

bergson's vitalisms

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In the eyes of the biologist Jacques Monod, Bergson is “the most illustrious promoter of a metaphysical vitalism” revolting against rationality¹. This interpretation, not exclusive to Monod, is often accompanied by the accusation that Bergson’s vitalism would be teleological², and maybe even mystical³ – this last idea being reinforced by the success that Bergson receives among the spiritualists⁴. This understanding of Bergsonian philosophy led to his disrepute among scientists. Even today, despite the renewed interest in Bergson’s reflections on science⁵, he is not considered a philosopher *of science*⁶. And the popular (textbook) opinion is still that his *élan vital* is a spiritual principle at the origin of all living things and even of all reality: Bergson is considered a vitalist using biology to develop a spiritualist metaphysics, which makes him acceptable to philosophers but not to scientists.

Yet, Bergson's position is ambiguous. Even though he criticises the intellectualist paradigm of science, which he claims is unable to comprehend the living, and proposes a form of vitalism, the philosophy of *Creative Evolution*⁷ may be regarded as a true philosophy of biology. However, some texts make the status of his vitalism problematic, such as *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*⁸, in which the *élan vital* is integrated into a reflection on the divine. The aim of this paper is to disentangle what, in Bergson, can or cannot be considered as a philosophy relevant to science, by trying to clarify the label 'vitalist' that has so commonly been assigned to him, often pejoratively. This will involve examining the link between his vitalism and the spiritualism he has been credited with. Contrary to Olivier Perru who has proposed an excellent analysis of Bergson's vitalism⁹ but focusing only on *Creative Evolution*, I will study his different works, to show that Bergson's position shifts according to the subjects under study: before *Creative Evolution*, Bergson develops a form of spiritualism; in *Creative Evolution*, he proposes a form of vitalism that may not be clearly related to his spiritualism; finally, I argue that, in *The Two Sources*, the distinction is not so clear and that his vitalism itself may indeed become spiritualist. His spiritualism transforms according to his works and the meaning of his vitalism changes in return. I hypothesise that Bergson is a *vitalist-opportunist*: there are several forms of vitalism Bergson, that have neither the same ontological status nor the same function, according to the purpose of the moment. This is not to say that Bergson changes his theory completely. Each time, the *élan vital* is intimately related to duration. But in this paper, I will focus on the shifts in meaning in order to distinguish between what belongs to a properly biological vitalism and what belongs to a spiritualist metaphysics.

WHAT IS VITALISM?

Vitalism has had several definitions throughout history¹⁰. A general definition would be that vitalism refers to the idea of an opposition between inert matter and life, that emphasises the properties specific to the living¹¹. Yet, this is a transhistorical definition into which almost all biological theories can be integrated. But attempting a historical approach risks confronting us with a multiplicity of definitions (a problem already raised by Andrault¹²). To clarify the concept, we can propose, following Wolfe, a distinction between a substantial (*substantiel*) vitalism and a functional one¹³. Substantial or metaphysical vitalism, generally of spiritualist or animist inspiration and often accompanied with teleology (Stahl, Driesch), assumes that there are vital and unmaterial forces which really exist in bodies. Non-metaphysical or functional vitalism simply states that the functional properties of the organism are irreducible to physico-chemical

properties (Haller) and is close to what is known today as organicism. Between the two, there are ambiguous positions such as that of Blumenbach¹⁴ or of the Montpellier School, where we find Bordeu and Barthez. While Bordeu leaves open the question of whether life results from organisation or organisation results from life¹⁵, positioning himself rather for an emergentist position¹⁶, Barthez refuses to think that life results only from the sum of its parts, and proposes the existence of a vital principle, corresponding neither to the soul, nor to the physical-chemical properties of bodies¹⁷. It should also be pointed out that the label ‘vitalism’ is often a pejorative appellation, insofar as it refers to a mysterious principle that has no place in science¹⁸.

As stated, many authors (see endnotes ¹, ² and ³) qualify Bergson as a vitalist, without the definition being very clear, mixing in the idea that he would also be a spiritualist and finalist. *Yet Bergson never claims to be a vitalist.* He explicitly refutes the idea of a vital principle, internal to the organisms, as a declination of finalism (which does not help Ruse from likening Bergson’s “*élans vitaux*” (*sic*) to Driesch’s entelechies¹⁹). Since individuality is not complete in the living, to what would the vital principle apply? (CE 44-46) “When we think of the infinity of infinitesimal elements and... causes that concur in the genesis of a living being... the first impulse of the mind is to consider this army of little workers as watched over by a skilled foreman, the ‘vital principle’” (CE 238). The vitalist, struck by the multiplicity of elements that contribute to the formation of the organism would posit a vital principle capable of accounting for their harmony. But Bergson does not reject vitalism completely. “The ‘vital principle’ may indeed not explain much, but it is at least a sort of label affixed to our ignorance... while mechanism invites us to ignore that ignorance” (CE 44).

Does this mean that Bergson would be a functionalist, and thus non-metaphysical vitalist? This interpretation may be reductive since Bergson *does* hypothesise an *élan vital* that has metaphysical commitments. At least, he is a vitalist in the most general sense: there is no doubt that Bergson refuses to reduce living beings to physical-chemical elements (CE 32-33). Yet, this meaning is broad and confusing: many biologists, while proclaiming the independence of biology from the physical science, do not accept the existence of a vital force. And it is not clear whether Bergson’s *élan vital* is a vital force, and even less clear whether it is a spiritual force: the question of its ontological status as well as its biological significance is difficult to answer and posed differently from one text to another. This is what I will try to clarify. My hypothesis is that, if Bergson does not call himself a vitalist, it is precisely because the Bergsonian ‘vitalism’ takes on different meanings according

to his works and different relations with his spiritualism, that the label ‘vitalist’ could not express.

IS DURATION A SPIRITUAL PRINCIPLE?

I. Duration as the ontological stuff of consciousness

Before 1907, there is no mention of the *élan vital*. But the idea of a specificity of life somehow comparable to a spiritual impulse is already subtly present.

In *Time and Free Will*, Bergson explicitly links consciousness and duration²⁰. This essay addresses a metaphysical problem – freedom. Implicit in the resolution of this problem is a rejection of a substantialist metaphysics considering consciousness as a substance upon which are superimposed mental states (see especially TFW 170-17; 175-178). Bergson denounces this vision as retrospective and grounded on spatial illusions. Consciousness is not a thing onto which states graft but is *duration*: a maturation in which the states intermingle. This allows Bergson to resolve the false problem of freedom that arises from a confusion between duration and space. Both the determinist and the defender of free-will think of the unfolding of consciousness as a succession of states, the former by claiming that, given antecedents a single possible act corresponds, the latter by assuming that the same series of states can lead to several different acts that are equally possible (TFW 174-175). But the *ego* is not divisible into states: consciousness is continuous duration and therefore enrichment; and the choice results from the very duration of hesitation.

Pure duration is defined as “the form which the succession of our conscious states assumes when our ego lets itself *live*” (TFW 100). But it is not a mere modality of our conscious perception: if consciousness allows to grasp duration, duration exists beyond our perception of time. For consciousness *is duration*, and this duration is operative: its action is different from physical and chemical factors because it can result in a free act that escapes the efficient causality of the material world. Duration is the actual process of consciousness, and furthermore it seems to be specific to this spiritual reality, as opposed to matter:

“External things change, but their moments do not *succeed* one another... except for a consciousness which keeps them in mind... Hence, we must not say that external things *endure*, but rather that there is in them some inexpressible reason in virtue of which we cannot examine them at successive moments of our own duration without observing that they have

changed” (TFW 227).

Duration thus seems to be the exclusive preserve of the mind; the temporality of matter depending on the temporality of our consciousness.

And yet, some material objects seem to endure – living beings. Bergson compares consciousness and the living several times, and it is not sure whether it is the duration of the living that explains the duration of consciousness or the other way round. Bergson distinguishes the realm of inert matter, which does not seem to endure, from that of life, characterised by irreversibility and where “duration certainly seems to act like a cause” (TFW 153). It is also stated that “the past is a reality *perhaps* for living bodies, and certainly for conscious beings”, that it “*may* be a gain for the living being, and it is indisputably one for the conscious being” (*Ibid.*, my emphasis). Between living duration and conscious duration, there would be a difference in degree not of efficacy but of certainty: duration only *might* be a reality for all living beings.

At this stage of Bergson’s work, duration appears as an ontological reality, distinct from the physical realm by its specific movement. One could say that this reality is spiritual insofar as it seems that it is in consciousness primarily, as opposed to matter, that the effectiveness of duration manifests itself. Does this mean that we have a spiritualism, and of what nature would it be? To begin with, consciousness is never described as an immutable substance, but always as a process, a continuity of change. We would then have a form of *spiritualism* (consciousness is distinguished from matter, by the effectiveness of duration), but *not substantial*. Moreover, if duration characterises consciousness, as opposed to matter, which leads to a spiritualist psychology that distinguishes phenomena of the spirit from material ones, *it is not certain that duration itself is spiritual in nature nor is it a form of consciousness*. Bergson says that duration could be a reality for living *bodies*, suggesting that duration could also be at the very heart of (organic) matter. Bergson’s spiritualism here touches on questions of psychology but not biology. If (and at this stage it is only a hypothesis) duration could have such an effect on the living that a distinction must be made between biological and physico-chemical phenomena, this Bergsonian vitalist interrogation is not itself spiritualist.

II. Duration between biological specificity and ontological reality

*Matter and Memory*²¹ re-examines the status of duration and its link to consciousness, through the question of perception and memory.

In this text, Bergson advances that duration can have “different tensions”: “there is no one rhythm of duration; it is possible to imagine many different rhythms which, slower or faster, measure the degree of tension or relaxation of different kinds of consciousness” (MM 275). Bergson links the different rhythms of duration with the various rhythms of perception which depend on the tension of consciousness. “Would not the whole of history be contained in a very short time for a consciousness at a higher degree of tension than our own?” (Ibid.) The different qualities perceived by the different organisms and the extent of their perception are related to the time taken for action, which in turn depends on the complexity of the nervous system. Does this mean that duration exists only for living beings, and more precisely in their consciousness? Is it a spiritual reality? A biological one? or the process that weaves all reality?

Bergson sketches here the idea that *being itself is duration, that duration is the ontological stuff of all things*, the differences between beings stemming from differences in rhythm: “if you abolish my consciousness, the material universe subsists exactly as it was; only, since you have removed that particular rhythm of duration which was the condition of my action upon things, these things draw back into themselves... in an incomparably more divided duration” (MM 276). Even though there is a great “distance between the rhythm of our duration and that of the flow of things” (MM 331), the material universe *does* endure. But to this idea also corresponds the fact that reality itself would be a form of consciousness, neutralised, but latent. “No doubt also the material universe itself, defined as the totality of images, is a kind of consciousness” (MM 313). And a few pages after: “Nature might be regarded as a neutralized and consequently a latent consciousness” (MM 331).

Duration would no longer be the characteristic of human consciousness nor a specificity of the living, but the ontological reality that would weave the whole universe, including inert matter. Duration acquires the status of a true metaphysical principle, even though it is less a substantial one than a processual one²². But it seems that, to say this, Bergson must inject spirituality into matter, but neutralised spirituality: if matter endures, it is because it is a consciousness that is not tense (towards action) but relaxed towards inertia. Even before being a vitalist, would Bergson have been a spiritualist²³, or even an animist? This is what the concept of *élan vital* will allow to clarify in *Creative Evolution*, while shifting the question, since the focus is no longer psychological but biological.

To transition to this problem, I will study what can be found in *Laughter*²⁴, a text

which appears as an announcement of the two problems that Bergson would later address: biology and morality. For laughter is the social and moral reaction to an action misinterpreting life and presenting it as inert. What makes people laugh is “something mechanical encrusted on something living” (L 57). Until now, Bergson has distinguished between duration and space, space being adequately grasped by physical-chemical schemes, the real effectiveness of duration slipping away from such schemes. Here, the opposition becomes that of the mechanical, which refers to inert matter, and the living. There is also a first characterisation of life: “a continual change of aspect, the irreversibility of the order of phenomena, the perfect individuality of a perfectly self-contained series: such, then, are the outward characteristics — whether real or apparent is of little moment — which distinguish the living from the merely mechanical” (L 89). Bergson proposes a *phenomenology* of life, because his focus being the social role of laughter, what matters is the superimposition for the spectator of a mechanical appearance on a phenomenon supposed to be alive. Bergson does indicate that there are forces of life, at the origin of these external characteristics: “*tension and elasticity*” (L 18), that characterise living bodies. But he says nothing about their ontological status. If no real conclusions can be drawn from *Laughter* about Bergson’s vitalism, a shift in terms can be noted: it is no longer the problematic couple of duration and space, nor of mind and matter that is at stake, but of the living and the mechanical, inviting the Bergsonian reader to conceive a connection between duration, spirituality, and life.

Consciousness is duration in 1889, but in 1896, it seems that duration is consciousness, a spiritual reality. Is the *élan vital* of 1907 then a vital principle that is spiritual in nature?

THE *ÉLAN VITAL* AS A HEURISTIC CONCEPT

I. The *élan vital* expresses a tendency of duration

In *Creative Evolution*, Bergson opposes the mechanical order to the vital one, just as he opposed space and duration. But the assimilation of the living to duration is not complete: *élan vital* is only a modality of duration, or more precisely a *tendency*. The mechanical order *and* the vital order are the (ideal) ends of two divergent tendencies of duration. The *élan vital* goes in an opposite direction to matter, without life and matter being two substantially distinct forces. Rather, they are two rhythms of duration, which Bergson conceives as opposite energetic movements, matter appearing as a degradation of the life-energy: life would be

“a process the inverse of materiality, creative of matter by its interruption alone. The life that evolves on the surface of our planet is indeed attached to matter. If it were pure consciousness... it would be pure creative activity. In fact, it is riveted to an organism that subjects it to the general laws of inert matter. But everything happens *as if* it were doing its utmost to set itself free from these laws” (CE 259, my emphasis).

Is the *élan vital* a spiritual force, as the reference to consciousness suggests?

II. Spirit is living, not life is spiritual

In *Matter and Memory*, to say that all things endured implied that reality was consciousness. Here, consciousness is *derived* from the *élan vital*, which itself is a tendency of duration. The *élan vital* is not consciousness: it is *ratio essendi* of consciousness. But consciousness is *ratio cognoscendi* of the *élan vital*. For it is through our consciousness that we can grasp duration as a creative movement and thus have an intuition of the *élan*. But we can only have this consciousness of duration because we derive from the *élan* which is duration. In the introduction, Bergson uses this argument to demonstrate the limits of intelligence (CE, ix-x)²⁵. All consciousness, as individual, is limited with respect to the life from which it originates. Does this mean that the *élan vital* is an unlimited consciousness?

Based on the idea that all duration is consciousness, it could be said that the *élan vital*, which is creative duration, is *par excellence* consciousness. Life would be “consciousness launched into matter” (CE 191). But since consciousness derives from the *élan*, it appears that the assimilation to consciousness is more a metaphor than an identity. It aims at grasping the movement of life as an impulse understandable only by analogy with the psychological²⁶: it is “*as if* a broad current of consciousness had penetrated matter” (CE 191, my emphasis). If the *élan* is compared to consciousness, it is because they share the same kind of qualitative multiplicity (“an enormous multiplicity of interwoven potentialities”, *Ibid.*) which develops in time. This is why it is said to be spiritual. Bergson explains elsewhere what he means by spirituality: “a progress to ever new creations, to conclusions incommensurable with the premisses and indeterminable by relation to them” (CE 224). If the *élan vital* is said to be spiritual, it is because of its dynamic more than its ontology: it is a perpetually creative impulse, which is more than merely organic matter, but which is not separated from matter. The image of an impulse suggests a motion at the origin of action, which unfolds its potentialities only in its effect, without being identifiable with this effect. Life is actualised in physical-

chemical elements but cannot be resolved in them: these actualisations do not exhaust the *élan*, just like the sum of the psychological states do not exhaust the flow of consciousness.

Since Bergson posits a distinction between vital and material movement, it could be retorted that life would be substantially opposed to matter, which would lead us back to spiritualist vitalism. But life and matter are two divergent tendencies of duration that is “the very stuff of reality” (CE 287, 381), one tending towards indeterminacy, the other tending towards repetition, the compromise of the two producing living beings and their organisation. This implies that duration explicitly acquires a cosmological dimension. But it also means that organisms are not a composition of matter and spirit: they are material objects whose organisation cannot be explained in the same way as inert matter, because in them, the tendency towards inertia of matter is counteracted by the tendency towards indeterminacy. Bergson writes that he does not dispute “the fundamental identity of inert matter and organized matter” (CE 32). What could appear as a dualism of ontological realms is constantly compensated by the affirmation of a unity of reality. The condition for the actualisation of duration is matter and matter itself endures. From this point of view, Bergson is neither a spiritualist monist, nor a metaphysical vitalist that would oppose life to matter (and obviously not a reductionist materialist). There is the affirmation of a unity, that comes precisely from duration, which is declined in several rhythms whose contradiction forms the organisation.

I. Sketch of a heuristic vitalism

In the end, the ontological status of *élan vital* remains problematic. While *Matter and Memory* asserted duration as an ontological principle declining into different rhythms sculpting reality, *Creative Evolution* doesn't draw any ontological conclusion about the *élan vital*, which appears more as a heuristic image than as a vital force. The *élan vital* is not a spiritual force either if spirit is understood as a substance distinct from matter. If Bergson refuses to assimilate living beings with the systems of physics, and prefers to compare them with consciousness, it is because neither organised beings nor evolution can be understood within the deterministic nor probabilistic framework of the physical sciences.

Thus, the *élan vital* serves above all to think of the process of evolution, which science cannot (yet) account for. Bergson writes that “it is only an image” (CE 271) that aims at giving an approximate account of this process. This image should not

replace scientific analysis, nor should it be hypostasized into an ontological reality. The *élan vital* is less an ontological conclusion than a call for reflection for both philosophy and biology. It is an image that points to a reality that is more than matter, but only exists through matter which is both its other and its necessary complement, the cause of its detours as well as the origin of its inventiveness (see the image of the road, CE 107-108)²⁷. Bergson does not exclude that biology could one day scientifically resolve the *élan vital* and

“become, to the physics and chemistry of organized bodies, what the mathematics of the moderns has proved to be in relation to ancient geometry... The procedure by which we should then pass from the definition of a certain vital action to the system of physico-chemical facts which it implies would be like passing from the function to its derivative, from the equation of the curve... to the equation of the tangent giving its instantaneous direction. Such a science would be a *mechanics of transformation*, of which our *mechanics of translation* would become... a simplification” (CE 34).

Bergson calls for a work of integration that would account for the specificity of the vital movement. He already wrote in *Matter and Memory* that the task of the philosopher was to “reconstitute, with the infinitely small elements which we thus perceive of the real curve, the curve itself stretching out into the darkness behind them” (MM 241-242). The *élan vital* aims to produce this integration for the evolution of life: it is an image capable of arousing an intuition that would envelop the heterogeneous characteristics of the living. Thus, Bergson can write, *without contradiction*, that the *élan vital* is an upspringing of novelties and that its productions are eddies of dust, relatively stable, that “want to mark time” (CE 134). It is through intuition that we can understand that the difference between the movement of evolution and the living beings, is one of degree *and* of nature: at a given moment equivalent to a given point on the curve, the intertwined tendencies of the *élan vital* have a definite quality equivalent to the contact of the curve and the tangent at that point.

Is there not, however, a form of teleological vitalism in the *élan vital*? Bergson says that, in Biology, the future must be *viewed* as an end rather than as a result (CE 55-56): finality is an approximation seeking to grasp the movement of evolution. If the vital and the willed orders may appear to be one and the same (CE 236), it is merely an *analogy*: “Life in its entirety, regarded as a creative evolution, is something analogous” (*Ibid.*). It is not an identity because will is a *particular* manifestation

of life. The analogy (we may say even the synecdoche) is ontologically based, but pedagogically, Bergson chooses the assimilation that aims at the coherence afterwards of evolution: its order rather than its actual movement. The *élan vital* cannot be finalised, because it is a creative process, an “unceasing transformation” (CE 243), and because the history of its unfolding, the evolution of living beings, is largely subject to the contingency imposed by matter (CE 30 n2; 268-269).

From a certain point of view, there is vitalism: the *élan vital* is not reducible to physico-chemical explanations, mainly because of its radical unpredictability. Only in this sense is it metaphysical, beyond physics. One could also say that this vitalism is spiritualist, provided that one understands spirituality is the quality of a certain tendency of duration, and not a substance independent from matter. Hence, Bergson’s vitalism is *heuristic*. The *élan vital* is an image pinpointing various phenomena specific to the living world. These different phenomena are linked together by a fading reality, the resolution of which Bergson calls for scientifically, but whose meaning he thinks can be grasped through philosophical intuition. Bergson, examining a problem of philosophy of biology proposes the *élan vital* as an intellectual tool, to pursue philosophical as well as scientific research. He does not promote an ontological principle, even if the *élan vital* raises ontological questions. The conceptualisation of the *élan vital* is therefore hardly comparable to classical vitalism. Now what happens to the *élan vital* in his other works?

BETWEEN *CREATIVE EVOLUTION* AND THE *TWO SOURCES OF MORALITY AND RELIGION*

I. The correspondence

Bergson returns to the question of vitalism in his correspondences, notably in a letter to Lovejoy: “A position such as mine may well be called vitalist... I reject vitalism only if it claims to constitute every living being as an independent entity”²⁸ (for an analysis of this letter, see Rates in this issue). But it is the letter to Höffding, in 1915, that is especially telling:

“I believe that, if one considers what I mean by ‘duration’, one will see in the ‘vitalism’ of *Creative Evolution* something more precise and more probative than you say. The essential argument I direct against mechanism in biology is that it does not explain how life unfolds a *history*, that is, a succession in which there is no repetition, in which every moment is unique and carries the representation of the whole past”²⁹.

He suggests here, even more explicitly than in *Creative Evolution*, that the *élan vital* does not refer to a transcendent principle, but rather to a modality of duration – *history*.

II. *The Creative Mind*, or the continuation of a heuristic vitalism

The Creative Mind (1934) contains texts mostly written before *The Two Sources*. It continues *Creative Evolution* by adding a methodological definition of the Bergsonian metaphysics and a reflection on the relationship between philosophy and science that seems to point towards an ‘unsubstantial’ vitalism: the *élan vital* would indeed be an image that the philosopher offers to the scientist to orientate biological research.

In this text, metaphysics is defined as a return to concrete reality. It implies an intellectual mobility exercise to produce fluid concepts that result from a qualitative integration work³⁰. It seems to us that the *élan vital* is such a concept.

This work is based on the use of intuition; and intuition “signifies first of all consciousness, but immediate consciousness” (CM 35-36). Now consciousness is duration, and the universe itself endures; and the living in particular endure on a rhythm analogous to that of consciousness: “If life is an evolution and if duration is in this case a reality, is there not also an intuition of the vital, and consequently a metaphysics of life, which might in a sense prolong the science of the living?” (CM 36). It is through the intuition of the duration of our consciousness that we can also grasp the movement of life.

Hence, philosophy can *enlighten* science: it does not replace it, but indicates the possible illusions that enclose scientific thought, and it sheds light on the path to follow (see the aviator-diver image, CM 74). The *élan vital* appears as this kind of indication that the philosopher proposes to scientists.

III. *Mind-Energy*: towards a new vitalism

In *Mind-Energy*³¹, there are several shifts in meaning from *Creative Evolution*, especially visible in “Life and Consciousness”, that seem to change the signification of his vitalism.

III.I. *Transformation of vitalism*

Consciousness is no longer coextensive with reality, although annihilated in inert

matter. It is coextensive only with the living, although annihilated in rudimentary beings. If duration weaves the entirety of reality, its effectiveness in the living implies a *consciousness* for these beings (ME 11).

Finalism is thought of in a much less sophisticated and therefore also much more problematic way than in *Creative Evolution*. Life does have a destination (creation), and even more so, nature warns us of this through a feeling: joy, an indicator “that life has succeeded” (ME 29). Creation is not only a way of describing a tendency of duration, but the very *objective* of life. Bergson no longer speaks so much of *élan vital* as of “nature”. The semantic shift corresponds to a shift in the stakes. The aim is no longer to offer an image of biological evolution, but to tell something about the meaning of human life, the question of life bridging biology and morality.

The ‘higher’ beings are those not only more complex in their structures or more free in their capacity of choice: they are those in whom the vital impulse continues unimpeded. In *Creative Evolution*, man is described as this superior being in which the *élan vital* was most emancipated from the determination imposed by matter, but the anchoring was still biological, this superiority being based on an analysis of the nervous system, and especially of the brain (CE 189-195; 277), and on intelligence thought of as an adaptive function (CE ix). Here, the biological superiority is coupled with a moral one, characterised by generosity:

“In man alone... the vital movement pursues its way without hindrance, thrusting through... the human body, which it has created on its way, the creative current of the moral life. ...It is the moral man who is a creator in the highest degree, the man whose action... itself generous, can kindle fires on the hearths of generosity” (ME 31-32).

Their biological superiority is now also a moral or even an ontological one, because men would realise “the aspiration of life” (ME 33). It seems that, to define the meaning of human life, Bergson needs to assign a goal for biological life, against which human life can be assessed. This shift leads to an obscuration of the concept of *élan vital*, which loses its conceptual sophistication and its heuristic function, to fulfil a different role in a philosophy that is now moral.

III.II. *Redefinition of consciousness*

In *Mind-Energy*, there is also a redefinition of consciousness. As in *Creative Evolution*, consciousness is said to reveal the movement of life and to derive from

it. But the status of consciousness seems to have changed. In *Matter and Memory*, it appears as a mere differentiation of rhythm with the duration of matter. Now, this difference implies that the soul almost certainly *survives* the body (ME 73; 97), which seems to lead to a distinction in substance, since the soul would be immortal as opposed to the body. Bergson no longer speaks of consciousness or mind, but of *the soul*. And for good reason: consciousness links the past to the future: if it can immerse itself into memory-images, its biological function is above all action and creation. We read that “consciousness is action unceasingly creating and enriching itself” (ME 23), that “all consciousness is anticipation of the future” (ME 8). When Bergson writes that the soul survives the body, it cannot be this consciousness which is projection towards action. It can only be this consciousness of memory-images (the memory independent from the brain, MM 104). But the latter is characterised by a relaxation of attention to life, a tendency to relaxation which in its end would be extension and thus inert matter (MM 277-291; 299-332). As he said in *Matter and Memory*, and repeats in “Life and Consciousness”, matter is a relaxation of vital tension. Bergson adds something to this consciousness when he calls it ‘soul’: it no longer seems to be distinguished from matter only by a difference in rhythm, but appears as a distinct reality, transcendent to matter, able to survive beyond matter.

Bergson’s vitalism takes on a strong ontological dimension: if the stream of consciousness extends the *élan vital*, and if consciousness or ‘soul’ is a reality independent from matter, and not just a particular tendency of duration, then should not the *élan vital* be rethought as a principle ontologically distinct from the matter it passes through?

TOWARDS A PRACTICAL VITALISM

I. The role of the *élan vital*

In *The Two Sources*, Bergson resumes in a few pages his development of the *élan vital*, recalling its status as an image, or an “idea full of matter, obtained empirically, capable of guiding our investigations, which will broadly sum up what we know of the vital process and will also bring out what is still unknown” (TS 105). This is very close to *Creative Evolution*. But Bergson does not make the same use of this concept in the *Two Sources*: he refers to it as *the basis for his social and moral philosophy*. Thus, it is from the two tendencies of life: to stability and closure on the one hand, and to creativity on the other, that Bergson grounds his distinction between closed and open societies. And it is more precisely when Bergson analyses the biological role of

the myth-making function that he takes up in detail the achievements of *Creative Evolution*. These achievements would allow an understanding of certain aspects of human life. The “two essential characteristics” of mankind, “intelligence and sociability must be given their proper place back in the general evolution of life” (TS 106), to grasp the metaphysical or moral meaning of humanity. But how does the transition from biology to morality work?

II. From *élan vital* to nature

Bergson explains this passage at the end of the book: it involves going *beyond* the conclusions of *Creative Evolution* where Bergson “stated nothing that could not in time be confirmed by the tests of biology” (TS 244), because the aim was to give a philosophical concept to a biological reality, while *waiting for* a biological explanation. In *The Two Sources*, however, the aim is different and so is the status of the concepts. “Here we are in the field of probabilities alone” (*Ibid.*) (in French: “dans le domaine du vraisemblable”³² : “in the field of plausibility”). In this field, the *élan vital* “is optimistic” (TS 130): it doesn’t guide science anymore, it gives rise to a hope that allows for the development of morality.

Here, Bergson makes very little use of the phrase *élan vital*, preferring the word ‘life’ or even ‘nature’. Bergson never defines it, but it seems to refer, like *élan vital*, to life as an impulse. Why then a different terminology? It may be assumed that it is because *élan vital* is a term from his philosophy of biology. The aim of *Creative Evolution* was to offer an image allowing one to grasp the particularity of biological evolution. The objective of *The Two Sources* is different and so is the conception of life. There is also much less metaphysical cautiousness: on many occasions, nature is described as having intentions or purposes. Bergson attributes to nature the “faculty of resolving problems” (TS 103), “defensive reactions” (TS 113; 121; 130, *passim*). Just as the semantic shift from consciousness to soul added an ontological transcendence to the latter, the one from *élan vital* to nature gives the latter a *direction* that is no longer a way of understanding evolution retrospectively (a view of the mind) but is inherent to life itself and would authorise the use of a teleological rhetoric. Bergson goes so far as to speak of “nature’s plan” (TS 48). If Bergson indulges in these semantic shifts, it is because the aim is now to extend (but also to move away from) reflections based on science to propose a “mystical intuition” (TS 145) based on plausibility: “we did not ask [in *Creative Evolution*] whether [humanity] had any other purpose but itself” (*Ibid.*); but this question is indeed the main object of *The Two Sources*. And the answer is no longer an empirically based concept, but a mystical intuition which has nothing to offer to

science.

III. The mechanical and the mystical: a moral vitalism for thinking the divine

After having redefined the couple space/duration, in matter/memory, and then mechanical order/*élan vital*, Bergson proposes, at the end of the work, a new couple: the mechanical and the mystical. In doing so, he directly connects life to mysticism, and the pairing takes on a new meaning: it no longer serves to understand reality itself, but human morality. Life no longer has a descriptive significance here but a normative one embodied in the teleological metaphors that essentialise nature and give it all the aspects of a metaphysical vitalism. It appears as a vital force whose distinction from matter may not only be of rhythm or tendency. Moreover, it is directly related to the divine.

Admittedly, the great mystic, that man capable of a higher morality, is defined in relation to the *élan vital* (TS 202). But this is a hapax. More generally, the mystic is said to be “in touch” with a “principle” (TS 201), or with an “*élan d’amour*”³³, impetus of love, that impetus which Bergson also calls God (TS 240). The movement of life itself is then defined less by a particular efficacy of duration, than by the emotion it envelops: love. The *élan vital* has become moral and therefore also religious. The theological vocabulary clearly shows the shift in meaning: the *élan* itself is no longer merely biological evolution, but a “divine action” that the great mystic, “capable of transcending the limitations imposed on the species by its material nature” continues and extends (TS 209).

It is indeed a transcendence of life that Bergson introduces here, to which corresponds a transcendence of the soul. For here, the matter is no longer consciousness as a tension of duration (whose extension would be matter), coming from the *élan vital* and which is a certain attention to life, but the soul, truly transcendent to matter, a soul that can find the divine and continue its action: “The mystic soul... throws off anything in its substance that is not pure enough, not flexible and strong enough, to be turned to some use by God” (TS 220).

IV. From intuition to love

This contact with the divine is “joy in joy” (TS 201): it is no longer an intellectual contact that would suppose a torsion of the intelligence to become intuition, it is a “love of that which is all love” (*Ibid.*): a religious emotion. Mystical intuition is not

the philosophical intuition that produces fluid concepts: it's a mystical love that produces moral actions.

The change of perspective – from theoretical to moral – is associated with a change of object – from biological to religious – which implies a transformation of the method (if it can still be called method). The idea is no longer to start from science and use a philosophical intuition to produce a fluid concept, capable of integrating into one image heterogeneous qualities that are temporarily unspeakable by science. Now, the aim is to deepen a mystical emotion that allows one to find the divine, and that also enables one to achieve truly moral action. This implies that the difference of the soul with matter is not only rhythmic, but that it can be really separated from the body. In return, the status of his vitalism becomes blurry, since *élan vital* now serves to link biology and religion: it becomes *élan d'amour*. The *élan vital* is no longer just a heuristic concept to grasp the specificity of evolutionary duration but serves as a basis for saying that the soul can find the divine.

CONCLUSION

In his early works, Bergson develops a form of spiritualism, though not a substantial one. And it is *by analogy* with this spirituality that Bergson thinks of life in *Creative Evolution*. The scope changes in the *Two Sources*. So, there are really two concepts of 'life' in Bergson's philosophy.

On the one hand, there is the *élan vital*, which corresponds to what I call a 'heuristic vitalism', and serves to understand the impulse of life, immanent to matter, different from it by a difference in rhythm or tension. This vital impulse is understandable by analogy with consciousness, but it is not a spiritual principle. The ability at stake is intuition, and it produces the fluid concept of *élan vital* which sums up what is known and what is yet to be explained about life.

On the other hand, in the *Two Sources*, the concept of life or nature is truly metaphysical. It is indeed grounded on the *élan vital*, but it seeks to understand man's destination and his contact with God. The ability at stake is no longer an intellectual intuition but an emotion (love) because the issue is no longer theoretical but moral. Explicitly positioning himself in the field of the plausible, Bergson develops hypotheses on the destination of life. "Beings have been called into existence who were destined to love and be loved, since creative energy is to be defined as love. Distinct from God Who is this energy itself, they could spring into being only in a universe, and therefore the universe sprang into being" (TS 245-246). It enables him to say that "it is man who accounts for the presence of life

on our planet” (TS 244) insofar as he can be love of the divine. The universe is then not so much duration as love itself. It seems that the impulse of life is no longer distinguished from the impulse of love, and that matter is therefore subordinated to this love, since matter is defined as “what without which life would not have been possible” (*Ibid.*).

Life in this text is spiritual and transcendent, and Bergson does indeed propose a ‘metaphysical vitalism’ as Monod thinks. However, it is not this life that is called upon to think biology. The *élan vital* is an empirically based concept that serves to think the movement immanent to biological evolution, the life of the *Two Sources* is a plausible hypothesis that allows us to think morality. This life or ‘nature’ does not concern the biologist, and Bergson never pretended it did. I can be assumed that it is a confusion between these two dimensions of life in Bergson’s philosophy that has led to thinking of him as a spiritualist who would have nothing to contribute to science.

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NOTES

- 1 Jacques Monod, *Le hasard et la nécessité. Essai sur la philosophie naturelle de la biologie moderne*. Paris: Seuil, 1970, 44-45.
2. See Ernst Mayr, “The Idea of Teleology.” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 53 (1), 1992, 120, or more contemporarily Michael Ruse, “Evolutionary biology and the question of teleology.” *Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences*, 2015, 2.
3. This critique is raised by Julian Huxley in *Memories*, vol. 1. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1970, 68; *Essays of a Biologist*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1923, 215.
4. Especially Jacques Maritain, Etienne Gilson, Jacques Chevalier, Etienne Borne and Emmanuel Mounier, see Giuseppe Bianco, *Après Bergson. Portrait de groupe avec philosophe*. Paris, PUF: 2015, 33-35. It should also be underlined that “spiritualism” is often used in a pejorative way, spiritualists being associated with the “clerics”, that would have nothing to say about science (see Françoise Parot, *La psychologie française dans l’impasse: Du positivisme de Piéron au personnalisme de Fraisse*, Paris, Éditions Matériologiques, 2017, 43).
5. See among many others: John Mullarkey, *The New Bergson*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999; Elie During, “Bergson et la métaphysique relativiste.” *Annales bergsoniennes III – Bergson et la science*. Eds. F. Worms et al. Paris: PUF, 2007, 259-294; Keith Ansell-Pearson, *Bergson: Thinking Beyond the Human Condition*. New York, Bloomsbury, 2018; Tano S. Posteraro, *Bergson’s Philosophy of Biology*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, forthcoming.
6. Jean Gayon, “Bergson entre science et métaphysique.” *Annales bergsoniennes III*, 175-189.
7. Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*. Trans. A. Mitchell. London: Macmillan, 1911.
8. Bergson, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*. Trans. R. Ashley Audra and C. Brereton. New York: Henry Holt, 1935.
9. Olivier Perru, “Le vitalisme bergsonien dans *L’Évolution créatrice*.” *Repenser le vitalisme*. Ed. P. Nouvel. Paris: PUF, 2011, 167-180.
10. Roselyne Rey, *Naissance et développement du vitalisme en France de la deuxième moitié du 18e siècle à la fin du Premier Empire*. Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2000.
11. Hilde Hein, “The endurance of the mechanism-vitalism controversy.” *Journal of the History of Biology*, 5 (1), 1972, 159-188.
12. Raphaële Andrault, “Définir le vitalisme. Lectures de Claude Bernard.” *Claude Bernard et la méthode de la physiologie*. Eds F. Duchesneau, J. J. Kupiec and M. Morange. Paris: Éditions Rue d’Ulm, 2013, 133-155.
13. Charles Wolfe, *La philosophie de la biologie avant la biologie. Une histoire du vitalisme*. Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2019, 14.
14. François Duchesneau, “Blumenbach et la théorie des forces vitales.” *Repenser le vitalisme*, 73-88.
15. For Bordeu, there is a conservative force maintaining “the whole life of the body” and inexplicable by mechanical means. But the images he provides refers to the collective and structural dimension

of the organism and not to a special force (especially the bee swarm, Théophile de Bordeu, *Recherches anatomiques sur la position des glandes et leur action*. Paris: Quillau père, 1751, 451-453).

16. Wolfe, *La philosophie de la biologie avant la biologie*, 253-254.

17. Paul-Joseph Barthez, *Nouveaux éléments de la science de l'homme*. Paris: Goujon, 1806; *Discours académique sur le principe vital de l'homme prononcé le 31 octobre 1772*. Montpellier: Boehm et fils, 1863.

18. Barthez is aware of this, when he indicates that he does not want to be considered as “the leader of the Vitalist Sect” (*Nouveaux éléments*, 98 n18). In the 20th century, vitalism is considered outdated and unscientific (see among others Francis Crick, *Of Molecules and Men*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1966, 99: “To those of you who may be vitalists... what everyone believed yesterday, and you believe today, only cranks will believe tomorrow”; Mayr, *The Growth of Biological thought. Diversity, Evolution and Inheritance*. Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1982, 50: “For biologists, vitalism has been a dead issue for more than fifty years”).

19. Ruse, “Evolutionary biology and the question of teleology.”, 2.

20. Bergson, *Time and Free Will*. Trans. F. L. Pogson. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1910.

21. Bergson, *Matter and Memory*. Trans. N. M. Paul and W. S. Palmer. London: George Allen and Unwin, 1911.

22. Valdimir Jankélévitch famously wrote that Bergsonism appeared “as a *monism* of substance [duration], and as a *dualism* of tendencies [consciousness and matter]” (*Henri Bergson*, Paris: PUF, 2011, 174). He drew this conclusion from *Creative Evolution*, but I mention it here because this assertion relies on duration being a *substance*. Yet, duration cannot be a substance since it is a continuity of change (and it is already the case in *Time and Free Will*). Bergson addresses the problem in *Creative Mind*. According to him, ‘substance’ is a rigid concept from which philosophers explain the whole reality deductively (Bergson, *The Creative Mind*. Trans. M. L. Anderson. New York: Philosophical Library, 1946, 34-35). Its “role is to support the states and qualities which succeed one another, it would be stability itself” (80-81). When he does use the word to speak of duration, he uses quotation marks (87), or precises that this substance is “a continuity of change” (103). Hence, it is more accurate to say that duration is a *processual principle* and not a substance.

23. *Matter and Memory* has often been considered a spiritualist piece, but of a new kind since it relies on scientific methods to prove the existence of a separate spirit. This novelty is not always a praise. If Victor Delbos underlines the depth of what he reads as a new “idealism” (“Matière Et Mémoire: Essai sur la relation du corps à l'esprit: Par Henri Bergson.” *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*, (5) 3, 1897, 353-389), Gustave Belot considers the innovation of this spiritualism as relying on its obscurity (“Un Nouveau Spiritualisme.” *Revue Philosophique de la France et de l'Étranger*, 44, 1897, 183-199).

24. Bergson, *Laughter: Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*. Trans. C. Brereton and F. Rothwell. New York: MacMillan, 1914.

25. Since intelligence is not life itself, but an adaptation proper to our species, “an appendage of

the faculty of acting... intended to secure the perfect fitting of our body to its environment”, it cannot grasp life in its entirety (Bergson develops later in the text, that it must become intuition, *i.e.*, retain something of the internal knowledge of the instinct proper to other animals).

26. For all this analysis, see Posteraro, “Vitalism and the Problem of Individuation: Another Look at Bergson’s *Élan Vital*.” *Vitalism and its Legacies in the 20th Century*. Eds. C. T. Wolfe and C. Donohue. New York: Springer Dordrecht Heidelberg, 2021 (forthcoming).

27. Evolution, in Bergson is characterised by the internal antagonism between the movement of life and its actualisation through matter. This is why, contrary to Deleuze and Guattari, Keith Ansell-Pearson conceives of organism (the actualisation of *élan vital* in matter) in Bergson not as a completely negative limitation of life, but as that which makes life, in its strongest sense (invention and duration) possible through this very limitation (*Geminal Life. The Difference and Repetition of Deleuze*, London and New York: Routledge, Taylor&Francis E-Library, 2003, 62).

28. Bergson, Letter to Lovejoy, July 4th, 1911, *Correspondances*. Ed. A. Robinet. Paris: PUF, 2002, 419.

29. Bergson, Letter to Höffding, March 15th, 1915, *Ecrits philosophiques*. Eds. A. Bouaniche *et al.* Paris: PUF, 2011, 443-444.

30. Bergson, *The Creative Mind*. Especially “Introduction (Part II). Stating the problems” (33-106) and “Introductions to Metaphysics” (187-237).

31. Bergson, *Mind-Energy*. Trans. H. Wildon Carr. New York: Henry Holt and Co, 1920.

32. Bergson, *Les Deux sources de la morale et de la religion*. Ed. G. Waterlot et F. Keck. Paris: PUF, 2008, 272.

33. *Ibid.*, 98, 102, 250.