience, nor does it exist independently of it; it coincides with the very manifestation of the experience itself. Self-knowledge is not the result of reflection on the body, but the immediate experience through which life is felt in its own corporeality: corporeality thus constituting the original condition of both selfhood and any openness to the world.⁵

Jean-Luc Marion develops his analysis along these lines, shifting the emphasis from the constitutive subject to the phenomenon that gives itself. For Marion, the event is not the product of a transcendental ego's activity, but a manifestation that precedes and constitutes the one to whom it is given. The phenomenological subject thus no longer appears as a sovereign ego, but as *l'adonné* ("the given one"), that is, the one who receives his own identity from what is revealed to him. The self does not precede the phenomenon but is constituted in and through the experience of the given. At first glance, however, this shift seems to contradict the phenomenological reduction itself, since the emphasis falls on the phenomenal self, and the transcendental ego appears to be replaced by a reference to the empirical "I". Marion, however, rejects this interpretation, since the Husserlian reduction does not eliminate the "I," but rather re-inscribes it within a broader process of phenomenalization. From this perspective, *l'adonné* does not denote a substance or any new type of subject, but rather the way in which the subject is constituted through the reception of the phenomenon.

In "*Étant donné*", the self is described as a place where the phenomenon becomes visible. When what was invisible becomes phenomenal, not only does the phenomenon reveal itself, but the one to whom it is revealed is also transformed by this manifestation. Phenomenalization concerns not only the object of experience, but also the subject who receives it. The self is no longer the original principle of the constitution of the phenomenon, but one of the moments in the process of phenomenalization.⁶ This analysis leads to one of Marion's central theses, according to which the self can exist as itself only to the extent that it incarnates (*s'incarner*). Incarnation does not denote the mere union of a pre-existing spirit with a body, but rather the process through which the self becomes accessible through the gift of its own body. In this sense, the self is not constituted prior to embodiment, but precisely through it. Although embodiment has a passive, involuntary, and factual character, it does not express the subject's limitation or alienation. On the contrary, it represents the original act

¹ Marion, *In Excess*, 90–91.

² Henry, *I Am the Truth*, 58.

³ J. Rivera, "Seeking the Sabbath of Life: Figuring the Theological Self after Michel Henry," 184.

⁴ Michel Henry, *Philosophy and Phenomenology of the Body*, trans. Girard Etzkorn (Martinus Nijhoff, 1975), 196.

⁵ Henry, *I Am the Truth*, 93.

⁶ Marion, *In Excess*, 15.

through which the self assumes its own existence and acquires presence to itself. The body thus does not appear as an object of experience, but as the place where the self's relationship with itself is established. It binds the individual to his or her own existence irreversibly and constitutes the very temporal form of his or her life. Bodily existence cannot be suspended or replaced; it is an original given through which each person is entrusted with and called to live their own life. Incarnation thus expresses how the self receives itself as lived existence.

Marion proposes a reinterpretation of Descartes. He draws attention to the passage in "The Passions of the Soul" in which Descartes asserts that the soul can be united with the body only when it is well-disposed (*bien disposé*), and that its well-disposition is naturally accompanied by a feeling. Marion interprets this sensation as original joy, and in this interpretation, embodiment itself appears as the event through which the self receives itself before it can think of itself.¹ The existence of the self is not grounded in a pure act of reflection, but in the original experience of embodiment, through which individuation, factuality, and the relationship with the self become possible. What Marion identifies in Descartes as "original joy" acquires, in his own phenomenology, systematic status through the concept of the flesh (*la chair*). While other saturated phenomena exceed the subject's capacity to objectify them due to the excess of intuition over concept, the flesh has a different structure: it does not reveal an external object but rather reveals the very one to whom the phenomenon is given. Through the experience of the flesh, *l'adonné* does not acquire a representation of himself, but receives himself in the very act of phenomenation. For this reason, transcending the metaphysical subject does not entail abandoning subjectivity, but rather reformulating it on the basis of embodied experience. Subjectivity is no longer understood as an autonomous principle but arises from the interpenetration of self-affection and hetero-affection. Consequently, the self does not preexist self-giving but receives itself within it.

Phenomenological recovery does not, therefore, lead to the discovery of a transcendental ego separate from the world, but rather to a description of how the self perceives itself through the experience of the body. From this, phenomenology faces decisive consequences: the status of corporeality, the relationship between self and otherness, the problem of intersubjectivity, and even the possibility of a phenomenological understanding of incarnation. All these lines of inquiry, however, have their starting point in the same fundamental thesis: the self does not precede bodily experience, but is constituted through it.² From this perspective, Henry radicalizes classical phenomenological intuitions. While Husserl shifts the problem of the self from objectification to intentionality, and Marion describes the self as *l'adonné*, constituted through the gift of the phenomenon, Henry situates the origin of the self beyond these two positions: life reveals itself prior to any intentionality, any gift, and any difference between subject and object. The unity of experience no longer results from the synthesis of consciousness, but from the original self-affection of life, in which corporeality and selfhood coincide.³

Self and Otherness: Exploring Relational Ontology

While the phenomenology of corporeality has shown that the self cannot be understood independently of its embodied mode of manifestation, subsequent phenomenological reflection shifts the problem in a new direction: the relationship between selfhood and otherness. From this perspective, otherness does not merely denote what is external to the self but penetrates even into its very constitution. Bernhard Waldenfels observes that *hétēros autós* or its Latin equivalent *alter ego* reveals its full significance only if otherness is understood "as a form of double" of one's own person (eine Art Doppelgängertum), as a

¹ Marion, *In Excess*, 96.

² Marion, *In Excess*, 100–103.

³ Henry, *I Am the Truth*, 117.

confrontation of the self with itself in the Other, in which the self exposes itself to a "quasi-self" (Beinahe-Selbst).¹

This shift in emphasis from self-identity to constitutive otherness also explains Emmanuel Levinas's critique of the metaphysical tradition of the subject. Western philosophy has consistently assumed that the self preserves its identity through all its changes and experiences, remaining the same even when it reflects on itself.² The self may observe itself, judge itself, reject itself, or discover itself to be alien to itself, but this inner otherness never transcends the horizon of identity. Even when confronted with its own contradictions or its own alienation, the self returns to itself and restores its unity. From this perspective, the otherness reflection uncovers within consciousness is not an authentic otherness, but only an apparent one. It represents, in Levinas's terms, a mere "play of the Same" (Le Même), through which identity reaffirms itself through the experience of difference.³ Self-negation does not suspend the identity of the self, but rather expresses the various ways in which it continues to assert itself. In this sense, the tradition that culminates in Hegelian dialectics remains faithful to the same fundamental structure: otherness is always integrated into and transcended by the unity of the self. Levinas, however, challenges this understanding of identity. He argues that the identification of the self must not be deduced from the abstraction of the formula "I am I," nor from the mere reflexivity of consciousness, but from the concrete relationship of the self to the world. The forms of material life are not empirical elements added later to a formal structure of the subject, but rather the articulations through which the self constitutes its concrete identity. Precisely for this reason, the identity of the self is not a logical tautology, but the existential mode through which the self inhabits the world and organizes it as its own space. Nevertheless, even this concrete identification does not exhaust the problem of otherness. While the world can be inhabited and integrated into the horizon of self's experience, the Other eludes any form of appropriation. Authentic otherness begins where the Other can no longer be possessed or reduced to the categories of the Same.⁴ At this point, the problem of the self becomes the problem of the ethical relationship with the Other.

This understanding of otherness as irreducible to the horizon of the Same has decisively influenced the subsequent reception of Levinas's thought. One of the most important interpretations comes from Marion, who reads Levinasian philosophy in an attempt to definitively transcend the language of ontology and to conceive of the self starting from the call of the Other. However, this reading raises certain difficulties and critical reservations. Marion describes his relationship with Levinas by analogy with Levinas's relationship with Heidegger, presenting his own project as a critical continuation aimed at transcending the language of ontology. Although he consistently draws on Levinas's thought, Marion reinterprets some of Levinas's fundamental concepts in his own way. Thus, while for Levinas paternity expresses a constitutive otherness of the self, for Marion it constitutes nothing more than a free response to the anonymous call of the other's face.⁵ Beyond this difference in emphasis, Marion recognizes a major theme in Levinas's thought: the possibility of conceiving the self beyond the language of being, by suspending ontological difference in favor of the call of a radical Other. Although otherness is undoubtedly the central theme of Levinas's philosophy, it is less obvious that his project explicitly aims to abolish ontological difference, despite his constant criticism of Heidegger. It can therefore be assumed that Marion's reading is significantly influenced by his own philosophical approach, which is oriented toward transcending the language of ontology. The context in which Marion first formulates this interpretation seems to confirm this hypothesis. This position is developed in the final section

¹ Waldenfels, *Schița unei fenomenologii responsive*, 47–48.

² E. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Duke University Press, 1979), 35–36.

³ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 37.

⁴ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 37–38.

⁵ Christina M. Gschwandtner, "The Neighbor and the Infinite: Marion and Levinas on the Encounter Between Self, Human Other, and God," *Continental Philosophy Review* 40 (2007), 232, doi: 10.1007/s11007-006-9036-z.

of the work "Idol and Distance",¹ as part of the analysis dedicated to the relationship between difference and distance. By comparing Levinas's and Derrida's conceptions of otherness and difference with his own notion of "distance," Marion brings together two seemingly divergent movements. On the one hand, Levinas distances himself from Heidegger, criticizing him for subordinating the relationship with the Other to ontology and attempting to conceive of otherness beyond the horizon of being. On the other hand, however, the Other remains a being and, as such, seems to remain within the realm of ontology. In his interpretation of "Totality and Infinity", Marion argues that although Levinas seems to open the possibility of transcending ontological language, his project actually reverses ontological difference by giving priority to beings over Being. The relationship with the Other thus remains a relationship between beings, prior to the relationship with Being, without yet stepping outside the ontological horizon.

Christina M. Gschwandtner points out that in "Other Than Being or Beyond Essence", this relationship takes on a radically different structure: The Other calls me as if I were a hostage, from a register that transcends ontology itself. However, from Marion's perspective, both works describe the relationship between the self and the Other, the decisive difference being that, in "Totality and Infinity", this relationship remains inscribed within the order of ontology, whereas, in "Other Than Being", it is grounded in a call that originates beyond any ontological determination.² This terminological shift is evident. In the second work, the Other can no longer be conceived in relation to being, but rather as "other than being," since it designates a difference that is not reducible to the opposition between being and non-being, but rather expresses the very difference of transcendence.³ The relationship with otherness thus lies outside any ontological order, without ceasing to concern beings. Although conceived from the perspective of being, "otherness" is absolutely distinct from essence: it shares no common ground with it and can be expressed only through the paradoxical term of a "beyond". Otherness manifests itself precisely through the fact that it eludes any ontological qualification and any determinable attribute.⁴

From the perspective of the ontology of the self, the difference between the two authors is significant. For Levinas, the self is ethically constituted through its exposure to the Other, without this relationship being reduced to a mere transcendence of ontology. For Marion, by contrast, the emphasis lies on the call that suspends the ontological question itself and reconfigures the self from the phenomenon of gift. In this sense, Marion does not simply develop Levinas's intuitions but shifts them into his own phenomenological horizon, dominated by a concern for transcending the language of being.

The Ontological Foundation of the Self: An Examination of Narrative Identity in 'idem' and 'ipse'

Before narrative identity received an explicit theoretical formulation, Dilthey shifted the problem of the self from the analysis of consciousness toward the unity of lived life. The self is conceived as a dynamic and active unity, whose coherence is constituted through memory, continuity, and the interpretation of one's own life.⁵ This orientation paves the way for

¹ Jean-Luc Marion, *The Idol and Distance: Five Studies*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Fordham University Press, 2001), 173.

² Gschwandtner, "The Neighbor and the Infinite: Marion and Levinas on the Encounter Between Self, Human Other, and God," 235.

³ E. Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1981), 3.

⁴ Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*, 16.

⁵ In contrast to the reductionist psychology of his time, which reduced mental life to a sum of processes and excluded the self from the realm of scientific inquiry, Dilthey conceives of personality not as an aggregate of disparate impulses, but as a process of self-organization centered on values, ideals, and life projects. Memory does not simply preserve the past but reconfigures it from the perspective of the present and integrates it into a horizon of future possibilities. Personal identity thus does not appear as a static given, but as the expression of a meaning-oriented existential continuity. Cf. Jacques Kornberg, "Wilhelm Dilthey on the Self and History: Some Theoretical Roots of Geistesgeschichte," *Central European History* 5, no. 4 (1972), 301, doi: 10.1017/s0008938900015557.

Ricoeur's reflection, which anchors it in a preliminary analysis of embodied being and its capacities.

The hermeneutic approach to the spatiality of the body leads to the subjectivity of "being able," which is characteristic of the phenomenology of the "capable human." From Maine de Biran to Husserl, "being able" finds its foundation in the Aristotelian concept of the relationship between potency and act (*dunamis-énergéia*), in the concept of praxis, as well as in Spinoza's *conatus*.¹ On the level of action, embodiment presupposes the capacity to remain the same, attested by fidelity to oneself and by keeping one's promise, which pertains to the very structure of ipseity. The self thus preserves its centrality, despite fluctuations in "active and passive capacities", continually rearticulating itself to maintain its stability.² Investigating how the self is constituted leads to a fundamental question that the narrative approach, through the distinction between *idem* and *ipse*, seeks to resolve: How can the self be, at the same time, the same and yet another?³ In this regard, Ricoeur identifies a fundamental dilemma of the subject in modern philosophy. Either we assume the existence of a subject identical to itself, despite the diversity of its states, or, following the example of Hume and Nietzsche, we consider that the identical subject is nothing more than a substantialist illusion, whose dissolution leaves behind nothing but a plurality of experiences. This dilemma disappears if we replace identity understood as *being the same* (*idem*) with identity understood as *being the same with oneself* (*ipse*). The difference between *idem* and *ipse* is nothing other than the difference between a substantial or formal identity and a narrative one. Identity with oneself eludes the dilemma between *the Same* and *the Other* to the extent that it is grounded in a temporal structure conforming to the model of dynamic identity, resulting from the poetic composition of a narrative text.⁴

Formal or substantial identity, in other words, identity as identity (*idem*), emphasizes the preservation of a constant self over time, across various circumstances, often perceived as a continuous entity. In other words, it refers to coherence and permanence in time and space. *Narrative identity* (*ipse*), by contrast, reveals a sense of the self in the process of becoming that is never fully defined. It focuses on individuality, marked by change and continuity.⁵ By its fluid and imperfect nature, *narrative identity* embraces change and variation while maintaining continuity throughout a lifetime.⁶ Bernard Dauenhauer emphasizes in *the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* that the identity of the self involves two dimensions. We are, and at the same time are not, the person we were ten years ago. The existence of ipse-type identity indicates that *the self* must be conceived in terms of the question "who?" rather than "what?"⁷, an important distinction, since the question "who?" opens up the narrative space, whereas the question "what?" remains trapped in the substantialist register. Along the same lines, Ines Pereira Rodrigues emphasizes that, for „ipse“, identity does not imply the affirmation of an unchanging core of personality: it does not determine one's nature, but rather one's „ipseity“.⁸

Philippe Cabestan shows that Ricoeur actually distinguishes between three types of identity: *ipse*, *idem*, and narrative identity, the latter serving as a mediator between the first two.⁹ Ricoeur analyzes this tension in his work "The Self as Other":

¹ Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 303.

² Kuan-Min Huang, "A Topology of the Self: Text and Author in Paul Ricoeur," *Philosophy and Culture* 42, no. 11 (2015): 117.

³ Kuan-Min Huang, "A Topology of the Self: Text and Author in Paul Ricoeur," 117.

⁴ Personal translation from Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 3, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (The University of Chicago Press, 1990), 246.

⁵ Mona Ericson, Björn Kjellander, "The Temporal Becoming Self—Toward a Ricoeurian Conceptualization of Identity," *Scandinavian Journal of Management* 34, no. 2 (2018): 205–207.

⁶ Declan Sheerin, *Deleuze and Ricoeur: Disavowed Affinities and the Narrative Self* (Continuum Books, 2009), 35.

⁷ Bernard Dauenhauer, David Pellauer, Scott Davidson, "Paul Ricoeur," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2002.

⁸ Ines Pereira Rodrigues, "On Narrative Identity and Truth of the Self," *Humanities Bulletin* 5, no. 1 (2022): 16–18.

⁹ Philippe Cabestan, "Who Am I? Ipse-Identity, Idem-Identity, and Narrative Identity," *Le philosophe* 43, no. 1 (2015): 151–160, doi: 10.3917/phoir.043.0151.

"To say *self* is not to say *I*. The *I* is posited—or is deposed. The *self* is implied reflexively in the operations, the analysis of which precedes the return toward this self. Upon this dialectic of analysis and reflection is grafted that of *idem* and *ipse*. Finally, the dialectic of the same and the other crowns the first two dialectics. I shall conclude this preface by underscoring the two features diametrically opposing, not simply the immediacy of the *I am*, but also the ambition of placing it in the position of ultimate foundation.¹

The dialectic between *idem* and *ipse* highlights the ever-increasing complexity of identity, illustrating the self's qualitative growth through repetition amid differences, as Deleuze puts it.² Although this distinction contributes significantly to psychopathology and ethics, the question remains whether it enables a complete understanding of the self in all its complexity. Joan McCarthy, in "Dennett and Ricoeur on the Narrative Self," distances herself from Ricoeur's perspective on certain points, comparing it with the naturalist-cognitivist model to assess both the advantages and limitations of the hermeneutic approach. A first objection concerns the status of narrative identity. Ricoeur assigns it the role of mediator between "ipse" and "idem," but the polarity he proposes suggests that narrative identity influences personal identity, functioning more as a specific mediator that oscillates between the pole of the character, where "idem" and "ipse" often converge, and the pole of self-maintenance, where the self becomes independent of narrative identity.³ Nevertheless, identifying narrative identity exclusively as a type of *ipse* identity, rather than as a mediator between the two poles, aligns with Ricoeur's broader vision. A second objection concerns the selective approaches to literary and psychoanalytic discourse. Ricoeur prioritizes the self that examines itself, which may overshadow the less reflexive dimensions of existence. At the same time, Joan McCarthy argues that the relationship between *idem* and *ipse* identities should not be read as stability versus change. Although the *idem* identity implies identity, usually associated with the persistence of object-like entities, such as *the real self*, the stability of the latter can be called into question,⁴ suggesting that the boundary between the two types of identity is more permeable than the Ricoeurian schema implies.

Identity conceived in this way is linked to a temporal framework that captures its changing nature, shaped by poetic narrative construction.⁵ In developing this argument, Émile Benveniste asserts that language plays a crucial role, shaping the individual's positioning through grammatical elements.⁶ The linguistic perspective ignores the historical aspects of an individual's identity. Ricoeur acknowledges that, although the self is linked to the narrative of life expressed through language, it often transcends the limits that language can encompass. This self, grounded in knowledge and reflection, remains integrated into the personal narrative, despite the multiple cultural and linguistic influences that can reshape it.⁷ The self's authentic meaning stems from interpreting signs, symbols, and discourses across space and time. Consequently, the self-forms as meaning develops: a process in which narrative plays a crucial role in connecting signs and symbols.⁸ Narrative identity thus continues to be constructed and deconstructed, remaining open to the multiple interpretations and retellings that accompany every moment of existence.

Personal identity is not determined by any of the terms analyzed thus far, but by their articulation: *idem*, *ipse*, and *narrative identity* together describe a self that is neither an absolute foundation nor a mere illusion. It is precisely this intermediary nature that raises the following question: to what extent does the hermeneutics of the self occupy an epistemological

¹ Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 18.

² Huang, "A Topology of the Self in Paul Ricoeur," 117-118.

³ Joan McCarthy, *Dennett, and Ricoeur on the Narrative Self* (Humanities Press, 2007), 151–152.

⁴ McCarthy, *Dennett, and Ricoeur on the Narrative Self*, 151–152.

⁵ Sheerin, *Deleuze and Ricoeur: Disavowed Affinities and the Narrative Self*, 35.

⁶ Émile Benveniste, "Subjectivity in Language," in *Problems in General Linguistics*, ed. Elizabeth Meek (University of Miami Press, 1971), 223-224.

⁷ Sheerin, *Deleuze and Ricoeur: Disavowed Affinities and the Narrative Self*, 35.

⁸ McCarthy, *Dennett, and Ricoeur on the Narrative Self*, 223.

and ontological place “situated beyond the alternative of the Cogito and the anti-Cogito?”¹ By rejecting *the Cartesian cogito* in favor of a self grounded in self-knowledge, *the narrative self* emerges from a life examined, purified, and clarified through the “cathartic” effects of personal, fictional, and cultural narratives. The constancy of the self thus refers to a self “shaped by the cultural works it has internalized.”²

The narrative self first appears in “Time and Narrative,” where Ricoeur explores plot-related deviations. This initial form can be viewed as a latent structure of *the narrative self*, not yet recognized as such. Although Ricoeur did not offer an explicit definition of narrative identity then, the main idea appears seven years later in “Oneself as Another.” Paul Ricoeur thus introduces the self as a narratively constructed character, a culturally rooted entity within a narrative framework that depicts essential aspects of human life.³ Assigning the self the role of a character in a play or a novel distances it from the psychological realm. Its dynamic and relational attributes, its stability alongside its vulnerability, and its individuality depend equally on context. For Ricoeur, “characters are themselves plots,” emphasizing the active, evolving, and relational nature of the self as an integral part of a narrative. This perspective distinguishes the self from perspectives limited exclusively to dispositions and habits, characterized primarily by “idem”, type conditions of identity.⁴

Narrative offers a distinct way of interpreting human life experiences, different from scientific explanations. Although the sciences typically rely on causal models to link events to preceding factors, narrative organizes them into a coherent story. This narrative method views human events as part of a broader story, in which each event gains meaning through its relationship to the whole, and the whole, in turn, is shaped by individual events. Consequently, understanding a “narrative event” depends on its context within the story.⁵ Just as narrative discourse links various events, characters, and occurrences into a coherent plot, it also weaves together different temporal elements. Although the “mimetic arc” links these processes, the transition from literary textual identity to personal identity matters more for self-formation than narrative differences that diverge from prefigurative elements. It is essential to note how the constancy of the self interacts with narrative identity.

Ricoeur emphasizes that understanding personal identity depends significantly on a temporal framework that captures the story created through narrative development. Although the phenomenology of temporal experience and narrative structures are hermeneutically linked, resolving identity issues ultimately depends on imagination.⁶ Narrative identity continues to be constructed and, at the same time, deconstructed.⁷ From this perspective, the transition from textual identity to personal identity matters more for the formation of the self than narrative deviations from prefigurative elements. The construction of the plot thus appears as an “oscillation” between alignment with established narrative traditions and their challenge. Between these poles lies a spectrum that includes both established and innovative variations.⁸ The subject’s narrative identity is characterized by flexibility and continuous change: *the narrative self* reconfigures itself through reflective engagement with various narrative frameworks, serving as both the creator and the critic of its own story, simultaneously and continuously shaping and reshaping personal narratives.⁹

¹ Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 16.

² Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 3, 159.

³ McCarthy, *Dennett and Ricoeur on the Narrative Self*, 17.

⁴ McCarthy, *Dennett and Ricoeur on the Narrative Self*, 151–152.

⁵ Henry Issac Venema, *Identifying Selfhood: Imagination, Narrative, and Hermeneutics in the Thought of Paul Ricoeur* (State University of New York Press, 2000), 96–97.

⁶ Venema, *Identifying Selfhood*, 96–97.

⁷ Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 3, 249. Mark Muldoon, *Tricks of Time: Bergson, Merleau-Ponty, and Ricoeur in Search of Time, Self, and Meaning* (Duchesne University Press, 2008), 216.

⁸ Sheerin, *Deleuze and Ricoeur*, 35.

⁹ Muldoon, *Tricks of Time*, 216–217.

The narrative dimension of the self involves two forms of responsibility. The first concerns commitment; as we shape our narrative voice and distinguish our story from its anonymous origins, we become aware of the full scope of the consequences of our promises and commitments. The second concerns legacy; although Ricoeur agrees with Montaigne that self-expression aids in a better understanding of the self, he emphasizes the hermeneutic significance of viewing formative narratives from the past as essential archives of human suffering, hope, and action.¹ Narrative identity thus emerges as a means of self-coherence, transforming one's life story into a lived experience.

The narrative structure of identity acts as a catalyst, allowing individuals to "be and, at the same time, act differently." Narrative does not in and of itself imply a true constancy of the self, except for those decisions that engage ethical responsibility as the basis for the coherence of the self.² This is precisely why the narrative function is, at this point, more important than mere phenomenological description.³ Factual elements serve as an objective record, while the imaginative dimension introduces variations that can disrupt narrative coherence: the narrative self therefore remains a permanently open construction.

The Concept of Self within the Ontological Framework and Temporal Model

In "Phenomenology of Perception", Merleau-Ponty explicitly links the problem of temporality to that of subjectivity, arguing that time cannot be understood on the basis of a pre-established conception of the subject. Both realism, which reduces time to the objective succession of moments, and idealism, which transforms it into a constitution of consciousness, remain "prisoners" of the same opposition between subject and object. The former dissolves the unity of experience into a succession of disparate instances, while the latter suppresses temporal difference by integrating the past and the future into a present of consciousness.

In contrast to these models, Merleau-Ponty, following Husserl, proposes a phenomenological understanding of time as an original dimension of existence. Time is neither an object external to consciousness nor a product of its constitutive activity, but rather the very mode of unfolding of *being-in-the-world*. The self, therefore, does not precede temporality but is constituted in and through it. Only by abandoning the model of an exclusively intentional and objectifying consciousness can the pre-reflective dimension of experience, in which time and the self co-belong, be understood. Merleau-Ponty's assertion that "time is someone" expresses precisely this idea: personal identity is not an original principle, but rather the cohesion of a life that is realized in the temporal unfolding of existence.⁴

Merleau-Ponty draws on the Husserlian distinction between objectifying consciousness and operative intentionality. The unity of consciousness is not grounded in representational memory, but in retention, understood as a passive synthesis that maintains the continuity of experience without transforming the past into an object of reflection. Self-consciousness does not result from a reflexive act through which the subject becomes an object of its own knowledge but is pre-reflexive to any experience: it preserves the past and anticipates the future without representing them as objects, thereby making possible the continuity of experience and the formation of personal identity. Self-consciousness is, in this sense, intrinsic to intentionality and precedes any reflexive objectification.⁵ However, the divergence from Husserl occurs here: Merleau-Ponty refuses to treat this synthesis as an act of transcendental consciousness. While Husserl locates temporalization in absolute consciousness, Merleau-Ponty identifies the self with the very movement of time. The self does not constitute time, but

¹ Muldoon, *Tricks of Time*, 224–225.

² Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 3, 249.

³ Venema, *Identifying Selfhood*, 96–97.

⁴ Michael R. Kelly, "The Subject as Time: Merleau-Ponty's Transition from Phenomenology to Ontology," in *Time, Memory, Institution: Merleau-Ponty's New Ontology of Self*, ed. David Morris and Kym Maclaren (Ohio University Press, 2015), 205–206.

⁵ Kelly, "The Subject as Time: Merleau-Ponty's Transition from Phenomenology to Ontology," 206–207.

constitutes itself as temporality, and its transcendence does not derive from an act of consciousness, but from the ek-static character of time itself. Original temporality is therefore not a mere succession of moments, but a power that holds them together in a dynamic unity. For this reason, "ultimate subjectivity is not temporal in the empirical sense of the term,"¹ since it cannot be reduced to a succession of states of consciousness. It is not situated in time as an object among others: "the self is not in time because it assumes or experiences time and merges with the cohesion of a life"². Thus, the present is not an isolated point, but a simultaneous opening toward the past and the future, and temporality emerges as the original structure of subjectivity. The Merleau-Ponty conception of temporality therefore excludes the idea of an isolated present or a discontinuous succession of states of consciousness. The present possesses a "temporal thickness," in which the past remains active through the superimposition of retentions, and the future takes shape through the structures of possibility within the field of the present. It is precisely this continuity that makes the unity of selfhood possible: the self is not the identity of a permanent substance, but the cohesion of a field of experience in which temporal ecstasies do not succeed one another, but intertwine. The same structure is found in the spatial order: there is a "natural and non-human space," which does not denote an objective space external to consciousness, but rather the pre-reflective background of experience from which any determination of the world is constituted. Both temporality and spatiality thus express the original character of the relationship between the self and the world, prior to any objectification.³ On the same grounds, Merleau-Ponty also distances himself from the Bergsonian interpretation of temporality. According to Lawlor's reading, Bergson "creates time from the preserved present, evolution from what has evolved," conceiving the past as a derivative of the present.⁴ Merleau-Ponty, however, rejects this position, because it makes the past a product of present consciousness. On the contrary, the present itself is possible only against the backdrop of a temporality, of a "past which has never been a present"⁵ and which precedes any act of representation or recollection. It is not the past that depends on the present, but the present that derives its own consistency from this original temporal depth.⁶ Through this shift, phenomenology moves from "time as subject" to "the subject as time," paving the way for a later ontology in which being and temporality become inseparable.

Merleau-Ponty radicalizes the Husserlian analysis of temporality by drawing closer to Heidegger's interpretation of time as self-affection. Drawing inspiration from Heidegger's *Kantbuch*, he shifts intentionality from consciousness to time itself, such that the self-affection of time becomes the condition of transcendence and self-consciousness. From this perspective, the self is no longer the principle of time's constitution but arises from the movement through which time opens up and relates to itself. Through this reversal, Merleau-Ponty departs from Husserl's transcendental phenomenology and moves toward an ontology of temporality. Selfhood is no longer grounded in an absolute consciousness, but arises from the ek-static dynamics of time itself, which makes possible both the relationship with the world and the self's relationship with itself. Temporality thus no longer appears as an attribute of the subject, but as an ontological principle that makes the self possible.⁷

Contemporary interpretations confirm and expand upon this direction. In the anthology "Time, Memory, Institution: Merleau-Ponty's New Ontology of Self," the everyday experience of the self as a unitary and stable identity does not appear as an original given, but as the result of an already established temporal structure: the continuity we attribute to our own

¹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (Routledge, 1981), 422.

² Kelly, "The Subject as Time: Merleau-Ponty's Transition from Phenomenology to Ontology," 206–207.

³ Scott L. Marratto, *The Intercorporeal Self: Merleau-Ponty on Subjectivity* (State University of New York Press, 2012), 56.

⁴ Leonard Lawlor, "The End of Ontology," *Chiasmi International* 1 (1999): 245, doi: 10.5840/chiasmi1999152.

⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 242. This same formulation will be taken up again in Merleau-Ponty's later writings. It will later take on significant importance, particularly in Levinas's work and in Derridean interpretations.

⁶ Marratto, *The Intercorporeal Self: Merleau-Ponty on Subjectivity*, 63.

⁷ Kelly, "The Subject as Time: Merleau-Ponty's Transition from Phenomenology to Ontology," 209–210.

identity depends on memory and on the establishment of a coherent temporal horizon, which confers a sense of familiarity and stability upon existence. This perspective shifts phenomenology from the analysis of consciousness to the analysis of the processes through which meaning and identity are established. Phenomenology is no longer understood as a mere description of subjective experience, but as an investigation of the ontological conditions that make the emergence of this experience possible. In this sense, the self is not the starting point of reflection, but one moment in an original dynamic of being, in which time, memory, and the establishment of meaning precede any form of self-identification.¹

The concept of the Self as a ritual involving personal experience

While existential and hermeneutic phenomenology have successively deconstructed the figure of the metaphysical subject, without, however, abandoning selfhood as the principle of self-reference, the phenomenology of liturgical experience introduces a new shift. The issue is no longer that of how the self understands itself, whether existentially or narratively, but rather that of the possibility of an experience in which the self ceases to constitute the center of its own manifestation. From this perspective, identity is no longer grounded in reflexivity, temporality, or fidelity to the self, but in the precedence of an absolute otherness, which constitutes the human being prior to any act of consciousness.

Lacoste observes that, in Husserlian phenomenology, experience is fundamentally understood as an act of knowledge (*connaissance*), since intentionality denotes the consciousness of various *Erlebnisse*.² In "Experience and the Absolute", he distances himself from this perspective, asserting that liturgical experience eludes "the jurisdiction of consciousness."³ This is not a complete exclusion of consciousness: if liturgical experience can be described in terms of consciousness, it is the experience in which consciousness encounters a veiled Absolute, whose manifestation remains constitutively ambiguous and demands unceasing interpretation, without the guarantee of a definitive understanding.⁴ The relationship with God cannot, therefore, be described in the usual terms of intentionality. While in classical phenomenology meaning arises through the acts of consciousness, the liturgy implies a reversal of this perspective: it is not man who directs himself toward God, but God who directs Himself toward man. For this reason, consciousness no longer constitutes the center of experience, and the ego loses its privilege as the original principle of phenomenation. Although it possesses phenomenal content, liturgical experience does not present it as an intentional object but rather removes the self from any kind of centrality.⁵ Human beings, therefore, no longer appear as the starting point of meaning, but as the term of an intention that precedes them; they are nothing but the end of a gaze whose scope they cannot grasp in consciousness.⁶

The liturgical experience is therefore not grounded in the metaphysics of representation, nor in the cognitive model of the opposition between subject and object, but in a mode of manifestation that precedes objectification. In accordance with Heidegger's intuition regarding affective moods (*Stimmungen*), Lacoste considers that the fundamental truths of existence are not acquired through theoretical knowledge, but through an affective experience that opens up the world. The possibilities of disclosure inherent in knowledge are limited in comparison to the original disclosure brought about by affective dispositions, through which

¹ David Morris and Kym MacLaren, eds., *Time, Memory, Institution: Merleau-Ponty's New Ontology of Self* (Ohio University Press, 2015), 10–13.

² Jean-Yves Lacoste, *Recherches sur la parole* (Peeters, 2015), 31.

³ Jean-Yves Lacoste, *Experience and the Absolute: Disputed Questions on the Humanity of Man*, trans. Mark Raftery-Skehan (Fordham University Press, 2004), 62.

⁴ Lacoste, *Experience and the Absolute*, 63.

⁵ Lacoste, *Experience and the Absolute*, 151.

⁶ Lacoste, *Experience and the Absolute*, 152.

Dasein is brought before its own being as “there.”¹ Drawing on Heidegger’s analysis of *being-in-the-world*, Lacoste begins his reflection by examining “place” and “world” as transcendental structures of human existence. However, he goes beyond the Heideggerian framework by posing a question that Heidegger does not develop in “Being and Time”: whether man’s original belonging to the world is grounded in consciousness. His answer is negative. The world precedes any conscious act and exerts a constitutive power over Dasein, such that openness (*Erschlossenheit*) to the world is not the product of consciousness, but the condition of its possibility.² Consciousness does not constitute the world but reflects upon an already given belonging. Consequently, man’s original relationship with place and the world takes precedence over any reflective activity, and the attempt to suspend this belonging in favor of an immediate relationship with the Absolute appears, in Lacoste’s terms, as paradoxical behavior.³ This tension, however, does not contradict Heidegger’s analysis. Heidegger neither excludes Christian identity nor integrates it among the existential modes of *being-in-the-world*. His ontological analysis remains deliberately neutral regarding the relationship between man and God. As he explicitly states, “the ontological interpretation of Dasein as being-in-the-world takes neither a positive nor a negative stance regarding a possible being-in-God”⁴; on the contrary, only after clarifying the ontological structure of Dasein can the question regarding the ontological status of its relationship with God be legitimately formulated. Thus, the *coram Deo* relationship is not denied, but is set aside as an issue, since it does not belong to the fundamental existential analysis.

Lacoste refuses to opt exclusively for one of Heidegger’s perspectives on situated existence the “world” in “Being and Time” and the “earth” in his later writings. He proposes a phenomenological mediation, arguing that both “the world” and “the earth” represent possibilities that open up from the more primordial fact of situatedness (*lieu, avoir-lieu*). Human existence is always a situated existence, and corporeality constitutes the condition of this situatedness. “The world” and “the earth” do not denote two competing models of existence, but rather two phenomenal modes of dwelling, grounded in the same original condition of situatedness.⁵ Lacoste’s phenomenological topology does not, therefore, seek to establish the ontological priority of one concept over another, but rather to show that humanity’s relationship with being is always mediated by corporeality and situatedness.⁶ For this reason, the “world of fatigue,” the “world of work,” or the “world of liturgy” are not mere psychological variations, but distinct modes of manifestation of situated existence, and the task of phenomenology consists in describing these fundamental configurations of experience.⁷ The existence of a place is not decisive, but rather the experience of being removed from one’s own center and of no longer being able to inhabit the world exclusively from the perspective of the self.⁸ From this perspective, liturgical experience does not denote a mere suspension of everyday existence, but a radical transformation in the way the self relates to itself and to the world.⁹ It does not annul the self, but suspends its claim to transcendental autonomy: the human being continues to say “I,” yet discovers himself first and foremost as a “you” of God.

¹ Joseph Rivera, *Phenomenology and the Horizon of Experience: Spiritual Themes in Henry, Marion, and Lacoste* (Routledge, 2021), 180.

² Lacoste, *Experience and the Absolute*, 10.

³ Jan Čermý, “A Too-Future Eschatology? The Limits of the Phenomenology of Liturgy in Jean-Yves Lacoste,” *Open Theology* 5, no. 1 (2019): 387, doi: 10.1515/opth-2019-0028.

⁴ Martin Heidegger, *Pathmarks*, trans. William McNeill (Cambridge University Press, 1998), 371.

⁵ Jean-Yves Lacoste, *Expérience et Absolu. Questions disputées sur l’humanité de l’homme* (Paris: PUF, 1994). *Experience and the Absolute. Disputed Questions on the Humanity of Man*, 7–22.

⁶ Joeri Schrijvers, “Jean-Yves Lacoste: A Phenomenology of Liturgy,” *The Heythrop Journal* 46, no. 3 (2005): 316, doi: 10.1111/j.1468-2265.2005.00263.x.

⁷ Lacoste, *Experience and the Absolute: Disputed Questions on the Humanity of Man*, 20–22.

⁸ R.C. Reed, “Experience and the Absolute Other. Why Lacoste Should Look Again at Levinas,” *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 44, no. 3 (2016): 476–477, doi: 10.1111/jore.12150.

⁹ Reed, “Experience and the Absolute Other. Why Lacoste Should Look Again at Levinas,” 473.

An authentic "being before God," therefore, does not add a new property to the self, but rather disrupts its usual structure of *being-in-the-world*, compelling it to understand itself starting from an otherness that precedes it and claims it.¹ The relationship between I and You thus ceases to be organized on the basis of the primacy of consciousness and is reconfigured on the basis of the initiative of absolute otherness.

From the perspective of the concept of the self, the consequence is decisive. The liturgy removes the autonomous subject from its position of principle and suspends the constitutive role of transcendental consciousness. Liturgical experience is not an experience of a religious object but consists in the transformation of the self in relation to the Absolute. To the extent that the self constitutes the instance through which the phenomenon manifests itself, any experience simultaneously transforms both what appears and the one to whom it appears. Therefore, it does not consist in the objectification of God, but in a reconfiguration of selfhood *coram Deo*, where the self is rather exposed and configured.² Selfhood is no longer understood as reflexive self-possession, but as embodied existence, exposed to the world, to the other, and to God. The carnal dimension of existence thus becomes the original locus of the self's manifestation, and the liturgical experience reveals selfhood that is constituted not by itself, but through an openness that precedes any act of consciousness. From this perspective, the liturgical experience can be likened to Levinas's description of the self as responsible before the other, even though Lacoste refuses to reduce the liturgical phenomenon to the ethical realm. The difference between the two does not concern the existence of a constitutive otherness, but rather its phenomenological and theological status.

Conclusions

The contemporary perspective on the ontological status of the self is shaped by the transformation of phenomenological language. Language is no longer conceived as an autonomous, closed system of signs, but as a dynamic, creative structure whose autonomy derives from its capacity to express experience and to express itself. From this perspective, "language is not merely a semantic fact or a system of meanings, but *logos*, that is, free and intentional human expression."³ Such an understanding presupposes the existence of an "original knowledge," which precedes any objectification and constitutes the condition of possibility for any subsequent research. Even if scientific description can revise or correct the data of immediate experience, it cannot eliminate the constitutive role of this original experience, which pre-determines the field of all knowledge.⁴

This transformation of language has not only terminological significance but also methodological significance. In phenomenology, the description of how the self manifests itself in experience does not constitute a preliminary stage external to ontology but rather establishes the very horizon within which the question concerning its being can be formulated. For this reason, ontology does not develop in parallel with phenomenology, nor does it follow it, but rather within the phenomenological approach: every ontological shift is preceded by a phenomenological reconfiguration of experience and language within which the ontology of the self can be articulated.⁵

Contemporary developments regarding *the self* thus emerge from a prior reconfiguration of phenomenological language, making it possible to describe dimensions of selfhood inaccessible to the subject's metaphysical vocabulary. The reconfiguration of the self begins by transcending its identification with the subject of consciousness and progresses through the thematization of corporeality, otherness, and the relationship to the Absolute. While the

¹ Reed, "Experience and the Absolute Other. Why Lacoste Should Look Again at Levinas," 473.

² Rivera, *Phenomenology and the Horizon of Experience: Spiritual Themes in Henry, Marion, and Lacoste*, 200.

³ Eugen Coșeriu, *Teoria limbajului și lingvistica generală. Cinci studii*, Romanian edition by Nicolae Saramandu (Enciclopedică, 2004), 253.

⁴ Coșeriu, *Teoria limbajului și lingvistica generală. Cinci studii*, 143.

⁵ Strawson, "The Phenomenology and Ontology of the Self," 43.

phenomenology of embodiment shows that the self reveals itself through the self-affection of life and its original corporeality, the phenomenology of otherness highlights that selfhood is not constituted in the reflexive isolation of consciousness, but in openness toward the Other and the Absolute. The hermeneutic horizon, in turn, shows that the self is not possessed directly, but is understood through the mediation of language, action, and narrative, with its identity taking shape in the interpretation of its own narrative. The liturgical dimension radicalizes this perspective, showing that relating to the Absolute does not suspend the embodied and situated condition of existence, but rather transforms the very way of inhabiting the world. This reconfiguration has a precise basis: human beings cannot suspend either the body or the place they occupy. The experience of the self always remains embodied and situated.¹ From this perspective, narrative identity, temporality, and liturgical experience are not specific concerns of French phenomenology, but expressions of the same effort to develop a language that describes the self beyond the paradigm of reflexive consciousness. For this reason, liturgical experience does not represent an escape from the world, but rather a transformation of the way we inhabit it through which corporeality, temporality, and the relationship to the Absolute acquire a new ontological significance.

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¹ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 408-409.

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