

Rev. Piotr Karpiński

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1692-3876>

The Pontifical University of John Paul II in Krakow

 <https://ror.org/0583g9182>

Searching for relationship. Eros as a model of intersubjective relation in approach of Michel Henry and Christos Yannaras

 <https://doi.org/10.15633/lie.30101>

Abstrakt

Szukając relacji. Eros jako model relacji intersubiektywnej w ujęciu Michela Henry'ego i Christosa Yannarasa

Jest czymś paradoksalnym, że filozoficzne ujęcie relacji początkowo w ogóle nie odnosiło się do sfery intersubiektywnej. Co więcej, w interpretacji metafizycznej relacja jest czymś pochodnym w stosunku do tego, co wiąże. Zagadnienie intersubiektywności doczekało się wstępnych przemyśleń dopiero w drugiej połowie XIX wieku, zaś za sprawą fenomenologii, zwłaszcza francuskiej wysunęło się na pierwszy plan. Po odrzuceniu Husserlowskiej koncepcji poznania Innego jako Alter ego to w tym środowisku wypracowane zostały główne modele relacji międzyludzkich, wśród których doniosłe miejsce zajmuje fenomen erotyczny. Artykuł przedstawia relację erotyczną w dwóch ujęciach: Michela Henry'ego i Christosa Yannarasa, które choć wydają się *prima facie* sprzeczne, to jednak ciekawie uzupełniają się i naświetlają nawzajem. U obu relacja erotyczna jest pierwszorzędnym sposobem przeżywania życia, a jej fundamentem jest pragnienie. Obaj żywią przekonanie, że Eros jest relacją tragiczną, świadczącą o naszej skończonej kondycji. U obu opisy relacji erotycznej są niezwykle realistyczne, włączając w nią także konflikt i cierpienie. Obaj dokonują dekonstrukcji ego, której przejawem jest właśnie wydarzenie miłości. Wreszcie obaj rozwijają fenomenologię życia i umieszczają w jej sercu relację. Dzięki zestawieniu opisów Henry'ego i Yannarasa relacja erotyczna jawi się jako jednocześnie konieczna i niemożliwa, a więc jako paradoks.

Słowa kluczowe: ego, Eros, fenomenologia, Henry, pożądanie, relacja, Yannaras, życie

Abstract

Searching for relationship. Eros as a model of intersubjective relation in approach of Michel Henry and Christos Yannaras

It is paradoxical that the philosophical approach to relations initially did not refer to the intersubjective sphere at all. Moreover, in the metaphysical interpretation, the relation is something derived from what it binds. The issue of intersubjectivity received initial consideration only in the second half of the 19th century, and thanks to phenomenology, especially French, it came to the fore. After rejecting Husserl's concept of knowing the Other as Alter ego, it was in this environment that the main models of interpersonal relations were developed, among which the erotic phenomenon occupies a significant place. The paper presents the erotic relationship in two perspectives: by Michel Henry and Christos Yannaras, which seem prima facie contradictory, but they complement and illuminate each other in an interesting way. For both philosophers, the erotic relationship is the primary way of experiencing life, and its foundation is desire. Both are convinced that Eros is a tragic relation, testifying to our finite condition. In both, the descriptions of the erotic relationship are extremely realistic, including in it also conflict and suffering. Both perform the deconstruction of the ego, which manifests itself in the event of love. Finally, both develop the phenomenology of life and place relationship at its heart. Thanks to the juxtaposition of Henry's and Yannaras's descriptions, the erotic relationship appears as both necessary and impossible, and thus as a paradox.

Keywords: desire, ego, Eros, Henry, life, phenomenology, relation, Yannaras

The philosophical approach to relation initially did not refer to the intersubjective sphere at all. Moreover, in the metaphysical interpretation, the relation is something derived from what it binds. The issue of intersubjectivity received initial consideration only in the second half of the 19th century, and thanks to phenomenology, especially the French one, it came to the fore. After rejecting Husserl's concept of knowing the Other as *Alter ego*, it was in this environment that the main models of interpersonal relations were developed, among which the erotic phenomenon occupies a significant place¹. The latter is nothing more than a love relationship between two people. At the same time, it is also a privileged situation to directly experience of the other person through the stimulated body in the very essence of his or her life.

Eros is something paradoxical. On the one hand, Renaud Barbaras notes that it is assigned to the sphere of affectivity, and therefore radically opposed to the area of knowledge. Even if it means a relationship with the Other, it reveals nothing and does not allow us to know anything. On the contrary, it assumes that its object is already known in order to be able to refer to it, which Husserl himself emphasized by pointing to the priority of objectifying acts over non-objectifying acts². Accordingly, desire neither establishes nor reveals its object, which has been previously given in representation. In short, something must first be an object in order to be secondarily an object of desire. In this approach, cognition and Eros are two modes of relation that are irreducible to each other.

On the other hand, a phenomenological treatment of Eros must take into account Husserl's very definition of intentional consciousness as a goal striving for its fulfillment. Desire is an essential feature of consciousness, it takes place in the area of cogito. It is the relation between consciousness and the object. What for some was an obscuration of knowledge, for others becomes a privileged model of relations and references to the Other, which cannot be included in a purely objectifying structure. And it is this approach to Eros that dominates in phenomenology.

1 In the area of French phenomenology, at least three concepts of intersubjectivity can be identified: Sartre's concept of the gaze of the Other, the concept of interiorized otherness (Lévinas, Henry) and the concept of the erotic phenomenon (Lévinas, Henry, Marion, etc.).

2 Cf. R. Barbaras, *L'Eros et la désublimation du désir*, "Alter. Revue de phénoménologie" (2012) no 20, p. 13.

In contemporary phenomenology, we can talk about a renaissance or at least increased interest in erotic topics, which some even call the “erotic turn”³. This is evidenced by the works of Christos Yannaras (*Variations on the Song of Songs*⁴; *Person and Eros*⁵); Michel Henry (*Incarnation. A philosophy of flesh*⁶); Jean-Luc Marion (*The erotic phenomenon*⁷), or Jean-Louis Chrétien (*La symbolique du corps: la tradition chrétienne du Cantique des Cantiques*⁸).

In this paper, I would like to present the erotic relation from two perspectives: Michel Henry’s and Christos Yannaras’, which, although *prima facie* seeming contradictory, interestingly complement and illuminate each other. M. Henry addressed the issue of erotic relation in the work *Incarnation*. However, the detailed phenomenological descriptions of this relation are somehow obscured by the negative result of his research: one lover will never reach the other in his experience of life, which he calls the “failure of Eros”⁹. A completely different approach is presented by the Greek theological philosopher Christos Yannaras, who distinguishes two “modes” of existence: natural and erotic. In the natural mode, a person remains egoistic and fights for his or her own satisfaction and survival, while in the erotic mode he reaches life and functions in relationships. *Variations on the Song of Songs* by Yannaras contain extremely interesting phenomenological descriptions of a love relationship.

The sense of juxtaposing the thoughts of Henry and Yannaras is not obvious. While for Yannaras the theme of Eros is a way of being in a relationship and opening up to life, which means accepting a person, in Henry’s case the lovers are confronted with the impossibility of radically knowing each other, that is, their own experience of life, through erotic union. While Yannaras describes the erotic mode of being as an everyday way of communion with

3 P. Karpiński, *Zwrot erotyczny w fenomenologii francuskiej?*, “Ruch Filozoficzny” 77 (2021) no 1, p. 90.

4 Ch. Yannaras, *Variations on the Song of Songs*, tr. N. Russell, Brookline 2005.

5 Ch. Yannaras, *Person and Eros*, tr. N. Russell, Brookline 2007.

6 M. Henry, *Incarnation. A philosophy of flesh*, tr. K. Hefty, Evanston 2015.

7 J.-L. Marion, *The erotic phenomenon*, tr. S. E. Lewis, Chicago 2006.

8 J.-L. Chrétien, *La symbolique du corps: la tradition chrétienne du Cantique des Cantiques*, Paris 2005.

9 M. Henry, *Incarnation*, p. 229. Cf. P. Karpiński, *Porażka erosa w fenomenologii Michela Henry’ego*, in: *Motyw miłości w wybranych tekstach literackich i innych dziedzinach kultury*, eds. P. Szymczyk, E. Chodźko, Lublin 2018, pp. 43–52.

the Other, Henry sees in the erotic relation the experienced impossibility of the very communion.

However, following the analyzes of Natalie Depraz¹⁰, many similarities can be identified between both thinkers. Firstly, in both of them the desire drive comes to the fore in an erotic relationship. Secondly, both of them believe that Eros is a tragic relationship, proving the finiteness of our condition. Thirdly, in both of them the descriptions of the erotic relationship are extremely realistic, including conflict and suffering. Fourthly, both of them perform the deconstruction of the ego, which manifests itself in the event of love. Fifthly, they both develop the phenomenology of life and place at its heart the erotic relationship with such categories as risk and difficulty, where authenticity goes in pair with discomfort. In short, the juxtaposition of Yannaras' and Henry's thoughts not only allows their valuable analyzes to resonate better, but above all it places the Yannaras' ontology of the erotic relationship against the background of the Henry's phenomenology of life.

Eros and desire

Eros is understood as ontological tension and orientation towards the other, striving for union with the other, gravitation towards him. The dynamics of this pursuit is much more important than its result in the form of, for example, a child or marriage. What is unique is its internal strength and mechanism that allows an erotic relationship to survive regardless of the objective, external situation. Both Yannaras and Henry agree that the internal force of the erotic relationship and its "mechanism" is desire, and even drive. A characteristic feature of both philosophers is that they draw inspiration in this area from psychoanalytic thought (both Lacan and Freud), but also, which may seem surprising, from the patristic tradition.

¹⁰ N. Depraz, *Eros et relation. Puissance générative et engendrement mutuel des pensées de Michel Henry et Christos Yannaras*, "Alter. Revue de phénoménologie" (2012) no 20, pp. 27–38; N. Depraz, *Phénoménologie de la chair et théologie de l'erôs*, in: Michel Henry. *Pensée de la vie et culture contemporaine*, ed. J.-F. Lavigne, Paris 2006, pp. 167–181.

Yannaras writes: “In the positivist language of psychoanalytic realism, the desire is difficult to define. It is the libido — the erotic desire for a relationship of fulfillment. What every human being seeks, from the moment of separation from the womb, is the immediacy and fullness of a relationship — *coessentia*. Not to be, at first, as a biological self and then to have relationships, but rather to draw existence from relationship — to exist as an event of relationship”¹¹. Yannaras refers to the thoughts of the Viennese psychoanalyst Igor A. Caruso, whom he comments in the work *Person and Eros*: “The immediate experience of relation confirms the relative or even conventional character of the semantic differentiations of the natural energy: the human glance, the expression of the face, the gesture, the articulated thought, the manifestation of love — are these expressions of the soul or body? Modern depth psychology (“Tiefenpsychologie”) has been shown experimentally how difficult it is to make real distinctions between different areas of experience”¹². It can be said that, according to Yannaras, the drive of erotic desire is a natural energy and a basic impulse that occurs earlier and below all human divisions into body, soul and spirit.

Already in the work *The genealogy of psychoanalysis* (*Généalogie de la psychanalyse*) from 1985, Michel Henry revealed his interest in primary affectivity and presented its criticism¹³. However, in the work *Incarnation*, drive is for him a synonym for transcendental affectivity and a pathos-filled force: “every force in itself is full of pathos, and at bottom that is what the concept of drive, without knowing it, in fact expresses”¹⁴. Pathos means the ability to experience, or self-affection. Drive is a force striving towards the Other, but one that wants to experience it.

Desire, however, cannot be understood too mechanically. It is definitely a force that also has a spiritual dimension. That is why Yannaras and Henry refer to Saint Gregory of Nyssa and his theological concept of desire. This fourth-century theologian presented desire as *epectasy*, Greek

11 Ch. Yannaras, *Psychoanalysis and Orthodox anthropology*, in: *Personhood*, ed. J. T. Chirban, London 1996, p. 84.

12 Ch. Yannaras, *Person and Eros*, p. 48.

13 M. Henry, *The genealogy of psychoanalysis*, tr. D. Brick, Stanford 1993.

14 M. Henry, *Incarnation*, p. 158.

epektasis — a term used to describe the soul's eternal movement into God's infinite being. Gregory borrows this term from the *Letter to the Philippians*, where Saint Paul writes that he considers everything as less than nothing and strives to know Jesus Christ: "Not as if I had even now got the reward or been made complete: but I go on in the hope that I may come to the knowledge of that for which I was made the servant of Christ Jesus. Brothers, it is clear to me that I have not come to that knowledge; but one thing I do, letting go those things which are past, and stretching out [*epekteinomenos*] to the things which are before, I go forward to the mark, even the reward of the high purpose of God in Christ Jesus" (Phil 3:12–14). *Epectasy* is a movement towards the desired, a search that does not satisfy us with what we have already achieved and always leads further from what we are. Jean Daniélou describes the experience of *epektasis* as follows: "It is both the most demanding in the order of self-emptying and the gentlest in the order of tasting God. And this double state, which is both possession and exit, is what Saint Gregory described with the term *epektasis*"¹⁵. The word itself expresses this duality of movement: on the one hand *epi* — possession, the real grasping of something, in this case the presence of God in the soul, on the other hand *ek* — the coming out of oneself, the infinite irreducibility of God to the soul that always comes out yourself in the ecstasy of love. Therefore, desire is not an expression of lack in the sense of deprivation or even frustration, but a full and intense test of inner mobilization. In desire, stability (*stasis*) and movement (*kinesis*) are actually the same thing.

Jean-Yves Leloup says similarly about "Gregorian Eros": "This kinship with infinity makes human an unsatisfied animal, a creature of desire"¹⁶. Desire, therefore, does not come from man, but results from his affinity with the divine nature to which he strives. It can be said that the patristic *epectasy* well reflects what Yannaras calls "self-transcendence" and Henry "auto-generation". In this way, we have shown the first feature of Eros, which is the desire — striving

15 J. Daniélou, *Platonisme et théologie mystique. Essai sur la doctrine spirituelle de saint Grégoire de Nysse*, Paris 1944, pp. 321–322.

16 Grégoire de Nysse, *Vie de Moïse*, présenté par J.-Y. Leloup, traduit par J. Daniélou, Paris 1993, p. 33.

hard for something or someone. It is not a blind mechanism, but an energy permeating all dimensions of human.

The tragedy of Eros

If Eros is a pursuit, one of its aspects is unfulfillment, dissatisfaction, the inability to be completely satisfied. Eros is very openness, inclination and desire rather than satisfaction. We can see here traces of the classic approach to Eros, for example from Plato's *Symposium*, where he is shown as the child of Poverty (*Penia*) and Resource (*Poros*), an intermediate being between god and human, and his nature consists in constant striving, searching rather than possession. Eros is freedom, but every freedom also has a disturbing aspect. Both Yannaras and Henry notice this and so describe the erotic relationship as a tragic event.

M. Henry emphasizes that in eroticism each subject has his or her own experiences, irreducible to another. The other is initially experienced as irreducible subjectivity, as bodily transcendence. It is worth recalling that the corporeal subject in his concept is experiencing life in immanence. Therefore, the question arises whether in an erotic relationship one life comes to know the other life, whether one subject can have experience of how the other experiences life in his or her immanence. Does one ipseity reach the other in its own life? We can ask this question in another way: is eroticism what gives access to the life of another? Henry's answer is negative: "In sexuality, the erotic desire to attain the other in his or her very life encounters an insurmountable failure"¹⁷. So the experience of "being two" cannot be transcended into "being one body". As Henry writes: "The coincidence sought is not the real identification of a transcendental Self with an Other, the recovery of two impressional flows melting into one, but at best only the chronological coincidence of two spasms powerless to overcome their division"¹⁸. This final separation at

¹⁷ M. Henry, *Incarnation*, p. 224.

¹⁸ M. Henry, *Incarnation*, p. 227.

the heart of the union itself highlights the tragedy of Eros: each lover remains dramatically alone.

Yannaras in § 52 of *Person and Eros* introduces a distinction between “true Eros” and “divided Eros”. He thus distinguishes the purely physical orientation of a person towards the Other, aimed at preserving the species, from a universal ecstatic reference that wants to transcend the boundaries of time and death. “Divided Eros” is the realization of the instinct to preserve the species, it is fulfilled in the child, who is the bearer of individual nature¹⁹. In Eros understood in this way, the other is not encountered in otherness, but in natural complementarity. However, “divided Eros” generates a “tragic awareness” of the relationship. Although, there is no such necessary “failure of Eros” as in Henry’s case. The success of Eros in Yannaras is possible by abandoning the mode of nature and entering the mode of Eros, i.e. the mode of life. However, the problem remains — the knowledge of the very Eros is given to us only in failure, we experience the mode of life as a lost paradise²⁰.

Eros and violence

If the erotic relationship is opening up to another person, entrusting yourself to him or her, it means that it carries the risk of some violence. It is about violence inflicted on each other as a lack of an adequate response to love. Violence in eroticism takes various emotional forms and manifests itself in various phenomena. For Yannaras, it will be a tear or rupture (*déchirement*), a rift in the relationship that manifests itself in hostility (*hostilité*), pain (*douleur*) and bitterness (*amertume*). In Henry’s case, in turn, it will take the form of suffering (*souffrance*) and the experience full anguish (*pâtir, angoisse*).

Yannaras in his *Variations...* writes: “There is no anguish more agonizing than the hostility between two people who believed at one time they were wholly in love, and that their love was wholly reciprocated. Hostility is always irrational, but in this particular confrontation its weapon is always logic. Each

¹⁹ Ch. Yannaras, *Person and Eros*, p. 143.

²⁰ Ch. Yannaras, *Variations on the Song of Songs*, p. 3.

one of us has our own perfect logic, flawless and inflexible in its certainties”²¹. Here we have an insightful diagnosis of the pathology of love, which consists in the fact that the intensity of experience characteristic of Eros is preserved also in situations of conflict, when primary passion gives way to hatred. Some even talk about “hate out of love”. It is unhealthy situation when, instead of giving, we demand love. We hate the other person who has not responded sufficiently to our love and is therefore not grateful. Demand replaced reciprocity. Hatred takes logic as its weapon: “I am right” demanding love, that is, accusing. The injured party of relationship (or one should say: insatiable, unsatisfied) has no choice but to punish the other person, and the punishment is a desperate cry for love. In this way, an erotic relationship turns into a spiral of violence.

In Henry’s phenomenology in turn, suffering and joy create a primary affective polarization. While in his work *The essence of manifestation* (*L’essence de la manifestation*) suffering (*souffrance*), next to pleasure or enjoyment (*jouissance*), is a full-fledged component of eroticism, in the *Incarnation* it comes to the fore as a result of torment and the “failure of Eros”. The body is both desiring and suffering. Henry writes: “So when facing the other’s magic body, the anxious desire to reach the life within it arouses the anguishing possibility of being able to do so — the streams of anxiety’s two dark rivers have reunited indeed. Their force sweeps everything away and eliminates every point of reference”²². It can be said that violence — the pathology of love — fits into the pessimistic register, close to depression or melancholia²³.

Both Yannaras and Henry display a relational pessimism that is fueled by either hostile hatred or felt anxiety, respectively.

21 Ch. Yannaras, *Variations on the Song of Songs*, p. 11.

22 M. Henry, *Incarnation*, p. 219.

23 W. Starzyński, *Miłość erotyczna jako paradygmat doświadczenia Innego w fenomenologiach Michela Henry’ego i Jean-Luca Marion*, “Fenomenologia” (2013) no 11, pp. 93–106.

Criticism of Natalie Depraz

The characteristic of Eros outlined above — Eros as an impulsive desire, its tragedy and violent nature — was criticized by Natalie Depraz. The French phenomenologist appreciates the realistic descriptions of both philosophers, which contrast with the romantic approaches as too ethereal and sentimental. However, she accuses both authors of having a “male” point of view²⁴. Phenomenological descriptions are conducted in the first person and are based on one’s own experience, but they should also be raised to the level of universal experience by means of reduction. If we stayed only at the level of “I”, without universalizing procedures, we would reduce eidetic description to the level of an anecdote, privacy or confidences²⁵. Depraz maintains that especially the three mentioned features of Eros — impulsive desire, tragic rupture and violence — testifies the “masculine” concept of Eros, which should be completed with the feminine element.

According to Depraz, descriptions of fear in an erotic relationship could also be applied to women as a sign of weakness or passivity, but the authors discussed want to show fear from a male point of view as an obstacle to action and impulsive power. Similarly, when Henry writes about female desire, he takes an external perspective — it is mimed, not lived. We read in the *Incarnation*: “At the very heart of this limit experience that the lovers expect to be not only extraordinary, but absolute, and to establish a sort of fusion or even identification between them, *the possibility of feigning remains*. How many women have made the one to whom they give themselves, out of love or for another reason, believe that they take from him a pleasure they do not feel, and perhaps will never feel?”²⁶. Yannaras also describes the erotic mode of relationship from the point of view of male seduction and presents the woman as a desired lover.

Depraz admits that the descriptions mentioned above could not have been different. She agrees that if male authors adopted a female perspective, we

24 N. Depraz, *Eros et relation*, pp. 33–34.

25 N. Depraz, *Comprendre la phénoménologie. Une pratique concrète*, Paris 2012, p. 43.

26 M. Henry, *Incarnation*, pp. 227–228.

would be dealing with some kind of reconstruction of experience, not its original description. Such transpositions would be simply inauthentic. The problem for the French phenomenologist is not the “male point of view” on Eros, but that the descriptions of Henry, Yannaras, but probably also many others, are presented as general and universal, while the “feminine part” has receded into the background. The male experience has covered the female one and claims universality.

Much more universal descriptions, taking into account both the male and female perspective, can be found in further analyzes by our authors, which include the destruction of the ego and the search for relationships and embedding them in the horizon of life. In this part, we can already talk about an eidetic phenomenological description that raises individual experience to the level of universality and works it towards intersubjectivity.

Eros and destruction of the ego

For both Yannaras and Henry, the erotic experience is a moment of destruction of the ego, its dissolution. Yannaras is particularly decisive here: “We fall in love hopelessly encased in the unbreakable shell of our mortality, which is our ego. Each one of us experiences the wonder of love alone. The Other is only the catalyst. Until our incompatible desires are shattered on these unyielding shells”²⁷. Yannaras discovers that in the experience of love we tend to love being loved, to love not another person, but that he or she loves me. We discover ourselves by looking for ourselves in the regard of others. The ego understood in this way is a sign of death, not life. The ego striving to assert itself is the cause of separation, not union, it makes me a separate individual, not a being in a relationship. Until the shell of the ego is shattered, which means dying to the self, the path to loving union, and therefore to life, remains closed. True love begins with the destruction of one’s ego.

Henry also mentions the need to transcend the ego, which he defines as “transcendental egoism”. In his opinion, the ego is a common driving force

²⁷ Ch. Yannaras, *Variations on the Song of Songs*, p. 12.

in love relationships, where it takes the form of the desire for self-affirmation, which Spinoza referred to as *conatus* — a spontaneous tendency to preserve one's own being, to survive. In place of the monological ego, Henry shows that bodily affectivity permeates the artificial self-other opposition. The body is an access to the other, but it is about access “that is not first a theoretical access, or some kind of reasoning, whether a reasoning by analogy or even a passive presentation, but desire in its concrete, carnal, and spontaneous form”²⁸. Henry states that splitting the erotic relationship into the ego and the other would be a dangerous return to the classical dichotomy of subject and object. Rather, the claims of the ego should be rejected, because “the erotic relation is a dynamic and pathos-filled relation taking place on a plane of absolute immanence, and that it has its site in life”²⁹. And reducing the erotic relationship to objective sexuality is a sign of nihilism³⁰. We see, therefore, that also in Henry the erotic relation is placed under the auspices of transcendental anti-egoism.

Eros as a relationship and life

Another feature of the universal description of erotic experience is its embedding in the horizon of life. This aspect comes to the fore most strongly in Henry, who called his philosophy material phenomenology or phenomenology of life. For him, phenomenology is not the study of phenomena, but of the very appearance, or even of revelation. However, true appearance does not occur in the horizon of the world — that is, in the external, objective and transcendental perspective, but in the horizon of life, that is, total immanence, the sign of which is pathos or self-affection. Life is not given to us externally, but internally. We have access to life as long as we have access to ourselves. Life manifests itself in us, it is invisible, affective. To be born is to come to life. Henry's reversal of phenomenology is that: “It is not thought that gives us

²⁸ M. Henry, *Incarnation*, p. 221.

²⁹ M. Henry, *Incarnation*, p. 224.

³⁰ M. Henry, *Incarnation*, p. 233.

access to life; it is life that allows thought to access itself”³¹. In short, Henry’s phenomenology is set in the horizon of life and the erotic relationship must be understood there, not in the objectivist or “dead” horizon of the world. The ideal would be for life, as an immanent sensitivity, to get to know another life, i.e. the self-affection of the other, in an erotic relationship — we already know that this is impossible and Eros fails in this field. Yet it only makes sense within the horizon of the revelation of life.

Yannaras also distinguishes two different modes of human existence: the mode of nature and the mode of life. The first is biological, egoistic, it means focusing on preserving oneself in preserving the species. It is not life, but survival. Whereas, we experience the mode of life in Eros. Yannaras writes: “In the experience of love we are all like Adam and Eve. The experience of others teaches us nothing. For each of us love is the first and greatest lesson of life, the first and greatest disappointment. The greatest lesson because we pursue in love the mode of life. The greatest disappointment because the mode proves to be inaccessible to our human nature”³². And further: “Our human nature (that indefinable mixture of our soul and body) *knows* with absolute clarity that the fullness of life is achieved only in the reciprocity of relation. In a reciprocal wholeness of self-offering [...]. We thirst for life, but the possibility of life seems viable only through a relationship with the Other. In the person of the Other we seek the reciprocity of relation. The Other becomes life’s *signifier*, corresponding to the deepest desires of our nature”³³. The mode of life in Yannaras brings serious risk, it is an exposure to the uncertainty of the other. At the same time, there is not such a radical rejection of the ontology and phenomenology of the world as in Henry. In any case, both place erotic analyzes within the horizon of life.

However, the climax of the description of Eros is the search for relationship. The main goal of Yannaras’ descriptions is to show that Eros is a mode of being in a relationship, and freedom is realized in absolute and unconditional openness to the Other. Relationality is a person’s basic mode of being.

31 M. Henry, *Incarnation*, p. 106.

32 Ch. Yannaras, *Variations on the Song of Songs*, p. 3.

33 Ch. Yannaras, *Variations on the Song of Songs*, pp. 3–4.

In *Person and Eros* Yannaras writes: “By the word *prosôpon* (‘person’) we define a referential reality. The referential character of the term is revealed fundamentally by its primitive use, that is, by its grammatical construction and etymology. The preposition *pros* (‘towards’) together with the noun *ôps*, which means ‘eye’, ‘face’, ‘countenance’, from the composite word *pros-ôpon*: I have my face turned towards someone or something; I am opposite someone or something. The word thus functioned initially as a term indicating an immediate reference, a relationship”³⁴. And further: “*Prosôpon*, or person, is defined as a reference and relation itself defines a reference and relation. The word’s primary semantic content does not allow us to interpret personhood simply as individuality outside the field of relation”³⁵.

From this perspective, each encounter is a reconstruction of the first time that introduced us to a relationship, i.e. to real life. As Yannaras will say, you should welcome your loved one as a guest every evening, as if it was his first invitation. And above all, not to succumb to the trivialization of relationships in the routine of everyday life, which kills Eros: “A hot vegetable soup, yes, a routine activity, but an exasperating obligation. Unwashed dishes pile up, daily cleaning is neglected [...]. Unbearable tiredness. No kind word, caress, or affectionate glance. Tenderness seems out of place in bed, almost comic. You must plead and that is humiliating. Generation after generation has yielded to love grudgingly for a moment of bodily pleasure, nothing else. They finish, turn their backs, and go to sleep. A wasted life, each day a habitual turn of the treadmill”³⁶.

Henry, in turn, not only places the relationship in the horizon of life, but also gives an example of an extraordinary relationship, literally extraordinary, which does not succumb to the above-mentioned routine and trivialization. He describes it in the article *L'Expérience d'autrui: phénoménologie et théologie*³⁷. We already know that objectivist phenomenology, maintained in the horizon of the world, is ontologically sterile and phenomenally poor.

34 Ch. Yannaras, *Person and Eros*, p. 5.

35 Ch. Yannaras, *Person and Eros*, p. 5.

36 Ch. Yannaras, *Variations on the Song of Songs*, pp. 47–48.

37 M. Henry, *L'Expérience d'autrui: phénoménologie et théologie*, in: M. Henry, *Phénoménologie de la vie*, t. 4: *Sur l'éthique et la religion*, Paris 2004, pp. 155–163.

Henry places Eros, like any other relationship, in the horizon of life, i.e. in immanence and self-affection. However, it turns out that life itself has the structure of relationships, or more precisely, it is not something static, but a dynamic process, a constant generation. Henry claims that there is no such thing as biological or emotional life. There is one life, the Life of God, the Absolute Life, which consists in auto-generation. Phenomenologically, the most primary is the relationship between the Absolute Life and the ipseity that belongs to it. And it should be known where it happens — in immanence, not in the horizon of the world. Henry writes: “If every transcendental Self, both that of the Other and my own, arises in the process of auto-generation of *Archi-Life* in its Word, then it is from this process that we must proceed: only in it lies the ultimate possibility not only of every living transcendental Self, but also their relationships”³⁸.

Within life, any conceivable community is born and formed, including an erotic relationship. However, the phenomenology of life has certain consequences for it. First, what is common in it is not reason, but transcendental life. Secondly, it is a community of living transcendental Selves, which would not be possible without it. Thirdly, it is Life that creates the transcendental possibility of being-together³⁹.

These three features, in turn, mean for Henry that each relationship is religious in nature; each is essentially invisible because it is not of the order of the world; finally, every relationship is alien to phenomenological categories, especially time and space. And this is what we meant when we said that Henry proposes a relationship that does not lend itself to everyday routine: “a true relationship can be established between transcendental Selves who have never seen each other and belong to different eras”⁴⁰. In an erotic relationship, space-time expands and Eros happens in the vast and generative communion of saints. A relationship with the Other, if it is guided by Eros, is no longer ordinary. This is that extreme point of vitality at the heart of a relationship

38 M. Henry, *L'Expérience d'autrui*, p. 158.

39 M. Henry, *L'Expérience d'autrui*, pp. 158–159.

40 M. Henry, *L'Expérience d'autrui*, p. 160.

with the other, where I no longer expect anything, but am ready to accept the surprise that comes.

Conclusions

To sum up, we can say that the work of Yannaras and Henry provides an extremely interesting approach to the erotic relationship. Importantly, its structure and course are multi-layered: from the almost blind mechanism of desire to a life-giving relationship. Even if Eros is associated with tragedy and violence, it also means overcoming “transcendental egoism”. Certainly, both philosophers show deep Christian inspiration, both contribute greatly to Christianity, which may be why they expose themselves to the accusation of practicing so-called “crypto-theology”⁴¹.

Nevertheless, their solutions have important consequences for phenomenology itself. A question can be asked of both philosophers: are their analyzes still phenomenology? In the case of Yannaras, aren't we dealing with a kind of Christian ontology? In Henry's case, aren't phenomenological descriptions completely invalidated, since body, life and relationship are invisible, do not appear, do not come from the horizon of the world, do not show any intentionality?

However, it seems that in both cases we can talk about the phenomenology of an erotic relationship. In Henry's work, not only corporeality, but also eroticism are maintained in the phenomenological order, because they still remain issues of the *cogito*. It is worth noting that for Henry, the forerunner of phenomenology is Descartes, who, unlike Galileo, defends the affective, sensational and subjective order. For him, all these experiences are *cogitationes*, i.e. modalities of the soul. The living body is the proper *ego cogito* for Henry, with Life as the ultimate foundation, of course. And an erotic relationship cannot be considered outside Life. Also in Yannaras' work we can speak of a phenomenological approach to Eros, despite the strong theological

41 Cf. D. Janicaud, *Le tournant théologique de la phénoménologie française*, Combas 1991.

component of his considerations, because it is a description of intersubjective reference rooted in experience.

Certainly, this methodological or meta-philosophical debate about the effects of erotic descriptions on phenomenology itself should be continued. Here, it is enough to say that the descriptions of the erotic phenomenon in Henry and Yannaras remain extremely promising, and their merit is in showing human as a dynamic being, constantly striving for someone and transcending himself. Eros appears in them as the only proper mode of existence for a human being.

References

- Barbaras R., *L'Eros et la désublimation du désir*, "Alter. Revue de phénoménologie" (2012) no 20, pp. 13–26.
- Chrétien J.-L., *La symbolique du corps: la tradition chrétienne du Cantique des Cantiques*, Paris 2005.
- Daniélou J., *Platonisme et théologie mystique. Essai sur la doctrine spirituelle de saint Grégoire de Nysse*, Paris 1944.
- Depraz N., *Comprendre la phénoménologie. Une pratique concrète*, Paris 2012.
- Depraz N., *Eros et relation. Puissance générative et engendrement mutuel des pensées de Michel Henry et Christos Yannaras*, "Alter. Revue de phénoménologie" (2012) no 20, pp. 27–38.
- Depraz N., *Phénoménologie de la chair et théologie de l'eros*, in: Michel Henry. *Pensée de la vie et culture contemporaine*, ed. J.-F. Lavigne, Paris 2006, pp. 167–181.
- Grégoire de Nysse, *Vie de Moïse*, présenté par J.-Y. Leloup, traduit par J. Daniélou, Paris 1993.
- Henry M., *Incarnation. A philosophy of flesh*, tr. K. Hefty, Evanston 2015.
- Henry M., *L'Expérience d'autrui: phénoménologie et théologie*, in: M. Henry, *Phénoménologie de la vie. Tome IV. Sur l'éthique et la religion*, Paris 2004, pp. 155–163.
- Henry M., *The genealogy of psychoanalysis*, tr. D. Brick, Stanford 1993.
- Janicaud D., *Le tournant théologique de la phénoménologie française*, Combas 1991.
- Karpiński P., *Porażka erosa w fenomenologii Michela Henry'ego*, in: *Motyw miłości w wybranych tekstach literackich i innych dziedzinach kultury*, eds. P. Szymczyk, E. Chodźko, Lublin 2018, pp. 43–52.

- Karpiński P., *Zwrot erotyczny w fenomenologii francuskiej?*, "Ruch Filozoficzny" 77 (2021) no 1, pp. 89–112.
- Marion J.-L., *The erotic phenomenon*, tr. S. E. Lewis, Chicago 2006.
- Starzyński W., *Miłość erotyczna jako paradygmat doświadczenia Innego w fenomenologiach Michela Henry'ego i Jean-Luca Mariona*, "Fenomenologia" (2013) no 11, pp. 93–106.
- Yannaras Ch., *Variations on the Song of Songs*, tr. N. Russell, Brookline 2005.
- Yannaras Ch., *Person and Eros*, tr. N. Russell, Brookline 2007.
- Yannaras Ch., *Psychoanalysis and Orthodox anthropology*, in: *Personhood: Orthodox Christianity and the connection between body, mind, and soul*, ed. J. T. Chirban, London 1996, pp. 83–89.