



# MICHEL HENRY: THE KNOWLEDGE OF LIFE AGAINST THE BARBARISM OF GALILEO

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In *La barbarie* (*Barbarism*), Michel Henry warns us against the pretensions of modern sciences: the objectivity they claim is nothing but an impoverishment of reality. According to him, the fundamental knowledge of man, the one which allows all the others, is not scientific knowledge but the knowledge of life.

One usually associates the development of scientific knowledge with that of civilization. A society that reaches a high level of technicality, a better geometric and mathematical knowledge of material nature is an exemplary society from a civilizational point of view. The advent of modernity, marked by the Galilean revolution, radically changed the conception of the world that we had in traditional societies. This rupture, this great upheaval is, in the eyes of Michel Henry, a terrible danger for the culture which he defines as "the self-transformation of life."

In *Barbarism*, the Christian phenomenologist describes "a fight to death" between knowledge and culture and worries about a possible victory of the first over the second. For Henry, scientific knowledge is thus not a part of the culture, but rather its negation. For the Galilean revolution is, strictly speaking, a "reduction" insofar as it attempts to describe the objects of the world by voluntarily ignoring the sensible qualities that compose them.

The Galilean method is a pure objectification of the world and a disregard of subjectivity. Consequently, it denies the very condition of possibility of the perception of objects, i.e., the lived experience. "It is thus this life, such as it is felt in us, in its incontestable phenomenality, this life which makes us living, which is stripped of any true reality, reduced to an appearance. The kiss that lovers exchange is no more than a bombardment of microphysical particles." writes Henry. There is culture only if there is life, because there cannot be experience without perception, of object without subject. The only reality to which we have access is that of perceived things. The real experience of the world is never a disembodied experience. When a subject looks at an object, he applies his sensitivity, his taste, his mood of the day, his physical state, his concentration of the moment.

## **Taking Life Out Of The Picture**

Modern scientific knowledge has the particularity of presenting itself as rigorous and unquestionably true knowledge. The result is an arrogance: it refuses the appellation of "knowledge" to all the traditional sciences which are not based on the Galilean principle of objectification and are incapable of

equivalent material results. "The illusion of Galileo and of all those who, in his wake, consider science as an absolute knowledge, was precisely to have taken the mathematical and geometrical world, destined to provide a univocal knowledge of the real world, for this real world itself, this world that we can only intuit and experience in the concrete modes of our subjective life," summarizes Henry.

In his eyes, "any culture is a culture of life, in the double sense where life constitutes at the same time the subject of this culture and its object." Culture, as Henry defines it, is nothing other than the perpetual movement of life working to its own development. It is a setting in motion of the totality of the subjective consciences towards the spontaneous accomplishment, or not, of high achievements. Art, as for him, is par excellence part of culture since it is the discipline which takes most into account the activity of sensibility. Artistic production proceeds fundamentally from the interiority of human experience, an interiority which does not interest the scientist who claims to overlook the world. On the other hand, Galilean scientific knowledge is barbaric because by it, "it is the life itself which is affected, it is all its values which falter, not only the aesthetic but also the ethics, the sacred—and with them the possibility of living each day."

In *La phénoménologie de la vie (The Phenomenology of Life)*, Henry defines living as that which is capable of experiencing itself under the modality of "self-affection." "Self-affection" is the primitive consciousness of man, a non-reflective consciousness which, rather than thinking that it thinks, feels that it thinks. It is, par excellence, the proof of the union of soul and body. Modern scientific knowledge is based on the attempt to deny this primordial subjectivity, which it refers to the particularism and relativism of individual experience. However, this "feeling of oneself," this "experiencing oneself" refers to "the deep nature of experience and of the human condition." For Henry, the fundamental knowledge, that is to say the knowledge which allows all the others, the knowledge which is also a power, is the knowledge of life.

In *Barbarism*, Henry takes the example of a biology student. When the latter studies a book in order to assimilate knowledge, he is, as a subject, faced with abstract scientific knowledge contained in the volume that he has before his eyes. Between the subject, the student, and the object, the biology book, remains an intentional gap that would be impossible to bridge without the knowledge of life unfolding in pure immanence, without *ekstasis*. Without knowing from life, the student would remain motionless, contemplating his book. Thanks to this knowing, the student can turn the pages of the book with his hands and read the lines by moving his eyes. "The capacity indeed to unite with the power of the hands and to identify oneself with it, to be what it is and to do what it does, only possesses a knowledge which

merges with this power because that it is nothing other than his constant test of himself—his radical subjectivity," Henry explains. In other words, the knowledge of life is man's ability to make body movements and intentionality coincide in pure immanence. It is a practical knowledge which is the condition of possibility of all theoretical knowledge.

Scientific knowledge is a knowledge that represents the world in front of it in a purely abstract knowledge but never experiences it. And yet, the only reality is experienced reality. The world of Galilean science is a cold and objective world. Whereas the knowledge of life proceeds from the meeting of the subject and the object; scientific knowledge refuses to take into account the reality of subjectivity and presents us an object which is the product of no glance, which is not apprehended by any conscience. "Point of interior: nothing which is alive, which can speak in its own name, in the name of what it feels, in the name of what it is. Only of "things," only of death", stresses Henry.

### Between Man And The World Stand The Robots

To the objectification of the things of the world by Galilean the response is the objectification of action through the ever-greater rise of technology. We have seen that the fundamental knowledge of life was defined as a know-how, as a praxis. However, with the industrial age, the living work of man was replaced by devices, by tools which reduce our relation to things to simplifying and disembodied mechanisms. Between man and the world, robots now stand in place of life. This leads to an "atrophy of the quasi-totality of the subjective potentialities of the living individual and thus a malaise and a growing dissatisfaction."

Henry opposes here the work of the *craftsman* who is a perpetual creation and a perpetual mobilization of the knowledge of life to that of the *worker* who is only the repetition of "stereotyped" and "monotonous" acts. The craftsman is in a carnal relationship with the world; his subjectivity is at work to deploy in immanence the knowledge of life. The cabinetmaker chooses the wood he will work on; evaluates its quality, its resistance, its grain and its veining. When he sands, polishes and then varnishes his wood, when he assembles the parts to make a piece of furniture, he performs unique work that involves his subjectivity and his life to the core. On the other hand, the worker who works on a production line is in a cold and mediatized relationship where the instrumental device comes to replace know-how. Pressing a button, operating a lever is a minimal task that can be performed by all in an identical way. For Henry, technology is nothing other than "nature without man;" that is to say "abstract nature, reduced to itself" and "returned to itself." "It is barbarism, the new barbarism of our time, in place

of culture. Insofar as it puts out of play life; its prescriptions and its regulations. It is not only barbarism, under its extreme and most inhuman form, that it was given to man to know, it is the madness," emphasizes Henry.

The rise of technology at the expense of life leads to a radical change, to an ontological "revolution," namely the appearance of a new reality—of an economic order. Henry aims here at "the inversion of the vital teleology that occurred at the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th century when the production of consumer goods that characterizes every society ceased to be directed... towards 'use values;' to aim henceforth at obtaining and increasing exchange value; that is to say, money." This is what is, par excellence, barbaric for the philosopher: the emergence of a reality that is produced neither by nature nor by the body itself. The reign of money as an exchange value corresponds to the advent of a pure virtuality within Being itself. Money determines our existence today, even though it is not the product of any life and serves no purpose except its own. The barbarism described by Henry is thus, in the last instance, a usurpation—that which is dead—technology and money—comes to pass for Being.

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*[Featured image](#): Portrait of Galileo, by Justus Sustermans, painted in 1636.*

