

Excarnating and Incarnating the Self: Social Media and Being

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journals.sagepub.com/home/atr**Rob James** 

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Abstract

The article explores the theological and philosophical implications of social media on personal identity, employing the Christian doctrine of the incarnation and the philosophy of Michel Henry. It argues that social media platforms pose significant dangers of “excarnation,” where users create disembodied, curated identities leading to fragmented selves and associated psychological issues. Conversely, it highlights opportunities for integration and authenticity through supportive online communities and activism. By examining biblical narratives, particularly the Garden of Eden and the figure of Jesus as the “second Adam,” this study highlights the contrast between incarnate, authentic being, and digital self-fragmentation. Michel Henry’s phenomenology provides a critical theological framework for assessing how social media influences self-understanding. Ultimately, the article calls for a conscious engagement with digital spaces that prioritizes authenticity and integration, reflecting the divine image in human existence.

Keywords

excarnation, incarnation, integration, Michel Henry, phenomenology, social media

Introduction

The digital world is here to stay, and yet, humanity has not quite caught up with all of the implications of what it has created. There are many things about the digital world that we have not yet begun to address properly. This article does not attempt to look at all of the possible presenting issues. My focus is purely on social media platforms and the way that users engage online in those spheres. Any article written about the detail of such a fast-moving environment is bound to miss the latest developments. However, I am writing in more general terms, and what I suggest is applicable to a wide range of social media

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platforms and potentially to other online interactions as well. In this article, I am going to argue that there are both dangers and opportunities associated with social media use. I do not go into all of the dangers, nor all of the opportunities, but rather outline what I see as the main areas of the debate, using a few examples. The evaluative strategy is the Christian doctrine of the incarnation, which I link first to the Garden of Eden story, with God physically present as the master gardener, and with Adam and Eve fully present to God and to themselves, and second to Jesus Christ as the “second Adam” as well as the incarnate *Logos*. I offer Michel Henry’s phenomenology as a conversation partner in this. Henry sheds light on the integrated understanding of human identity by emphasizing that life finds its ultimate foundation in the Trinity. For Henry, the ground of life is the life of God, as revealed in Christ. Humanity, created in the divine image, is called to rediscover this reality and be re-created into the image of the Creator. This theological and philosophical framework provides a critical lens for evaluating the ways in which social media fosters or hinders the integration of human identity.

In what follows, I will first address the theological ideas of incarnation and integration that are present in the myth of the Garden of Eden and in the Resurrection stories. Second, I will explore the chief danger of social media platforms, which is the danger of “excarnation,” nomenclature I use to suggest the opposite of “incarnation,” and which points toward the creation of disembodied, curated identities, often leading to an inauthentic experience of the self. Third, I seek to balance this perspective by noting a few of the ways in which some users of social media are able to move in the opposite direction, toward a more integrated, incarnate way of living. Finally, the philosophy of Michel Henry acts as a guide to understanding what is going on in incarnate and excarnate ways of living. Henry uses the same theological motifs as I use in the rest of the article, with particular focus on incarnate living, the Genesis account of creation, and the incarnation of Jesus.

The biblical narratives of creation and incarnation challenge the excarnate, disintegrated identities often cultivated in digital spaces. Navigating social media while not losing ourselves requires a conscious effort toward authenticity, reflecting the integrated wholeness of the divine image.

Creation, re-creation, and the divine/human body

This section of the article considers the theological grounding of an integrated human identity, an identity rooted in the divine image. I will consider how the creation and re-creation narratives in Genesis and John depict God’s embodied presence in creation and how this presence models the wholeness humanity is called to emulate through the incarnate Word.

In the Judeo-Christian creation myths found at the start of the book of Genesis, there is an account of God as a master gardener. Genesis 2.8 says that God “planted a garden in Eden, in the east,” and goes on to say that it was there that he placed the “man” (“ha-a-dam” in Hebrew, from which the name “Adam” is derived). After a description of the garden, verse 15 goes on to reinforce the idea that Adam has been placed in the garden and adds that his job is “to till it and to keep it.” Later, the myth goes on to tell of the creation of the first woman, Eve, and of humanity’s eventual expulsion from the garden. The

Garden of Eden, at least as intended by God, was to be looked after by humanity, but God is the master gardener. God is even imagined as having bodily form, for God comes to walk in the garden, apparently physically, with Adam and Eve. It is likely, as Francesca Stavrakopoulou points out, that the bodies created by God and given life as Adam and Eve are envisaged in the myth as bearing physical likeness to God's body, and likely also that they bore physical resemblance to other members of God's Council, a set of spiritual beings operating under God's aegis.¹ In this story, God has made a creation which is very like him. It is obvious in the case of the bodies of God, Adam, and Eve. But it is less obvious in the case of creation itself, of which the garden is a part. And yet, in this myth, creation is like God in that God inhabits it with God's body, much as humans do with their bodies. The physicality of creation mirrors the physicality of God.

That God comes to physically inhabit the world is the core of the story of the incarnation. Indeed, there is a long Christian tradition, stretching back to St. Paul (1 Cor. 15.45, Romans 5.12–19), of referring to Jesus as the "second Adam." John Suggit points to the image of Jesus as a gardener in the Gospel of John as a sign and image of the re-creation that is accomplished in the resurrection.² Suggit sees the two angels at the tomb as being there not to guard the way to the tree of life, as in the account of Genesis 3.24, but rather to point the way toward life.³ "Adam was put in the garden of Eden to maintain it . . . He failed to do so, but Jesus is the second Adam, the true human being, as [John] 19.5 (*idou ho anthrōpos*) ought to be understood."⁴ Beyond what Suggit suggests, it is possible also to say that once again God has come to walk bodily in the garden. In Jesus, God is present in a body. If the beginning of John's Gospel is also taken into account, then echoes of the creation stories become even clearer. John 1.1–18 itself begins with a creation story and climaxes at 1.14 with the statement "and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us." Jeannie Brown puts the idea of the Word becoming flesh together with, first, the fact that John presents Jesus' resurrection as being explicitly on the first day of the week, and, second, that life is a theme throughout John, to show that the renewal of creation is a major theme of Johannine theology.⁵ Brown shows how in John's account, the Sabbath being about to begin just after Jesus dies is a recapitulation of the Creation narrative.⁶ There is rest, followed by the first day of the week, and then there is the renewal of creation, or, indeed the re-creation, which follows the recreation of Sabbath.

The biblical narratives of creation and re-creation offer a vision of integrated being. God's bodily presence, incarnate in the Garden of Eden and incarnate in Jesus Christ, illustrates a model of wholeness and authenticity, in which the physical, mental, and spiritual selves are harmoniously united. More than this, the narratives demonstrate a model whereby nothing is hidden. Naturally, as this is God we are talking about, there is

¹ Francesca Stavrakopoulou, *God: An Anatomy* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2021), 17–28.

² John Suggit, "Jesus the Gardener: The Atonement in the Fourth Gospel as Re-Creation," *Neotestamentica* 33, no. 1 (1999): 161–68.

³ *Ibid.*, 167.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Jeanne K. Brown, "Creation's Renewal in the Gospel of John," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 72, no. 2 (2019): 275–90.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 286.

nothing else that should be expected. Aquinas insisted that God is “simple,” not simplistic, but simple. God is simply what and who God is, with no artifice or obfuscation. Robert Burns notes Aquinas’ insistence that “God is positively ‘simple’ more eminently than creatures ever are, and not merely that He is not multiple in the ways in which creatures are multiple.”⁷ In other words, although it is more usually the case that Aquinas will say what God is not, Divine Simplicity is considered fundamental, and as such it can be positively stated. God is positively simple. Such positive simplicity is not something that humans, nor any created thing, shares. And yet, in the myth of the Garden of Eden, simplicity is the lost possibility that is presented, and a possibility that is desired. When they are created, Adam and Eve are naked, literally hiding nothing. They appear as unified beings, whole and content in their own skin, simply who they are, in the image of a God who is simply who God is. They are properly incarnate, for the whole of themselves is present and presented in their own beings.

After the narrative of the eating of the forbidden fruit, rather than being at one with themselves, Adam and Eve henceforth hide parts of themselves, physically, but also mentally and spiritually. Rather than living an incarnate way of life, they experience shame at who and what they are, even though they are creations of God. The mythological lost simplicity may not be historically what happened, but it is something that people nevertheless dream about “getting back to.” Duane S. Elgin and Arnold Mitchell describe the aim of people who strive to live a “voluntarily simple” lifestyle as being to live a life that is “outwardly simple, but inwardly rich.”⁸ It is about the discovery of an integrated life, a life in which one can live as whole and complete. Such a life is not possible to achieve *in toto*, but it is something toward which humans can move, and which there is a longing for within the human psyche. In the incarnation of Jesus as the “second Adam,” we see the true form of a human being, one who lived fully into the person that he was, without artifice or obfuscation. In Jesus, the perfect state of the Genesis myth is fully lived out.

Throughout these accounts of creation and re-creation, God is depicted as being present with and within creation. We often think in philosophical terms about the supreme otherness of God, or consider creation as being present at all times and all places to God. None of this is untrue. However, the creation and re-creation narratives also point to a facet of God’s being that is easy to lose under philosophical gloss. God is pictured as condensed into a body. All that God is, is fully present in a definable and encounterable presence, and it is this presence who undertakes the work of creation and re-creation. The quotation from Suggit, above, notes that Jesus is the “true human being,” a human being once again as Adam was intended to be.⁹ Jesus is the true human being because there is nothing left unintegrated in his being. Who he is, is fully how he presents. The simple connection of being to the presentation of that being is always true for God, and this is where the image of the body is so useful. In the garden of the creation myth of Genesis

⁷ Robert M. Burns, “The Divine Simplicity in St. Thomas,” *Religious Studies* 25, no. 3 (1989): 271–93, 272.

⁸ Duane S. Elgin and Arnold Mitchell, “Voluntary Simplicity: Life-Style of the Future?” *Ekistics* 45, no. 269 (1978): 207–12, 207.

⁹ Suggit, “Jesus the Gardener”, 167.

2, God is fully present in all that God is. So too, the human creatures are made to be fully themselves, integrated wholes. In the garden myth, the eating of the forbidden fruit is the thing that leads to Adam and Eve losing the integrity of their selves. They become unintegrated, dis-integrated, ashamed, and embarrassed of themselves, including their bodies. As Jack Katz comments, “Adam and Eve gained a self-reflexive way of knowing that changed the substance of their being.”¹⁰ In thinking about how Adam and Eve then attempt to present themselves to God, Katz continues, “shame is located as an intrinsic, driving force behind the presentation of self to others.”¹¹ The story of salvation is the story of the recovery of the integrated self, a person at one with themselves and with their creator, being in the image of transcendent simplicity, without gap between being and presentation.

As Josephene Newman puts it,

the mystery of Christ is the mystery of the human radiating the divine as its deepest centre [sic.] . . . [Christ] manifested the fullness of human response as it finds its inmost centre in the divine and radiates therein a “new kind of existence” (Rom. 6.4).¹²

Genesis has humans being made very literally in the image of God, integrated wholes who are physically present, and in Jesus humans are called back to this way of being. The incarnate life of the Word is the incarnate life to which all are called. This is embodied existence, but it is also more than this, for it is about being truly present to oneself, it is about life being present to life, about one’s own self being present to one’s own self. In considering Irenaeus’ insistence that it is God alone who vivifies the flesh, Michel Henry critiques Gnosticism’s dualism, arguing that life is not trapped in matter but is rather its very source, with flesh as the medium of life’s self-experience.¹³ I will return to Henry later in the article, but now it is time to turn to how the digital world can undercut the experience of living an incarnate life, leading to problems for human identity.

Digital excarnation

Having considered the incarnate life to which humans are called, it is now time to consider dangers posed by social media platforms to integrated human identity, arguing that they have great potential to foster “excarnation,” by which I mean the curation of disembodied, fragmented selves. My argument seeks to demonstrate how such excarnation undermines authentic, incarnate ways of living, mirroring the dis-integration of life described in the Genesis fall narrative. As this section and the following section develop, I will continue to show why “incarnate living” is a concept that goes beyond mere “embodiment,” something that will be more fully fleshed out when considering Michel Henry’s phenomenology.

¹⁰ Jack Katz, “The Social Psychology of Adam and Eve,” *Theory and Society* 25, no. 4 (1996): 545–82, 550.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 556.

¹² Josephene Newman, “The Resurrection,” *The Furrow* 33, no. 9 (1982): 531–39, 536.

¹³ Michel Henry (trans. Karl Hefty), *Incarnation: A Philosophy of Flesh* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2015), 133.

In recent years, social media and digital communication have redefined how we interact and connect, and even how we construct our identities. The concept of “excarnation” provides a theological framework for understanding these shifts. Excarnation involves the removal of physical presence in favor of virtual representation, but is more than merely virtual representation. By “excarnation,” I mean the way in which it is possible to curate a highly externalized and idealized version of self. Naturally, human beings always present something of themselves to the world outside themselves, but in prior ages, when this had to be done in person, such curation of the self was limited. It is harder to fool people when living cheek by jowl with them. What social media allows for is the creation of a wholly digital, disembodied community to which it is possible to present a plausible self, but a self far removed from the true self. Social media platforms allow, and encourage, users to create curated digital profiles, sharing carefully selected moments from their lives. Such a process of curation can lead to an emphasis on appearance over substance, where users focus on presenting an idealized version of themselves. Consequently, the embodied aspects of identity are often minimized, or are pretty much absent altogether. More than this, the one doing the curating of self can come to imagine that this curated self is their true self.

In writing about information technology–driven identities, Michelle Carter and Varun Grover observe that “IT identity is primarily a personal construction.”¹⁴ Danah Boyd notes that content shared on social media often persists and endures, making it fundamentally different from ephemeral interactions in physical spaces, such as conversations in a park. In ephemeral conversations, identity as it is experienced in the interaction is direct experience. It is very different when it comes to online interactions. Boyd writes that the “persistence” of such interactions “means that conversations conducted through social media are far from ephemeral; they endure . . . often ‘on the record’ to an unprecedented degree.”¹⁵ This enduring nature of digital life can be framed as a form of disembodiment, where identity becomes a curated, archived artifact rather than an organic, lived reality. And yet, the sense of the self can come to be largely wrapped up in the external software, presentation, and even in the device that holds access to the curated identity. As Carter and Grover put it, individuals who strongly identify with their digital persona also place great value on the devices they use to store, access, and curate that identity, experiencing a “shrinkage of self” if they lose such a device.¹⁶

The concept of the fragmentation of the self is a well-recognized coping mechanism for people in various cross-cultural experiences. Fragmentation means that the person dissociates from their original self and experiences a new way of being.¹⁷ However, in former times even someone in a new cultural setting who was experiencing a fragmented version

¹⁴ Michelle Carter and Varun Grover, “Me, My Self, and I(T),” *The MIS Quarterly* 39, no. 4 (2015): 931–58, 940.

¹⁵ Danah Boyd, *It's Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 11.

¹⁶ Carter and Grover, “Me, My Self, and I(T),” 940.

¹⁷ Thomas Reuter, “The Fragmented Self: Cross-Cultural Difference, Conflict and the Lessons of Ethnographic Experience,” *Paideuma: Mitteilungen zur Kulturkunde* 52 (2006): 251–66, esp. 259–60.

of themselves was physically present in that situation. The fragmentation that is possible online is deeper and more seductive. It is entirely possible to choose to present only very niche parts of your personality, and social media users can even choose to present different facets of their identity on different platforms, tailored to specific audiences. The flip side of this is that, as Boyd points out, social media introduces the phenomenon of “collapsed contexts,” where on at least some platforms, individuals must navigate audiences from different spheres of their lives simultaneously, each with potentially conflicting expectations. The collapse of context forces users to carefully curate their self-presentation to avoid misunderstandings.¹⁸ With pressure for both bespoke and general presentations of the self, the experience of the self online is primarily performative and frequently angst-ridden rather than experiential and simple. Thus, the self is both fragmented and put elsewhere, beyond the person, beyond the proper locale of the self. Rather than the self experiencing the self, the self can become mistaken for the performance of the self.

Kristupas Ceilutka argues that social media platforms are used to hunt for recognition, but that the inherent competition involved means that most users do not get the recognition they seek. In turn, the unfulfilled hunt for recognition leads to perfectionism, resentment, and collective narcissism.¹⁹ In a psychological study, Sophie E. Carruthers, Emma L. Warnock-Parkes, and David M. Clark noted that social media users with high social anxiety compared themselves to others by looking at metrics “including number of friends, number of photos, type of photos, events, how much fun is being had, number of likes on posts, number of comments on posts and amount of personal information shared” far more than people with low social anxiety.²⁰ They also found that those with high anxiety thought far more people were observing their posts than did those with low anxiety.²¹ A study of children using social media found that heavy users were twice as likely to suffer from low well-being.²² A corollary to observations from psychology is a warning from the world of education. Neil Selwyn cautions that most proponents of educational technology, including of the use of social media in education, simply assume that technology will aid learning, without stopping to question how technologies are implemented in real-world settings.²³ Specifically on the use of social media in education, Selwyn says that there is a danger of students concentrating “on a commoditized promotion of self in

¹⁸ Boyd, *It’s Complicated*, 21.

¹⁹ Kristupas Ceilutka, “The Discontents of Competition for Recognition on Social Media: Perfectionism, Resentment, and Collective Narcissism,” *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 49, no. 4 (2023): 409–30.

²⁰ Sophie E. Carruthers, Emma L. Warnock-Parkes, and David M. Clark, “Accessing Social Media: Help or Hindrance for People With Social Anxiety?” *The Journal of Experimental Psychopathology* 10, no. 2 (2019): 1–11, 9.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Helena Bruggeman, Alain Van Hiel, Guido Van Hal, and Stefan Van Dongen, “Does the Use of Digital Media Affect Psychological Well-Being? An Empirical Test Among Children Aged 9 to 12,” *Computers in Human Behavior* 101 (2019): 104–113.

²³ Neil Selwyn, *Distusting Educational Technology: Critical Questions for Changing Times* (New York: Routledge, 2014). For his commentary on social media in education, see chapter 6. Also see his “Editorial: In Praise of Pessimism – The Need for Negativity in Educational Technology,” *The British Journal of Educational Technology* 42, no. 5 (2011): 713–18.

pursuit of competitive status-driven and reputation-driven advantage.”²⁴ Again, this is social media driving people toward the presentation of the highly curated self. The pressure that social media users put themselves under to maintain a consistent and polished, perfected, and idealized identity, an identity which is also necessarily a false version of themselves, can contribute to anxiety and reduced self-esteem.

The experience of self in a digital context is often an experience of excarnation. In striving for the perfect image to present to the world, one necessarily needs to be highly selective in what one presents, in which parts of oneself one presents. Such selectivity inevitably means that a version of self is presented which leaves many, and potentially most, of the self not represented. As this digital version of self is curated and cared for, as time is invested in it, so the individual’s attachment to it can become so great that this version of self can come to be considered of greater value than one’s integrated self, which slips further away as attention is lavished on the digital version(s) of self. Michel Henry uses the term “disincarnate flesh” to describe the Gnostic view of flesh, and although he is not thinking of the digital world, what he writes applies very well to it. He says that such flesh is “thrown outside of itself, relieved of itself in some way, discharged from its own weight . . . deprived finally of the phenomenological possibility of suffering and enjoying that are constitutive of its true substance.”²⁵ James McWilliams points in the same direction when he writes of how “digitized life is beginning to alienate us from ourselves,” and from simple human interactions.²⁶ He notes that one of the “insidious” things about digital technologies is that even in seeking to become at one with our “inner selves,” such technologies promise “to enhance the habits that inform identity” and vow “to improve the quality of our lives by making everything faster and easier even as it purloins that quality, leaving behind anxious users twitching for little more than the chance to indulge the next new thing.”²⁷ McWilliams gives a beautiful example of how digital technologies affect our interactions, noting that when two people are in conversation with one another face-to-face, neither one is entirely in control of what is happening, but when setting up an electronic message, the sender is in complete control of how that message will be presented.²⁸ With digital media, often, perhaps usually, humans are led to a place where they deliberately excarnate themselves.

Social media and possible wholes

Given what has been said so far, it might appear to be the case that I am deeply opposed to Social Media in all its forms. This is not the case. Social media certainly can be psychologically and spiritually dislocating, leading to a dis-integration of self. However, there are instances of people using it in the opposite direction. The two phenomena I will consider here are both ways in which social media users reveal the reality of a situation

²⁴ Selwyn, *Distrusting Educational Technology*, 121.

²⁵ Henry, *Incarnation*, 132.

²⁶ James McWilliams, “Saving the Self in the Age of the Selfie,” *The American Scholar* 85, no. 2 (2016): 22–35, 25.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 31.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 33.

by way of being a user self-help community. One concerns movements for political liberation in the face of oppression, the other, groups focused on mental or physical health.

In chapter three of *A New Dawn for the Second Sex*, Karen Vintges begins by noting the way in which various social media and blogging platforms were the places where protestors of the Arab Spring could organize themselves, and that very many people involved in such organizing that led to the protests were women.²⁹ Nezar AlSayyad and Muna Guvenc further show that the protests of the Arab Spring were coordinated via social media, but in interplay with traditional media and with urban space.³⁰ Diana Letcher generalized this observation by undertaking a study of a large body of literature on the use of social media to coordinate mass protests.³¹ Especially when this sort of use of social media is combined with the use of anonymizing software, such as ToR, to mask the user's identity, such usage is rather different from the exarnation discussed above. In the case of its use for political organization, social media at least has the potential to connect people in a meaningful way that leads to real-world impact. A real-world, as opposed to a digital world, impact suggests that social media can be a part of a truly incarnated experience of the world. In such cases, individuals have a clear political aim. By "political," I simply mean that they have an aim about the way that society should be organized. In other words, they set out to use social media with a very clear aim that is incarnationally focused, albeit a communal rather than individualistic incarnational aim. Even within such an incarnationally focused setting, exarnation may also be present as elements of the self will likely still be presented performatively. However, at the same time, the self is presented such that everyone knows it is partial, as the presentation of self and the interaction with others is around a specific, limited, topic. Rather than creating a fiction of the totality of self, there is focus on some small part of the experience of life. At its best, such a focus is an exercise in honesty.

Despite the positive possibilities of using social media for political affiliation in places of oppression, there is also a potential dishonest side to the political use of social media. Writing in 2011, Clay Shirky tells several tales of protests coordinated via social media that led to political change in various parts of the world, but he is still unsure of the long-term political effectiveness of social media in political discourse.³² Since then, lies on social media have played a part in the decision of the United Kingdom to leave the EU, US presidential elections, and elections around the world as hostile actors seek to influence outcomes.³³ Nevertheless, this deplorable use of social media does not

²⁹ Jaren Vintges, *A New Dawn for the Second Sex: Women's Freedom Practices in World Perspective* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017), 95–127.

³⁰ Nezar AlSayyad and Muna Guvenc, "Virtual Uprisings: On the Interaction of New Social Media, Traditional Media Coverage and Urban Space during the 'Arab Spring,'" *Urban Studies* 52, no. 11 (2015): 2018–34.

³¹ Diana Letcher, "Online political Participation, Collective Action Events, and Meaningful Citizen Engagement: Social Media Use During Mass Protests," *Geopolitics, History, and International Relations* 10, no. 2 (2018): 70–75.

³² Clay Shirky, "The Political Power of Social Media: Technology, the Public Sphere, and Political Change," *Foreign Affairs* 90, no. 1 (2011): 28–41.

³³ For example, see Marco Silva, "General Election 2019: What's the Evidence That Russia Interfered?" <https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-51776404>, March 20, 2020.

undercut the real positive impact that social media can have on mass movements for democracy as people seek to live together in (hopefully) a better way.

Besides these collective movements for how a society is to organize itself in the political sphere, there are other uses of social media that point toward a more incarnate way of living and which directly challenge the observations about excarnate living on social media. Social media platforms have become important places for self-help groups, offering spaces for individuals facing similar challenges to connect, share experiences, and provide support. This can be a deeply incarnating experience. A psychological study found strong evidence that social media self-help groups for those with depression made a significant positive difference for many members.³⁴ I have Ulcerative Colitis and I belong to a group on a social media platform for those who have this disease, or Crohn's Disease. These communities serve as invaluable resources, fostering a sense of solidarity among members and offering a platform for the exchange of practical advice and emotional support. Beyond medical matters, these groups often extend their support to addressing body image concerns, exemplified in the Ulcerative Colitis and Crohn's groups by members sharing empowering images of their bodies after operations, including of their stoma bags, where these have become necessary. Such candid portrayals not only destigmatize the use of medical devices but also promote body positivity, fostering a culture of acceptance and self-love. It is not that no aspect of a person is excarnated in these sort of online presentations, but it is certainly the case that these groups are an attempt to do the opposite of the regular excarnating use of social media. Although focusing on the way that women's bodies have been objectified, and subjected to certain societal definitions of "beauty," Céline Leboeuf describes the movement from shame at one's body to pride in one's body as the core of what is usually described as "body positivity." Importantly, she notes that in order for it to be useful, "body pride would have to contribute to the meaningfulness of one's life. It is clear from the empowering aspect of the movement that it does."³⁵ The empowerment found in having pride in one's body speaks of incarnation, of owning the wholeness of who one is, including the physicality of that. Groups meeting online can be a part of this and can counter the pressure to excarnate. However, true "incarnate living" goes beyond merely being able to be happily embodied, and it is to a theological and philosophical exploration of this to which I now turn.

Henry's theological phenomenology of life

The philosophical tradition of phenomenology begun by Edmund Husserl studies the structures of experience and consciousness as they are lived and experienced from a first-person perspective. Phenomenology aims to explore how things appear to us, how we

³⁴ Yingjie Lu, Taotao Pan, Jingfang Liu, and Jun Wu, "Does Usage of Online Social Media Help Users With Depressed Symptoms Improve Their Mental Health? Empirical Evidence From an Online Depression Community," *Frontiers in Public Health* 8 (2012). doi:10.3389/fpubh.2020.581088.

³⁵ Céline Leboeuf, "What Is Body Positivity? The Path from Shame to Pride," *Philosophical Topics* 47, no. 2 (2019): 113–28, 122.

experience the world, and the meanings discovered in and ascribed to those experiences. Michel Henry built on Husserl's work, and also on that of the later phenomenologist Martin Heidegger, especially his *Being and Time*. Henry was inspired to develop phenomenology in a solidly theological direction because he felt that Husserl had ultimately failed to give the self a proper grounding.³⁶

He demonstrates how the mystery of life is rooted in the Trinity, and highlights how the *Logos*, incarnate as the Word made flesh, reveals the fullness of life and human identity, for this is the image in which humanity is created.

In describing what the self is, Henry uses the concept of "ipseity." This refers to the deep, self-experiencing core of identity, often contrasted with external, socially constructed aspects of the self. In *Oneself as Another*, Paul Ricoeur distinguishes between *idem* (sameness) and *ipse* (selfhood). *Idem* refers to the stable, recognizable traits that define a person over time, while *ipse* signifies the dynamic, self-constituting experience of being, a self that exists through time but remains open to transformation.³⁷ Henry, in his phenomenological approach, takes this further by arguing that ipseity is not just selfhood but self-revelation, the immediate, non-objectifiable experience of life knowing itself. Unlike Gnostic or Cartesian dualism, where the self is a thinking subject detached from lived experience, Henry sees ipseity as inseparable from the experience of being alive. He notes that modern biology does not really know what life is, reducing it to a series of processes, saying that

biologists do not concern themselves with the appearances that are the modalities of life; their phenomenological status does not interest them. They never perceive them in themselves as impressions, sentiments, desires, joys . . . they seize upon electric currents or chains of neurons.³⁸

But for Henry, life is not defined as a set of processes, biological or otherwise. "The only life which exists is transcendental phenomenological life" and this is a "revelation" that life shows to itself.³⁹ The auto-revelation of life is beyond time, prior to any temporal or worldly experience. Zahavi emphasizes this, describing Henry's "Living Present" as constant and without temporal flux.⁴⁰ For Henry, the ipseity is generated in the auto-revelation of life. Ipseity is

³⁶ Michel Henry (trans. Nick Hanlon), "Phenomenology of Life," in *Transcendence and Phenomenology*, eds Peter M. Candler and Conor Cunningham (London: SCM Press, 2007), 241–59, 244.

³⁷ Paul Ricoeur (trans. Kathleen Blamey), *Oneself as Another* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 1992), 2–18.

³⁸ Michel Henry (trans. Susan Emanuel), *I Am The Truth: Toward a Philosophy of Christianity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 39.

³⁹ Henry, "Phenomenology of Life," 247.

⁴⁰ Dan Zahavi, "Subjectivity and Immanence in Michel Henry," in eds A. Grøn, I. Damgaard and S. Overgaard, *Subjectivity and Transcendence* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007), 133–47, 144.

a real essence that is actual and living, it is each time an actual self. It is the identity between the affecting and the affected in an auto-affection that radically individualizes and puts the stamp of individuality on everything that is auto-affected.⁴¹

This foundational self-revelation of life, centered on ipseity, finds its deepest expression in what Henry describes as the *pathétique* life, translated by Susan Emanuel as the “*pathētik*” [sic.] life.⁴² Henry does not employ the word as it is usually employed in English; Henry means the life that knows itself firstly by the emotional response that is pathos, rather than by a logical response. Thus, Henry is endorsing a view that is the very opposite of Descartes’ *cogito*. “I think” comes only after the experience of “I am.” For Henry, “I am” is foundational. It is in this way that life reveals itself to itself. If this were not true, then “I think” could precede life’s knowledge of itself. Instead, the revelation of life to itself allows the “I” to exist in “I think”—“I” must exist, and must know of its existence before there is any “I” to do the “thinking.”

To anyone who knows their Bible, the title of Henry’s book *I Am the Truth* is clearly an explicit reference to the Johannine Jesus, who, later in the Gospel, looks as if he is the gardener. In John’s gospel, Jesus says “I am the way and the truth and the life” (John 14.6). Even from the brief examination of Henry’s philosophical scheme above, it is easy to see the connections with this verse. The *pathētik* experience of “I am” is the self-revelation of the truth of life. For Henry, this is no incidental or passing similarity. It is fundamental to the life of the Universe because it is fundamental to the life of the Divine. Of the relationship between the Father and the Son, Henry says that

in its absolute self-generation, Life generates within itself He whose birth is the self-accomplishment of this Life . . . The Father—if by this we understand the movement, which nothing precedes and of which nobody knows the name by which Life is cast into itself in order to experience itself, this Father eternally engenders the Son within himself, if by the latter we understand the First Living in whose original and essential Ipseity the Father experiences himself.⁴³

Under Henry’s scheme, it is not possible for the Father to be described as “life” without necessarily generating the Son, for without the Son there is no generation of the ipseity that the Father requires in order for life to be said to exist. Henry goes on to note that because the Son is necessarily eternally generated (for the Divine experiences the Divine in eternity), it is not as if one came before the other, for this is activity that is outside of time, and there has never been a time when the generation of the Son was not.⁴⁴ Although the one generates the other, because this generation is eternal and necessary for the one generating in order to know his own life, both are God from the beginning, as it says in the first chapter of John’s gospel.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² For example, Henry, *I Am the Truth*, 39. “*Pathétique*” appears in the original, French version of his text, published as *C’est moi la vérité: Pour une philosophie du christianisme* (Paris: SEUIL, 1996), and is also used by Henry elsewhere.

⁴³ Henry, *I Am the Truth*, 57.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 58.

Henry closely relates the Divine life to the life of creatures, which, given the reflection on the Genesis, above, is no surprise at all. Life is accessible to us only because of the Divine life. It is only because of the incarnate “Word,” “absolute life’s arrival in itself” that we are able to have access to life.⁴⁵ Henry suggests that we experience the revelation of life “only in the eternal proceeding in which absolute Life comes in itself.”⁴⁶ If we arrive at life via the self-experience of ourselves, then it is obvious that “ourselves” in some sense precedes the discovery of it by us in the revelation of life. Life thus proceeds from absolute Life. The revelation of life to itself, of the ipseity of the individual self to that self, is still the *pathētik* arrival of life in itself, but we see that this revelation is truly a gift of the absolute Life from which life proceeds. Divine life, under this scheme, does not show us our own life, this seeing (the *pathētik* experience of “I am”) can only be via self-revelation, but the gift of that revelation comes from absolute Life.

Earlier in the article, I discussed the incarnation of the “Word” in John’s Gospel, and how this points toward the incarnate life to which all are called. In Henry’s terms, this also points toward the revelation of the absolute Life to itself. Henry makes great use of the Greek word *logos* that John’s gospel uses to describe the eternal Son who became incarnate in Jesus. In his description, and in keeping with Patristic tradition, Henry suggests that Christianity is subversive of the original Greek usage of *logos*, which was to do with logic, reason, and so forth. The Christian use of *logos* as an identity is not, Henry insists, about the appearing of the world, but is rather “the self-revelation of Life.”⁴⁷ Besides the more famous prologue to John’s gospel, where John says of the *Logos* that “what has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people” (John 1.3-4), Henry also points to 1 John 1, which speaks of the “*Logos* of life.”⁴⁸ Henry goes so far as to say that “God is life.”⁴⁹ This means that the abstracted question of God’s existence is set to one side, for if God is life, then we know God in the act of living. Henry notes that Meister Eckhart says that the true human being is the “human who knows God,” and that God is thus truly life.⁵⁰ We may say that to be fully alive is to know God. This ties in, as Henry observes, with the Judao-Christian affirmation from Genesis that God made humans in his image, for to be in the image of God is to be made in a similar fashion to God.⁵¹ Thus, if God is life, then we can assert that the truest human is the human who is also life. This logically brings us back to the *Logos* and to the incarnation; it is not too great a stretch to suggest that Henry successfully demonstrates that Jesus is the only person who can be truly called fully human besides being called fully God. Interpreting Henry, we may suggest that if life is what makes a human a true human, then the *Logos* of Life incarnate (the ultimate self-revelation of life) is not only the truest image of God, as humanity was intended to be, but is simply the True Image of God,

⁴⁵ Henry, *Incarnation*, 85.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ Michel Henry (trans. Christina M. Gschwandtner), *Words of Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2012), 74.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 82.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 84f.

there being no distance between the desired and actual image. In the self-revelation of absolute Life, the *Logos* reveals the Divine, and in the incarnation of absolute Life, Humanity is also revealed to itself. The *Logos* is Life itself in that it is the *Logos* who is the loci of the revelation of Life unto Life. Henry says that in “the First Living Self . . . Life reveals itself to itself—its Word.”⁵²

There is a soteriological implication to Henry’s phenomenology of life by way of a scheme for what we might call “atonement,” becoming at one with God. Henry insists that the definition of a human person is in the “condition of Son” and that this is “what allows for his salvation.”⁵³ It is possible to regain the “absolute life,” that is the life of the Son in one’s own life, only by “life itself.”⁵⁴ Explicitly, this cannot be by any form of “knowledge,” and even such knowledge as the attempt to prove God’s existence by logic.⁵⁵ Here, Henry criticizes Heidegger’s view that Being is the ground of truth, for this subordinates the Divine to the logic of the world.⁵⁶ Humans can know, *pathētikally*, their own salvation by being joined with the life of the absolute in what Henry calls “acts of mercy.”⁵⁷ It is in these acts that the ego is substituted for “an essential Ipseity” in which the Son is embodied as the true human.⁵⁸ In this process, the ego, the socially constructed, externalized self, gives way to essential ipseity, the deep, self-revealing core of being. This transformation happens through acts of mercy, which reflect Christ’s own life and embody his absolute self-giving nature. In such acts, a person experiences their true self (i.e., their own ipseity) as inseparable from divine life. Henry notes that Paul had just such an experience when he wrote to the Galatians (Galatians 2.20) “it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me.”⁵⁹

If Jesus is the True Human, and if in him was Life and the true Image of God, then in becoming one with this Life, we find our own truest life which is True Life itself. In thinking of the Prodigal Son of Luke 15, Henry comments that the younger son experiences a moment of self-revelation of the son’s true self when he decides to return to his father after squandering his inheritance. Henry comments that the great revelation for that character is not that he has made an intellectual decision, but rather that he is alive in the emotion of his pathos, in his life’s self-revelation. “This revelation is infinite Life’s self-revelation revealing itself to him in its emotion.”⁶⁰ Henry goes on to comment that “all finitude is woven of the infinite, blended with it, inseparable from it, and draws from it all that it is.”⁶¹ Elsewhere, Henry insists that a human self is one to whom the revelation of Life is given, such that the self is experienced by the self and that this self can only be found within and from “the Word of Life” (1 John), the “First Born among many

⁵² Henry, “Phenomenology of Life,” 250.

⁵³ Henry, *I Am the Truth*, 152.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 153.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 154.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 157.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 168.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 169.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ Henry, *Incarnation*, 177.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

brothers” (Romans 8).⁶² Thus, according to Henry, humanity comes from the Divine, and salvation is that going to the Divine wherein we discover True Life in the Absolute Life of the *Logos* as the *Logos* proceeds into Life and we proceed from this revelation. This is an expression of Theosis, or Divinization, a participation in the very life of God, where the self is not absorbed or erased but fully realized in its truest form. In Henry’s terms, this means that salvation is not merely a return to God but a deepening of selfhood in the absolute self-revelation of Life itself, where the finite is drawn ever more fully into the infinite. Through this union, humanity does not just reflect the divine image but is transfigured by it. For Henry, this applies to the very flesh of which we are made. As Emmanuel Falque comments, “*ainsi en va-t-il précisément de la doctrine de l’incorporation de l’homme à la chair du Christ chez Irénée*,”⁶³ “this corresponds precisely to Irenaeus’ doctrine of human incorporation into Christ’s flesh.” When Irenaeus writes of the *telos* of this transformation, he says that Jesus Christ “for His immense love’s sake was made that which we are, in order that He might perfect us to be what He is.”⁶⁴ Athanasius puts it like this, “the Word of God . . . assumed humanity that we might become God.”⁶⁵ For Henry, as with Irenaeus and Athanasius, this transformation is not an abstraction, but a reality grounded in the very flesh of Christ. The incarnation is not merely an event in history, but it is the ongoing reality in which human flesh is drawn into the divine life. Christ’s flesh is not separate from ours, but it is the very place where humanity and divinity meet, where the finite is infused with the infinite. In Christ, human flesh does not lose itself but is fulfilled, being transfigured in the glory of divine Life.

For Henry, the mystery of Life is finally revealed in the *pathētik* experience of “I am” generated by the *Logos*, which gives life unto Life itself. It is in the relational aspect of the *Logos* to the Father and to the life of creation that allows absolute Life to be shared, given and experienced. Here is revelation qua revelation, the Divine Life being revealed to the Divine Life and hence to all who live, to all living, who can *pathētikally* join themselves to this Life and say, with Paul, “it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me” (Galatians 2.20). Henry points us back to the Garden of Eden, where life was given by the one who is Life itself, and experienced and enjoyed in pure auto-revelation, and then points us on to finding Life once again in the incarnate *Logos*, who can reveal our selves to ourselves. Henry’s phenomenological approach to life connects with what has been said above about social media. Assessing the nature and our use of technology, including social media, it is a question of whether the user of social media is in fact letting their ipseity show forth or not. Whether it is showing forth to the world is revealed to be not the most important question, rather it is about whether it is showing forth to the self. Does the user of social media move more toward experiencing who they truly are, or are they moving away from this? Even so, are they experiencing the “I am” or are they

⁶² Henry, “Phenomenology of Life,” 251.

⁶³ Emmanuel Falque, “Michel Henry Théologien (À Propos de *C’est Moi la Vérité*),” *Laval Théologique et Philosophique* 57, no. 3 (2001), 525–36, 527.

⁶⁴ Irenaeus of Lyon (trans. Members of the English Church), *Five Books of S. Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons, Against Heresies* (Oxford: J. Parker, 1872), 449.

⁶⁵ Athanasius (trans. A Religious of C.S.M.V.), *On the Incarnation* (London: A. R. Mowbray, 1963), 93.

instead starting from (or being coerced into creating) a false knowledge of themselves, claiming an “I am,” which is based on “I think,” prior to a real experience of self? In excarnating the self with social media, the auto-revelation of life is stifled by the fake presentation of the self being mistaken for the self. The ego is allowed, or even encouraged, to rule over the ipseity. Conversely, there are online groups and communities who help people to be a more authentic version of themselves than they otherwise would be. Authenticity means to live in such a way that the ipseity is leaned into. It is to live incarnationally. It is to live into the reality of who one is, rather than to live the shadow life of a false version of the self.

Conclusion

In reflecting on the themes of creation, incarnation, and excarnation, I have traced a narrative from the divine embodiment in the Genesis creation myths to the digital self in contemporary social media contexts. Using Michel Henry’s theological understanding of phenomenology, it is possible to see how life is discovered in auto-revelation, and how all life is revealed by the True Life to all the living, and yet how this ipseitic discovery can be masked by the ego. There is a tension between the integrated self, the self that is aware of itself and incarnate unto itself, and the curated, excarnated identities that can be fostered by digital platforms. Digital spaces invite a tendency to dislocation and excarnation, but they can also contribute to integration and incarnational living.

The rise of social media has introduced new dynamics of self-representation that often emphasize appearance over substance. Social media encourages users to excarnate aspects of themselves, such that dis-integration is a real danger. Physical presence is replaced by a digital persona, and the curated and idealized versions of the self thus presented can lead quite directly to fragmented identities that exacerbate anxiety and reduce self-esteem. This digital fragmentation mirrors the theological concept of dis-integration introduced in the Genesis account. Of course, humans have always done this to some extent. We have always hidden parts of ourselves. But the real difference is the scope and magnitude of what is possible online, and the encouragement toward belief in our own propaganda about ourselves, rather than allowing ourselves to experience ourselves.

However, social media is not monolithic in its effects. As discussed, there are significant examples where digital platforms foster genuine connection and integration. Political movements and self-help communities illustrate the potential for social media to serve as a tool for incarnate living, at least insofar as social media allows users to display great honesty and openness about a specific part of their life. Such honesty and openness to ourselves is firstly important for self-identity, even as these qualities may assist others in dropping at least some performative aspects of their self-realization. Social media platforms can facilitate real-world impact and provide support networks that promote body positivity and solidarity, and this use aligns with the integrated, incarnate existence modeled in the creation narratives.

The dual potential of social media makes it complex. On one hand, there is a risk of excarnation and the attendant psychological and spiritual dis-integration. On the other hand, there is the potential for these platforms to support incarnational living, fostering genuine connection and holistic self-representation. The integration of the self in the

digital age requires a conscious effort to balance the use of social media. By cultivating practices that promote authenticity and embodied presence, individuals can resist the pull toward fragmentation and excarnate living. Digital platforms, social media and more besides, are here to stay, and there is a need to therefore educate ourselves and our children about how to use these things, of the dangers as well as the opportunities.

In the stories of the Garden of Eden, there is no gap between Adam and Eve's ipseity and their ego, for their life reveals itself to them in an unmediated and immediate way. They are simply who they are, in the image of their Creator. As humanity catches up with the technology we have created, we need to be moving toward a digital existence that reflects the integrated wholeness of the incarnate divine image and the true humanity seen in the Garden and in Jesus. In this, there is a pathway to reclaiming our full, authentic selves in both digital and physical realms.

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