

Michel Henry
What Science Doesn't Know¹
translated by Michael Tweed

“God is Science,” said Yvon Belaval, meaning that science has taken the place of God. This implies that **from now on science possesses knowledge, all conceivable knowledge,** and Power, all power which humankind is capable of in this world, as far as we can act on the world and transform it by understanding its laws. In this regard, **the startling (in all senses of the word) progress of the technology that furthers and constantly depends on scientific development is the spectacular illustration of a theoretical and practical mutation that entrusts man's destiny to the objective understanding of material nature.** If one belief survives amidst the collapse of all beliefs and of all values that characterizes modernity, it is this: the belief that scientific knowledge constitutes the only form of true, veracious, objective knowledge and consequently that human action must be based on and be guided by it.

Now **it is exactly in its relation to ethics that strange weaknesses appear in this exclusive knowledge.** We demand at least two things of ethics: on the individual plane, a core of certitudes allowing each person to lead their life; and, on the collective plane, a unity offering to humanity and especially to each social group, to each nation, the possibility of forming a community of behaviours, an ethos constructed on this ground of convictions and common thoughts.

What do we see, on the contrary, in the age of omniscient science and omnipotent technology? Not beings confident in themselves and their destiny, moving with happiness and ease within a world now intelligible to them, certain of what they should do; but rather **solitary individuals, strangers to all concrete community because, lacking a spiritual bond, no community of this kind exists any longer.** For those beings left to themselves but not finding any meaning to their lives, neither inside nor outside, there are basically only two possible forms of escape. If they are still worrying about their personal life, the first is to **contact a psychotherapist, psychoanalyst or psychiatrist** who is not to propose positive values, in which these new doctors do not believe any more than they do anyway, but to help them to “live,” to support themselves as well as the unbearable society in which, despite everything, they must fit in.

Self-help,
wellness,
bien-être

But the second solution seems more tempting and easier, and would seem preferable: to **flee oneself, to cast oneself out towards any enthralling spectacle capable of completely absorbing oneself to the point that one no longer thinks of oneself and totally forgets oneself.** Still the spectacle must never stop and this is what technology has brought to the lost man of our times: the possibility of constantly losing oneself, most often by simply sitting down in front of a television set that spews an unbroken flood of images to which, hypnotized, the viewer can abandon him- or herself. For such is the extraordinary condition of modern, so-called civilized, man, as the content that occupies his mind—his images, dreams, desires, fears, passion and ideas—no longer arise from him but from a device that dictates all that he feels and thinks. At no time or place has the alienation of the human being been so complete. If being alienated is to become a

¹ from *Phénoménologie de la vie, Tome IV, Sur l'éthique et la religion*, 2004 PUF, pp. 41-51
(Originally appeared in *La Recherche*, 208, March 1989)

stranger to oneself, it is, more specifically, to be deprived of all power over what goes on in one's own mind.

So just what does science do? What do its theories, i.e. those self-legitimizing structured groups of idealities, concern? Some of these theories, it is true, have allowed the production of images at a distance and hence of those devices that have transformed all of humanity into a crowd of mental dependents. But did the knowledge included in such theories ever decide to build these kinds of instruments and force people—including children three years old whose mothers no longer interest them—to gather before them as so many dazed spectators? It is the physics of the atomic nucleus that allows the fabrication of thermonuclear bombs, but has physics ever recommended actually building them? It is modern biology, with its magnificent progress, that has made genetic manipulations possible, but has it prescribed such manipulation, even experimentally? In short has science ever said a word to humankind about what actions we should take?

What then has science said? If science is the only true knowledge at humanity's disposal, what other authority could act as our guide if there is actually no other knowledge than that of science? That is the question. It is not a question of "critiquing" science, of arguing over the validity of its results considered in their ideality and thus in their basic universality, results that in their respective fields cannot instill even the slightest denigration but only admiration. It is a question of asking: 1) Is scientific knowledge really the only knowledge that we possess? (2) Is it the one on which we must base our actions?

The second question has already been answered in the negative. Science is "innocent," neither the atomic bomb nor genetic manipulations can be held responsible simply because, adhering strictly to the order of things, science draws no conclusions as to the goal of our actions nor does it assume this role. So one must acknowledge, here and now, that if humanity did not possess any knowledge other than that of science, it would find itself in complete disarray, without any idea as to what should be done nor being able to decide. So we find that such a disarray corresponds to this paradoxical situation that we now find ourselves in: to be master of a considerable knowledge that is continuously expanding according to obvious and impressive advancements while, at the same time, having to confess complete ignorance as to the ultimate purpose of our actions and the values that should define them. Thus the first question, which is the main purpose of this analysis, becomes more urgent: namely, does man have only science, in the modern sense, at his disposal in this regard?

So what is the answer? Does science's field of competence encompass all that exists, all that we can rightfully speak of? Does it ultimately define all true knowledge that humankind can lay claim to? In answer it is preferable to refer to the origin of modern science, at the beginning of the seventeenth century when Galileo and after him Descartes laid its explicit foundations. In this inaugural act, that one could call the proto-founding act of modern science, decisions were made that would direct the entire subsequent development of what came to be known as "scientific" knowledge, and what is more: the ways we think, how we relate to the world that surrounds us and how we understand its nature.

This world is given to us in the form of sensible appearances that vary from one individual to another and which are thus contingent. But this sensible basis of the world, these ungraspable "sensible qualities," transitory as they are, are only an appearance from

which one must make an abstraction if one wants to understand the true being of the universe. The universe is comprised of extended material bodies, each having a form and thus a shape. But while these bodies can very well exist without one imagining their sensible qualities, these qualities cannot on the contrary exist without the material bodies that support them: the former are the accident, the latter the essence, this true-being of things that Galileo had in mind. Now while these inessential sensible qualities dissolve into the subjectivity of various individuals where it is impossible for us to grasp them with any precision in order to formulate from them rigorous, universal scientific propositions, we produce on the contrary, regarding the essence of things, a mode of exact, ideal knowledge which will provide us rational truths, capable of being imposed on every mind. This ideal knowledge of bodies' shapes is geometry.

In his decisive text *The Assayer* (*Saggiatore*) Galileo affirms both the essential character of the material basis of the universe with its geometrical determinations, as well as the inessential character of sensible qualities and thus of the sensible knowledge on which scholastic science was based before ceding its place to modern science.

“Nevertheless, I say that, as soon as I conceive of a piece of matter, or a corporeal substance, I feel compelled out of necessity to conceive that it is bounded, and has this or that shape; that it is small or large in relation to other bodies; that it is in this or that place, and at this or that time; that it is in motion or at rest; that it either touches or does not touch another body; and that it is one, few or many; nor can I separate it from these states by any act of the imagination. But I do not feel my mind forced to conceive it as necessarily accompanied by such states as being white or red, bitter or sweet, noisy or quiet, or having a pleasant or unpleasant odour.”² In this way it is possible to know the true-being of Nature or, as Galileo says, to read in the great Book of the Universe, assuming one understands its language, the characters which are “triangles, circles and other geometric shapes without which means it is humanly impossible to understand a word.”

In his famous analysis of a piece of wax in the *Second Meditation*, Descartes uses similar terms to describe this sensible/geometrical split, while reducing the reality of things, like Galileo, to ideal determinations. As it also appeared capable of producing a mathematical formula for these geometrical properties and modern science, the physico-mathematical approach of nature was born.

All science is based on a reduction. Out of the entire fabric of existence, it only retains whatever forms the explicit theme of its research—inter-human relations if it is sociology, human events considered from the angle of their historicity if it is history, the brushstrokes which cause the productions of the mind to be offered to us as “artworks” if it is aesthetics, etc. But science as we understand this term today, Galilean and post-Galilean science arose from a massive reduction that sets aside certain aspects of phenomena to concentrate on others. It dismisses the entire sensible character of this world where we live, all that makes it a human world, the life-world, the *Lebenswelt*.

One must beware of this Galilean reduction that threw open the doors to modernity. Setting aside the sensible qualities of the universe, the blue of the sky, the green of trees, the serene or threatening character of a landscape, the sweetness of scents, the beauty of

Contemporary physics has superseded notions of classical location. Does that mean that Galilean science is obsolete, and with it its philosophical implications? Or is contemporary physics just a refinement of Galilean views, and geometry (math) is where location and shapes should be found?

² Galileo, *The Assayer*, translated by George MacDonald Ross, (<http://www.philosophy.leeds.ac.uk/GMR/hmp/texts/modern/galileo/assayer.html>)

shapes—of old cities or the *dread* in the monstrous suburbs of our time—not only eliminates the external aspect of the objects that surround us but our own life as well. For it is true, according to the brilliant intuition of Descartes, that the sensations which cause the world to be given to us in the appearance of a sensible world are not in things but rather within us, in our mind. Things do not feel themselves, thus they cannot be warm, in pain, sad or peaceful. Only what feels itself, what experiences itself interiorly can experience something as hot or cold, painful or joyous. We call that which immediately and interiorly experiences itself “subjectivity” or “life”—not biological life, but life in the sense that one gives to this word when saying for example, “life is fleeting,” “life is sad” or even, like a character from Maupassant, “Life is neither as good nor as bad as you claim.”

Everyone knows what life is, because life knows itself, experiences itself interiorly and immediately. Interiorly: beyond the world and its light, beyond representation, in the invisible. Who has ever seen their life, their boredom, joy or anguish? And yet, these invisible determinations are what are most certain. When, in search of an absolute certitude, Descartes undertook to doubt everything and to this end imagined that all was only a dream, he retained as absolutely certain, despite the fact that it was only a dream, the fear or whatever “passion” he experienced (*Passions of the Soul*, art.26). For it is actually impossible to doubt what experiences itself interiorly in the manner of a fear, anguish or pleasure, or in any sensation whatsoever.

By dismissing the sensible qualities of the world, Galilean science actually abolishes this absolute phenomenological life (the immediate experiencing of oneself present in every fear, in every pleasure, in every sensation, etc.) from its research. And here one clearly sees that two paths open up before the human mind and that, choosing one or the other is one’s destiny: one must decide between life and death. Theatrical

Either one gives a purely methodological meaning to the Galilean reduction. One says: to know the reality of the material universe it is best to not take into account its sensible appearance within our subjective experience of that universe. And this is perfectly fine if it is true that sensations and impressions, desires and affects, everything that is subjective in general is excluded from the material thing and is irreducible to it. It is in this sense that according to Descartes the soul, or what we call phenomenological life, is fundamentally different from the body.

Or one grants the Galilean reduction an ontological meaning. What the Galilean reduction brackets out—namely this subjective life with all of its modalities—is assumed to be nothing, or at the very most a simple appearance, a kind of phenomenal double of reality, the reality that is actually the theme of Galilean science and that would reveal itself, as this new science developed, in the form of the particles found in modern physics. Subjective life on the one side and physical reality on the other, are not like two fields of being, different but equal in dignity, the latter alone constituting the actual and determining reality, while the former is only the product, phenomenon or, more accurately, the epiphenomenon. The existence of sensations, desires, affects are not strongly denied, but are only a consequence, an effect. If it is a question of colours or sounds, one will concede that they are impressions, *lived experiences*, but they comprise only the illusory subjective appearance of a reality comprised of the material movements for which physics proposes the rigorous theory, which physics presents in their truth.

When one deems scientific concepts lacking, one always exposes herself to a heavy burden of proof. What does biological life lack in order to accommodate Henry's concept of life?

Descartes dualism is the consequence of a methodology, not a premise

And so, due to an imperceptible shift, science has yielded its place to an ideology, the scientific ideology that science often gives rise to but never directly implicates. To treat our subjective life as little more than appearances, and illusory appearances at that, is, in regard to humankind and its humanitas, the greatest of blasphemies. For what creates this humanitas, what differentiates it from a thing, is the fact of feeling and of feeling oneself, in other words one's subjectivity. Our being begins and ends with our phenomenological life. If this subjective life is nothing, then we too are nothing. If this life is only an illusory appearance, then we too are only an illusion, and reality can be attained even without taking us into consideration. The theoretical negation of subjectivity involves the practical destruction of humanity or, at least, makes such destruction possible.

The pro-science and anti mumbo jumbo reader may be swift to conclude that yes, subjectivity is an illusion or at best, an effect. But Henry argues that we should reject this view not on the basis of ego, but because of theoretical shortcomings

However it is not because it undermines ethics that scientific ideology should be rejected, but rather for theoretical reasons. Regarding appearances as illusion is the supreme illusion. For every appearance is proof of itself by the very fact that it appears: appearance is, in its appearing, the basis of every assertion and of every possible truth. Thus in his last great work³ Husserl demonstrated that all the idealities and conceptualizations of science must refer to this sensible world that they are supposed to explain, they are erected on the previously given ground of the sensible world, assume it and only have meaning in relation to it. What is more, these idealities and conceptualizations do not exist in nature: for example, neither circles nor squares are found in nature; instead there are only curves and sensible outlines from which the geometric shapes evolve through a process of ideation. However this process is an act of consciousness, of that very subjectivity that has been presumed to be illusory and without which science and all its conceptual edifices would not exist.

Methodological grounding

Further, by creating from the sensible givens of the world the intelligible base that must be accounted for, science develops entirely inside of this experience of the world whose fundamental structures—space, time, causality, etc.—it presupposes. More radically it assumes that the world itself, i.e. this space of light spread before our gaze, this horizon of visibility inside of which all that we are able to see—whether with our eyes of flesh or with those of the mind—appears. In other words, scientific experience develops in the prolongation of perceptual experience, as it perceives only objects. Being an object means to be placed before, to become visible, to appear to an eventual gaze, in such a way that it is the fact of being placed before, it is the objectivity of the object, the exteriority of the world that creates visibility, the phenomenality of all that is found placed in this condition of being an object.

What then is an experience in which there is neither an object nor a world, and the content of which has escaped both the perceptual gaze as well as the gaze of science? Such however is the essence of life, the phenomenological life that experiences and realizes itself interiorly without ever hollowing out, between it and itself, the distancing of a world (*l'écart d'un monde*), the place of any object. Life that can neither be seen nor understood in the sense of science, certainly, but which is no less unquestionable or incontestable, and which on the order of a fear, desire or sensation is found to be necessary, in that we experience it, and as we experience it.

This then is what science does not know: our life. This life is not something (as is the case for biological life for example) but rather a knowing, the first and most essential

³ *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, tr. David Carr, Northwestern, 1970

knowing of all, the one that presupposes all the others. For every knowledge by which we know the world (whether it is a question of the sensible world or of the world of geometrico-mathematical idealities)—seeing, hearing, feeling, understanding—would not be if they weren't first living, if they didn't experience themselves interiorly and thus know themselves with a nonobjective and irrepresentable knowledge in the very act by which they see, hear, understand, etc.

This primitive awareness of life, by which life does nothing other than know itself and know nothing but itself, is at work in our most basic comportments, in all know-how, in every action, in every praxis. Knowing-how-to-move-my-eyes and thus being able to look, knowing-how-to-move-my-hands and thus being able to grasp—all knowledge that inhabits our living subjective body and identifies with its power is of the order of life. We are forced to acknowledge that this basic awareness is also the most fundamental and makes all the other forms of knowledge possible: for how can we read the most sophisticated treatise of physics or biology if we don't first know how to turn the pages with our hands, and how to peruse the text by moving our eyes. Yet this knowing which inhabits all our actions owes nothing to scientific knowledge but precedes it as an imperceptible, yet inescapable condition. This basic knowing has allowed humanity to live and survive since it arose on the Earth, long before the invention of scientific knowledge by Galileo in the seventeenth century.

Understanding is the practice of a living being

But this elementary knowing quality of life is also the basis for its highest achievements, for culture in all its forms, for art, ethics and the various expressions of spirituality. Art, for example, reintroduces what Galilean science had bracketed out: the very sensibility in which art seeks the most intense modes of accomplishment. Ethics—which is totally foreign to the field of science, as science has nothing to teach us about how we should act—draws its source from life and from it alone. That is why life, immediately experiencing itself in its suffering need and in all of its lived experiences, knows what it is and what it wants, as well as what it must do and how to do it—as its immediate knowing is also that of all know-how and of all possible praxis.

Art is the typical example of the expression of life. Explain how phenomenology of life makes both art and science conceivable within the same philosophical framework

Life, when all is said and done, desires itself—and that is why it passionately refuses death—a refusal that is at the root of every moral rule and probably all religions. It wants, according to the desire for growth within it, to live longer, feel, understand and love more. In all that it does, in each of its abilities, it aspires to experience itself more intensely, it seeks an ever greater happiness. This happiness of living constitutes the unique finality of life, as well as of all that it undertakes, especially of the scientific project and of the technology that science gives rise to. When it escapes this finality, in my view, it changes into a monstrous self-development, inaugurating a barbarism of a new order under which humanity risks being crushed, or in any case spiritually killing itself.

It is not a question of instigating a conflict between this phenomenological life that defines our deepest being, that motivates all that we can do, that is the source of every possible meaning, and the science that thematizes the material universe, but rather of recognizing an insurmountable division of their respective domains. There is no greater illusion than to believe that science will one day overcome this gap, if our invisible life remains entirely outside of the world in which science seeks and finds all that it is able to. As for understanding how to at least carry on a discourse about this nonobjectivizable and mysterious life that escapes the comprehension of Galilean science while presenting with



Henry's concept of life is close to the concept of conatus. A living being is driven by an inner push toward both conformity to its identity and augmentation of what it can

Henry is careful to not surrender to antiscience. But it comes at a price: subjective experience and objective knowledge are unbridgeable. Henry does not defend ontological dualism, but rather a duality created by a choice of methodology

comparable rigour necessary, aprioric truths similar to those of geometry, although of another order, this is a different affair entirely—this is no longer the affair of science, but of philosophy.