

bergson and the fringes of the psyche: between spiritualism and spiritism

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INTRODUCTION

Over the last few years, there has been increased attention among Bergson scholars for the philosopher's relation to a long and complicated tradition of French philosophy known as spiritualism. Thanks to extensive historical work, we have come to see how Bergson inherited this tradition from his teachers, Émile Boutroux, Jules Lachelier, and Félix Ravaisson, continued to develop the fundamental tenets of spiritualism with his contemporaries Maurice Blondel and Édouard Le Roy, and passed on the tradition to his students Louis Lavelle and Gabriel Marcel.¹ Unsurprisingly, in their discussions of this tradition, many scholars are keen to dissociate spiritualism from all the dubious connotations of the term. For example, in his book *Making Spirit Matter*, Larry Sommer McGrath

from the very first page strictly distinguishes between the French spiritualist tradition of doing philosophy and spiritism, the doctrine inaugurated by Allan Kardec and characterized by its belief in spirits. To keep them apart, McGrath defines spiritualism as a philosophical tradition “committed to the existence of a subjective dimension of reality accessed via inner experience” and spiritism as “[belief in the possibility of] contact with another spectral world”.²

In this paper, I want to show that while there are indeed distinctions that can and need to be drawn between French spiritualist philosophy and the more problematic forms of spiritualism as spiritism, the boundaries between them are much more porous than is usually assumed. Because large-scale historical research would be needed to lay bare the intricate connections between these traditions in nineteenth-century France, I will here focus mainly on the ramifications of the interplay between spiritualism and spiritism for our conception and evaluation of Bergson’s philosophy.³ What I want to argue is that Bergson was fundamentally committed to those theses associated with spiritism that we nowadays consider to be improbable, and that all those who want to call themselves Bergsonians today would do good to spend more time wrestling with this part of his legacy.⁴ Instead of taking Bergson’s engagement with psychical research to be the result of an insignificant personal interest, I claim that in his oeuvre, Bergson advisedly develops a philosophy that is able to explain and account for: (1) the independence of the spirit from the body, (2) the continued existence of spirit after the death of the body, (3) the interaction between spirits at a distance. To be sure, I will take it for granted that these are convictions that are no longer widespread among philosophers today, and that espousing a philosophy that is indissociably connected to these three theses will, for many, be deeply problematic.

In the first two parts of this paper, I will historically reconstruct Bergson’s early encounters with psychical research by discussing and contextualizing his first scholarly article *On Unconscious Simulation in States of Hypnosis*.⁵ The third part will be devoted to Bergson’s role in the research of the *Institut Général Psychologique* (IGP) and his assessment of their research. In the fourth part, I will connect Bergson’s views, statements, and beliefs concerning psychical phenomena to his philosophical views. I will do so by close reading a relatively little studied text by Bergson, namely his presidential address for the British Society for Psychical Research (SPR) titled *Phantoms of Life and Psychic Research*.⁶ What I hope will become clear from explicating this part of Bergson’s philosophical trajectory is that there is a continuum between his philosophical views and his views on psychical research. The latter are not external to his philosophy or mere contingent

personal beliefs, instead, they co-constitute the nucleus of Bergson's philosophical motivation and metaphysical commitments.

BERGSON AS AN EXPERIMENTAL HYPNOTIST

Bergson's interest in psychical phenomena can be traced all the way to the beginning of his career.⁷ At the age of 24, Bergson anonymously published a French translation of James Sully's book *Illusions: A Psychological Study*.⁸ This work deals extensively with hallucinations of ghosts and specters, altered states of consciousness, and (after-)dreams. It also contains a brief note on hypnosis, where Sully discusses James Braid's foundational work on hypnosis and Rudolf Heidenhain's reflections on "unconscious perceptions".⁹ Sully argues that during hypnosis the "threshold or liminal value of stimulation is lowered", so that the subject is "largely cut off from the external world, as in sleep".¹⁰ Using suggestion, the hypnotist is then able to induce hallucinations that are immediately acted out by the subjects. As we shall come to see, Sully's considerations are close to Bergson's own views on the topic.¹¹

In October 1883, Bergson moved to Clermont-Ferrand to work as a teacher at a *lycée*. While teaching in this provincial city, he became acquainted with the English theosophist G.R.S. Mead, and began to take part in meetings devoted to hypnosis by doctor Moutin.¹² From a letter by Gilbert Rouchon, we know that it was during this time that Bergson began to study *Phantasms of the Living*, the two volumes of testimonies of telepathy compiled by the British psychical researchers Edmund Gurney, Frank Podmore, and Frederic Myers.¹³ In the same letter, Rouchon also recounts how he and Bergson talked about the work on stigmatization by the local physician Antoine Imbert-Gourbeyre, and reports Bergson's attendance of discussions on metapsychology by professor Ch. Baron.

Eventually, these readings and discussions led Bergson to pursue his own research on the topic. In July 1886, together with the scientist Robinet, he conducted a hypnosis experiment with two adolescent boys. The results were published in November 1886 in *Revue philosophique de la France et de l'étranger* (RPFE) - a journal that had previously showcased discussions of hypnosis and psychical research on multiple occasions.¹⁴ In the introduction to the article, Bergson relates how he had learned from "M. V..." about "hypnosis-experiments".¹⁵ In these experiments, doctor V read a book with the cover of the book turned towards a hypnotized subject. Subsequently, he would ask the hypnotized subject to guess the page number on which the book was opened or tell the doctor what he was

reading. Surprisingly, the subjects did remarkably well on this task and, implicitly, it was concluded that these results provided evidence for the existence of mental suggestion.¹⁶

Together with Robinet, Bergson observed some of these experiments and they both concluded that doctor V “worked with a remarkable surety and entirely good faith”. Nevertheless, Robinet and Bergson felt the need to repeat and validate these experiments, so they invited the four subjects of doctor V to their homes. Bergson and Robinet first hypnotized the boys by staring into their eyes at close distance for about 7 to 8 seconds and during the next sessions, they apparently could hypnotize them by simply placing a hand on their heads. According to Bergson, the subjects immediately showed “the clearest characteristics of hypnosis ... eyes wide open, loss of focus, and ... [loss of] every intelligent expression”.¹⁷ Being hypnotized, the subjects were ready for the experiments: Robinet began to read the book with the cover turned towards the subjects, but only one of the young boys was able to give satisfying answers. According to Bergson, when asked how he could guess the words or numbers, the boy repeatedly declared: “I see it”.

At this point, Bergson begins to formulate a hypothesis. Whenever the boys give the wrong page number, the mistake is usually in the order of the number. The boys say “213 instead of 312 and 75 instead of 57”. According to Bergson, it seems as though they are reading as if they are looking into a mirror. As a result, he and Robinet begin to believe that the hypnotized subjects are reading the numbers “on the cornea of the magnetizer”. Although the mirrored reflection on the cornea is - as Bergson admits - extremely small, he argues that hypnosis has made the subjects hyperaesthetic: their eyes have become so sensitive that they simply have become able to read the tiny image on the cornea.¹⁸ To test this hypothesis, they ask the subjects to describe photos that can only be viewed with a microscope, and to draw a copy of an epidermal tissue. While these experiments are not conclusive regarding the exact breadth of their hypesthesia, Bergson and Robinet conclude that they have “demonstrated that the alleged reading of a book or thought is actually done by looking at the cornea of the hypnotist”.

To corroborate this conclusion, Bergson and Robinet “vary their questions and set all kinds of traps” to get the subjects to admit that they are reading from the cornea of the researchers. But their efforts are to no avail, the subjects do not reveal their technique. According to Bergson, this does not mean that the boys are acting in bad faith - since they had been implicitly requested not to remember anything after the experiment about the means they used to accomplish their

task. For Bergson, the boys simply “simulated” their conduct and he argues that we can consider this to be a case of “unconscious simulation”.¹⁹

To test this explanation, Bergson and Robinet conduct some more experiments. They suggest to one of the boys that he is the same person as Bergson, and seat him in front of the philosopher with his back turned toward him, so that the boy cannot see him. Thereafter, Robinet pricks Bergson with a needle and asks the boy to point out where the philosopher was pricked - since the boy and Bergson are supposed to be one person, right now.²⁰ Apparently, the boy once again did remarkably well on this task: he could guess the spot twelve out of fourteen times and every time he looked as if he was in pain. Yet, after repeating the experiment in another setting, Bergson concludes that the boy probably saw Robinet’s gestures and accordingly reconstructed the point where Bergson was pricked.²¹ But whatever they try, the boy does not admit this and Bergson concludes that “perhaps nothing comes to consciousness; or rather this operation was translated into the consciousness of the sleeping person in the form of a prick felt at the very point where, according to his calculations, the pin of M. B.. must have been placed”.

In the conclusion, Bergson relates his results to previous findings of experiments by Charles Richet, a Nobel-prize winning physiologist and avid psychical researcher, Henri-Étienne Beaunis, the founder of France’s first laboratory for experimental psychology, and Pierre Janet, the psychologist known for introducing the concept of dissociation. Essentially, Bergson argues that his results can explain and falsify their previous evidence for mental suggestion. In his view, hypnotized subjects unconsciously use all means available to perform their tasks and hence might be led to simulate mental suggestion. What he wants to convey is that experimenters should be cautious: hypnotized subjects might give wrong explanations for their special capacities. Nevertheless, Bergson does not deny the existence of mental suggestion and he reassures the reader by asserting his belief in this phenomenon: “[c]ases of mental suggestion have been observed by competent and critical researchers, therefore it seems difficult to contest their existence”.

CONTEXTUALIZING BERGSON’S EARLY CAREER

In a paper called *What Was “Serious Philosophy” for the Young Bergson?*, Giuseppe Bianco quotes a letter by Bergson from 1881 where he expresses his wish “to do medicine [because] there is no other way to deal seriously with philosophy”.²² As Bianco argues, Bergson’s confession is situated within a broader development:

spiritualism had been undergoing significant changes since 1853, and in the 1880's, it could no longer define itself with reference to philosophy only. Whereas the spiritualists had previously - under the control of Victor Cousin - been able to ward off the threats coming from medicine and psychology apropos their belief in the unity and independence of the soul and the methodological primacy of introspection, the developments within these two disciplines were making it increasingly harder for spiritualism to affirm its epistemological authority. Using hypnotic suggestions, physiologists and psychologists were beginning to study unconscious and automatic behavior, dissociated consciousnesses, and even multiple personalities - evoking questions about the existence of the unconscious and the unity of personality. First and foremost, these experiments with hypnosis enabled researchers to decompose personality, self, and soul - thereby endangering the ideals of spiritualism.²³

As a matter of fact, it were experiments such as those conducted by Bergson and Robinet on the nature of hypnosis and mental suggestion that formed the impetus and (institutional) model for experimental psychology in France.²⁴ In contrast to the roots of German psychology in research on perception, the origins of experimental psychology in France lay in these investigations by physiologists, philosophers, and psychiatrists into psychical phenomena. Incidentally, Bergson's early career is situated exactly at the cross-roads of these developments: his aspiration to study medicine and his work on hypnosis reveals an interest in these new, emerging fields of inquiry, and seems to imply a parting with the ideals of the previous generation of spiritualist philosophers.

Yet a more precise examination of the discussions of the time reveals a more complicated situation. Bergson's results were mostly used by researchers that opposed spiritualist ideals: the Belgian psychologist Joseph Delboeuf cited Bergson's findings to argue that under hypnosis we sometimes come to see more than we are aware of, Janet used Bergson as evidence for the existence of a dissociated consciousness, and the German materialist Ludwig Büchner praised Bergson extensively for his fascinating results.²⁵ Still, these appraisals failed to take into account the actual motivation behind Bergson's investigations. The complex and ambiguous context of Bergson's experiments in late nineteenth-century France only becomes apparent after studying two other assessments of his results: (1) a note by Myers in the journal *Mind* written after a short correspondence with the French philosopher, and (2) a reprimand by the spiritualist philosopher Alphonse Darlu in the next edition of *RPFÉ*.

In his review, Myers summarizes Bergson's findings and gives further evidence for the hypothesis that the subjects probably read the book in the eyes of the hypnotist.²⁶ He also expresses his agreement with Bergson concerning the claim that the boys were unconscious of the true cause of their capacities. What Myers is skeptical of, however, is the boy's ability to read the microscopic pictures. He states the obvious: the image is simply too small to be perceived by the human eye. But instead of repudiating Bergson's results, Myers remarks that in the experiment "thought-transference was not formally excluded because Bergson himself knew the photograph and the look of the cells". He also proposes an alternative explanation: "hypnotic suggestion had induced (by spasm of the ciliary muscle?) some change in the shape of the crystalline lens, which made the eye a microscope for the time being".

In a letter to Myers from December 1886, Bergson writes that he has not been able to conduct follow-up experiments with the two boys due to "difficulties of various nature in obtaining their attendance".²⁷ For this reason, he has begun to search for and train new subjects; he still wants to continue his work on "unconscious reasoning". In his response to Myers' criticism, Bergson admits that thought-transference as an explanation cannot be formally excluded but argues that he has made no suggestions that could have insinuated the subject. Once again, Bergson is quick to add that even though he was "not able to obtain the least results", his research was inherently motivated by his belief in mental suggestion. What is more, although Bergson expresses his agreement with Myers that there was "minimal visibility" of the retina, he immediately adds that while not explicitly stated in his article, he was at the time of the experiments already convinced that the subject's lens was bent by hypnotic suggestion. For Bergson, this was confirmed by another observation: the boys had a hard time reading a book up close after the experiments because it "was too big".

What this communication reveals is that Bergson was above all fascinated by hypnosis and mental suggestion for its potential in acquiring evidence for the belief that the mind has an incredible power over the body. As he remarks in his lectures on psychology at the time: "hypnotism show[s] that the imagination is capable of exerting an almost unlimited influence on the body".²⁸ Thus, rather than aligning himself with the physiological psychologists, such as Delboeuf and Théodule Ribot, Bergson – from the very beginning of his career – tried to incorporate the results of the new experimental psychology within the contours of spiritualism. Be that as it may, these intentions were obscure to at least one older, spiritualist philosopher – showing that the significance of Bergson's experiments

was ambiguous even for his contemporaries.

In the next edition of the *RFPE*, Alphonse Darlu publishes a review of Boutroux's *Freedom and Determinism*.²⁹ To a brief exposition of Boutroux' discussion on the relation between magnetism and freedom, he attaches an extended footnote. Darlu begins this note by posing a question concerning hypnotism that he had expected many philosophers to raise: "do we have the right to induce hypnosis even when the person who is the subject has given explicit consent?". According to Darlu, consent is not always received in a faithful spirit. The subjects are rendered defenseless by the undertaking of the (authoritative) doctor and by the "weakness of their spirit and the inferiority of their social condition". In any case, after the first session, all freedom lapses: the subject has become enslaved by the hypnotic practices. Moreover, while the subjects might agree to undergo hypnosis, they do not explicitly consent to the dangerous and painful experiments. Even if we presuppose free will on the side of the subject, we can still ask whether the subject consents to the gross modifications in "perception, memory, sensibility, morality ... [and] the nervous system" brought about by hypnosis.

To further justify his worries, Darlu explicitly points out misconducts of hypnotists. According to Darlu, hypnosis might function as a cure, but then it must be done by a doctor and only be used for battling disease. But this is hardly ever the case, hypnosis is practiced by all kinds of researchers and is often used solely as a method for psychological experimentation. To make his case, Darlu names a few prominent hypnotists: Delboeuf, who spends his holidays roaming the countryside looking for youngsters suitable for his research; Janet, who bluntly explains how he creates double personalities; and "Bergson [who] tells us how he grafted a second magnetic sleep onto a first in a teenager (!)". For Darlu, these practices are reprehensible because "the interest of science which has inspired them serves as a pretext ... for a self-interested and unscrupulous charlatanism". However, even if the experiment's interest was purely scientific, this still could not justify the use of human lives for improper ends. According to Darlu, modern philosophy has demonstrated the sanctity of the human person and rather than conducting hypnosis experiments, "the philosophers that I have cited" should make us aware of the danger of these experiments for the public's respect for the unity of the human soul.

Undoubtedly, Darlu was not the only one concerned about the subjects of experimental hypnotists: since 1883, Jules Liégeois had been expressing his worries about experiments like those of Bergson and Robinet.³⁰ From his lectures

at Clermont-Ferrand at the time, we know that Bergson was aware of these discussions concerning the role of consent in hypnosis and the crimes supposedly conducted under hypnosis, yet he continued to consider the danger of the practice to be trifling.³¹ In these lectures, Bergson also explicitly points out the loss of freedom involved in hypnotic practices: “the subject becomes an automaton, in the sense that he is completely under control of the operator”.³² Regardless, Darlu was still too quick to align Bergson with the psychologists who tried to decompose the soul and hence relinquished the spiritualist conception of freedom: it was never Bergson’s aim to dissolve a personality. Bergson was always skeptical about decomposing personalities: “I do not believe in the dissociation of the personality, I do not believe that a personality can break into a thousand pieces like glass”.³³ On the contrary, the unity of the personality would prove to be fundamental for his account of freedom. As Bergson puts it in *Time and Free Will*: “we are free when our acts spring from our whole personality”.³⁴

In sum, while his experiments might suggest a rupture with spiritualism - even for his contemporaries - on closer inspection, it becomes clear that rather than going along with the naturalist views of the new, experimental psychologists, Bergson revitalized spiritualism with reference to the contemporary scientific discourse. Contrary to Darlu’s assertions, Bergson probably never thought of his experiments as a means to decompose the soul, but instead continued to promote the independence of the mind, the unity of personality, and the reality of freedom in the face of the growing influence of the physiological psychologists.

BERGSON AT THE INSTITUT GÉNÉRAL PSYCHOLOGIQUE

Around the turn of the century, the writer Oswald Murray and sculptor Serge Youriévitich were attempting to create an institute for the study of psychical phenomena as a French complement to the SPR. As Brady Bower shows, they capitalized on “the significant popular enthusiasm for the study of spirit phenomena from believers, skeptics, and the simply curious” to try and resolve “the issues surrounding spiritism ... by science”.³⁵ In the summer of 1900, twenty-two scientists and intellectuals - including Bergson, Richet, and Janet - founded an organization that eventually became the IGP. The following year, Bergson became part of one of the institute’s four study-groups that was to be devoted to the exploration of the “still undefined forces” at the frontiers of psychology, biology, and physics”.³⁶ In 1913, Bergson also joined a (secret) discussion group known as the Club of Thirteen. This group would meet every thirteenth of the month to discuss psychical research and comprised prominent academics such as

Émile Boirac, a philosopher interested in clairvoyance, Camille Flammarion, an astronomer and friend of Kardec, and probably also Eugène Osty, a physician and the later director of the *Institut Métapsychique International*.³⁷

In 1905, the IGP began a three-year project with the Italian medium Eusapia Palladino.³⁸ Born into a peasant family in 1854, Palladino had begun to conduct séances after claiming to have acquired the ability for table turning and communication with the dead during adolescence. After finding a manager in the spiritualist Ercole Chiaia, Palladino was introduced to many important psychical researchers by the criminologist Cesare Lombroso - who at first was skeptical of psychical phenomena but eventually became a convinced investigator.³⁹ Before coming to France, Palladino had been the subject of examinations by the SPR, but they had caught her in acts of trickery and deceit. Palladino apparently liberated her hands from the controllers during the séances - secretly laying the hands of the controllers on each other - to make tables turn. Despite these clear cases of fraud, Palladino's reputation did not suffer much: she claimed to be unconscious during deceit or argued that the spirits made her do it. A few years later, a few experiments with Richet and Boirac could still persuade the IGP to initiate a long series of expensive séances with the Italian medium.⁴⁰

According to the report of these séances, Bergson attended six out of the 43 sessions with Palladino.⁴¹ During these sessions, Palladino would sit in a *cabinet noir* with only her hands and feet visible but firmly held by two participants sitting next to her in front of the curtain. It usually took a long time - sometimes over two hours - before anything happened and the researchers often got impatient. The reports reveal that Palladino could not bring about psychical phenomena by sheer will. The right circumstances had to be there: the lights had to be dimmed, people had to talk, dance or sing, and even then, it could take hours. But from time to time, the table began to levitate or there appeared luminous dots and sparks.⁴² Bergson was witness to some of these phenomena: he served as control during a session where mysterious events took place. In the notes of the fourth session, it is written that Bergson saw that "a black arm from the left side of the curtain approached several times and forcefully touched M. Komyakoff [another participant] on the shoulder".⁴³

In an interview with the sculptor Georges Meunier in 1911, Bergson comments on the results of the experiments with Palladino and details his view on psychical research.⁴⁴ Meunier begins the conversation by asking Bergson what he thinks about the wondrous (*Merveilleux*).⁴⁵ Bergson answers that there is no reason not

to be interested, indeed, one must be interested in these strange phenomena that seem to occur all over the world. Although there were scientists that claimed that the inexistence of these phenomena had already been demonstrated, Bergson disagrees and argues that while there are many cases of fraud, it does not necessarily follow that all cases are fraud. There is doubt and as long as there is doubt, scientists need to investigate the phenomena and not mock those who do so. For Bergson, the method of science should always be observation and experiment - never ridicule and scorn.

Even though Bergson admits he is skeptical about the results of the sessions with Palladino, he does seem to attest to the reality of the phenomena: "I have experimented little myself and it is difficult to render an opinion in this matter... However, it is at least possible to speak of certain spirit phenomena and particularly those which the celebrated medium Palladino produced".⁴⁶ According to Bergson, there are two or three phenomena that Palladino produced that remain unexplained, but due to the many cases of fraud, he remains skeptical and argues that we should refrain from definite judgement. Interestingly, when asked about the existence of telepathy, Bergson is suddenly much less skeptical. He affirms that while its reality is not yet fully established, if one would force him to "bet for or" against its existence, he would "bet *for*, without hesitation".

When asked about the spirit hypothesis (the existence of spirits of the dead), Bergson dismisses the view that it is merely absurd. He emphasizes that it is important to distinguish between knowledge by reasoning and knowledge of facts. While our reasoning can be absurd, as when we affirm that a square can be round, the existence of facts such as psychical phenomena cannot be absurd because their existence depends solely on experience. Consequently, questions regarding the reality of psychical phenomena cannot be answered *a priori*, as these questions concern facts and hence should be empirically investigated. For example, when someone discovers that "the route followed by the moon is no longer the same as before", one might be "disturbed". Yet, it cannot *a priori* be denounced as absurd since this knowledge "only depends upon experience".

Despite these arguments for the need for empirical research, when asked about the existence of clairvoyance, Bergson immediately rejects it as unlikely. Even though there was as much research on clairvoyance as telepathy at the time, he says there is little evidence for the reality of clairvoyance. In his reply, Bergson argues that clairvoyance is incompatible with two fundamental commitments of his own philosophy, namely the fact that we are free beings and that the future is

unpredictable. Essentially, what this answer reveals is that his assessment of the existence of psychical phenomena is predicated upon his philosophical views, we do not need to empirically study every psychical phenomenon to assess whether it exists or not. For some phenomena, at least, we can use *a priori* or philosophical reasoning to denounce its existence. This is further corroborated by Bergson's reply to Meunier's question about fetishism: he is extremely dismissive of the possibility of its existence and answers that "here we are in the realm of pure fantasy".⁴⁷

Given that throughout his oeuvre, Bergson never endorses a strict distinction between the empirical and the *a priori*, it is remarkable to observe that when reviewing the likelihood of the existence of certain psychical phenomena, he immediately takes recourse to this philosophical distinction to repudiate the existence of clairvoyance and fetishism. His philosophical commitments, here, clearly determine what line of inquiry is valid: because his views on telepathy cohere with his spiritualist philosophy, its existence is plausible, but since clairvoyance categorically contradicts his philosophy of freedom, its existence is improbable. More importantly, they also determine the justification he uses to argue for his belief. Since the fact that we are free beings and that the future is unpredictable can be established as knowledge through reasoning, the possibility of the existence of an empirical phenomenon, such as clairvoyance and fetishism, that confutes this fact is minute. Therefore, clairvoyance and fetishism can be dismissed using *a priori* reasoning. In a word, Bergson's philosophical commitments, here, also determine if the existence of a psychical phenomenon can be assessed by *a priori* reasoning or needs to be studied empirically. In brief, Bergson's assessment of the existence of psychical phenomena discloses that his views on this topic cannot be detached from his overall philosophy: they form a coherent whole.

READING PHANTOMS OF LIFE AND PSYCHIC RESEARCH

After being a correspondent member of the SPR since 1909 and having rejected its presidency twice, Bergson accepted this honor of the British society in the year 1912-1913. Several prominent philosophers and intellectuals had taken on the position before him - among them Richet, Henry Sidgwick, and William James. In the introduction to his presidential address, Bergson expresses his admiration for the courage and brevity of the researchers in their "struggle against the prejudices of a great part of the scientific world".⁴⁸ He also establishes the aim of this lecture, which is:

“to show that behind the prejudices, the mockery of others, there is, present and invisible, a certain metaphysic unconscious of itself,- unconscious and therefore incapable of continually remodelling itself on observation and experience as every philosophy worthy of the name must do,- that, moreover, this metaphysics is natural due at any rate to a bent contracted long ago by the human mind and this explains its persistence and popularity”.

This “bad metaphysics” that Bergson will oppose throughout his lecture epitomizes the ideal counterpart of his own philosophy: a materialism that denies the independence of the spirit, a scientism that dismisses the existence of all experimentally indemonstrable phenomena, and a naturalism that rejects all non-mechanical explanations when accounting for the ways of the world.

After a brief methodological remark, Bergson starts attacking the view that psychical research is committed to the supernatural. For him, psychical phenomena and “those [facts] which form the subject-matter of natural science” are “of the same kind”. In principle, psychical phenomena, such as veridical hallucinations or apparitions, are subject to laws equal to those of the natural sciences. As Bergson argues, if psychical phenomena truly exist and we have come to know their laws, it will be possible to produce the phenomena at any moment: “if telepathy be real, it is possible that it is operating at every moment and everywhere”. For Bergson, psychical phenomena are as natural as all those other invisible forces discovered during the nineteenth century. In this regard, he compares telepathy to electricity: both phenomena are ordinary and ever present, but up until recently we never even suspected their existence.

The difference between the natural sciences and psychical research, therefore, lies not in a difference between natural and supernatural phenomena, but is due to the development of the two sciences. Natural science has already been put on a strong footing by Kepler, Galileo, and Newton: they have discovered the fundamental laws of nature. In contrast, psychical research has not yet been able to attain this state of science: there has not been any psychologist equal to those scientific geniuses, who was able to discover the fundamental laws of psychical phenomena. For this reason, psychical researchers are still employing the method of history and jurisdiction, namely a critical study of testimonies and witnesses.⁴⁹ But even with this meagre means, they have come to acquire enormous amounts of evidence and facts - as attested by the accounts in *Phantasms of the Living*. Taken together, these findings lead Bergson to conclude that the existence of telepathy

has acquired the same degree of plausibility as most well-documented historical events. As he himself puts it: “I am led to believe in telepathy, just as I believe in the defeat of the Invincible Armada”.⁵⁰

Next, Bergson turns to the “deep-seated cause” for the wanting development of psychical research. In his view, it can be explained by the inclination of science to tend “to mathematics as to an ideal”. Rehearsing his arguments from *Time and Free Will*, Bergson argues that the mathematization needed for measuring the mind is impossible and invalid: there is no magnitude appropriate to the phenomena of the mind. For him, “it is of the essence of mental things that they do not lend themselves to measurement”. To make up for this shortfall, scientists have substituted the mind for the brain, they have “determined to consider the cerebral as the equivalent of the mental”. In a word, they have adopted the hypothesis that there is a “strict *parallelism* between the cerebral and the mental”.

According to Bergson, this assumption is self-contradictory and unwarranted: “the facts, looked at without any prepossession, neither confirm nor even suggest the hypothesis of parallelism”. In his view, there is only one faculty which might be said to be localized in the brain and hence would justify the assumption of parallelism, namely word-memory. For all the other faculties, such as “[j]udgement, reasoning or any other act of thought, there is not the slightest reason to suppose that they are attached to intra-cerebral movements”. Only for memory then, research seems to show that certain lesions impede the ability to remember, understand, or utter words, and thus to corroborate that memories are stored in the brain. Yet for Bergson, even this modest conclusion is unwarranted by its premises.

Drawing upon his arguments put forward in *Matter and Memory*, he begins to challenge the view that memories are stored in the brain. According to Bergson, the brain only stores motor habits that enable the evoking of memories, “the mechanisms of recall”. In contrast, the memories themselves are not in the brain and, therefore, “the brain has no other part than to play, in the full meaning of the term, the mental life”. Although the brain is crucial for keeping our attention fixed on life and directing us towards action, it is in the end only the pantomime of consciousness. In short, “consciousness is not a function of the brain”. Even though brain dysfunctions, mental illness, or intoxications influence our behavior, the mind itself remains unaffected. Only the mechanisms for recall are disabled, not our judgements or reason itself, we have simply lost touch with reality - not with logic itself.

According to Bergson, what the brain essentially does is to limit our mental life, it canalizes our perceptions, actions, and thoughts. But if only our attention to life were to weaken, we could open the gateway to discovering the facts of psychical research. We would, first, uncover the limitless capacity of our memory. Because for Bergson, “the past is preserved even down to its slightest details ... there is no real forgetting”. Yet in our daily existence, this rarely happens, since we are constantly involved in practical activities that force us to focus and act. Nevertheless, there are moments, for example, at death or during sleep, that “a sudden *disinterestedness* in life” discloses to us the full past in a “panoramic vision”. If we could only lower the tension of our will, these events would manifest themselves much more often, because like telepathy, they are possibly taking place all the time.

Secondly, we would come to realize that “we perceive virtually many more things than we perceive actually”.⁵¹ According to Bergson, the brain is only “an instrument of selection” that determines which virtual perceptions will be actualized and thus our mental life is always more comprehensive than we believe it to be. As Bergson had already argued in his first scholarly article, there exists the possibility that we come to see much more than we think we can. Although we might, like the hypnotized boys, continue to be unaware of the true source of our perceptions, the phantasms of the living will still reveal themselves from time to time. Because at any moment, there are “around our normal perception a fringe of perceptions, most often unconscious, but all ready to enter into consciousness, and which do in fact enter in exceptional cases or in pre-disposed subjects”.

What stops us from entering these realms, the domain of psychical research, is the bad metaphysics of the scientists ingrained in the very nature of our mind. For Bergson, “it is space which creates the sharp divisions” between minds. In other words, it is only our bodies that are separated in space - not our minds. Since only a part of the psyche is attached to the body, there is the possibility that between “different minds there may be continually taking place changes analogous to the phenomena of endosmosis”. According to Bergson, if only we would endorse a more veridical metaphysics, we would start discovering a more vast, unknown realm of the mind. Subsequently, we would be able to demonstrate not only the existence of psychical phenomena but also disclose the reality of the survival of the soul after the death of the body. Because “[t]he more we become accustomed to this idea of a consciousness overflowing the organism, the more natural we find it to suppose that the soul survives the body”.⁵² If only the parallelism between the cerebral and the mental had been verified by empirical psychology, we would have reason to doubt the continued existence of the soul, but since the contrary

is the case, “the burden of proof comes to lie on him who denies it rather than on him who affirms it”.

But this is not all: for Bergson, if our science had taken this pathway, its whole essence would have been transformed. If Kepler, Galileo, or Newton had been psychologists, “science would have passed from pure mind to life”. In addition, “[a] biology would have been constituted, but a vitalist biology, quite different from ours, which would have sought, behind the sensible forms of living beings, the inward, invisible force of which the sensible forms are the manifestation”. Like his fellow-members of the study group of the IGP and many other psychical researchers, Bergson apparently believed that in the coming years psychical researchers could discover a new force that would be able to explain psychical phenomena.⁵³ But even such a discovery would not yet fulfill Bergson’s dreams. In his closing remarks on his vision of the future of science, he evinces - in a striking return to the therapeutic ideals of hypnosis introduced by Mesmer - how this new science might also remedy the problems of contemporary life:

“[t]ogether with this vitalist biology there would have arisen a medical practice which would have sought to remedy directly the insufficiencies of the vital force; it would have aimed at the cause and not at the effects, at the centre instead of at the periphery; healing by suggestion or, more generally, by the influence of mind on mind might have taken forms and proportions of which it is impossible for us to form the least idea. So would have been founded, so would have been developed, the science of mind-energy [*l’énergie spirituelle*]”.

In his last book, *The Sources of Morality and Religion*, Bergson would return once more to this vision of the future of science, and the role to be played by psychical research. On the final pages, he reveals how humanity would be transformed if the science of mind-energy would blossom and be able to demonstrate the existence of an independent, free soul: “if we were sure, absolutely sure, of survival, we could not think of anything else ... Pleasure would be eclipsed by joy”. It is this longing for redemption - with clear religious undertones - that drove many intellectuals to seek consolation in séances and psychical phenomena after the tragedy of the First World War.⁵⁴ Unsurprisingly, it was also during times of personal distress that the more extravagant aspects of séances became attractive to Bergson: in a lecture at the SPR, Gabriel Marcel recounts how he and a mourning Bergson had once tried to summon the spirit of the deceased William James.⁵⁵

CONCLUSION

Throughout this paper, I have reconstructed Bergson's encounters with psychical research to show how his commitment to a spiritualist philosophy conditioned his engagement with the new sciences of the mind - including both experimental psychology and psychical research. We have seen how Bergson's belief in the independence of the spirit, the survival of the spirit after death, and the possibility of communication between spirits at distance do not merely function as extraneous commitments of Bergson's philosophical system, but instead are intertwined with his core convictions concerning freedom, the nature of the mind, and the ambit of science. Ultimately, I think that it should not surprise us that many inheritors of the French spiritualist tradition were positively disposed to the results of psychical researchers: their doctrine was based on the indubitable power of the spirit, and hypnosis, hyperesthesia, and telepathy could easily be interpreted as proof for these beliefs. For Bergson's contemporaries, at least, the points of intersection and overlap between spiritualism and spiritism were obvious: countless psychical researchers used Bergson's philosophy to legitimize their inquiries.⁵⁶

Still, we might ask: what can we conclude from all of this? While some scholars have asked themselves the question whether Bergson was "*really* being serious", I hope to have shown that with a thorough understanding of the historical context of his oeuvre, we can recognize and explain the reasoning that led Bergson to make such seemingly grandiose statements.⁵⁷ With this understanding, we also come to see that we cannot simply dismiss Bergson's explorations as mere pseudoscience: on the contrary, many of the crucial markers for scientific methodology (i.e. empirical scrutiny, experimentation, and falsification) are clearly there - raising interesting questions about the very nature of science. Nevertheless, we should not forget that most scientists at the time did find the research of psychical phenomena to be misleading, and the illusions generated by séances that we now use to explain these phenomena had already been explicated. Sully, for example, in the very book Bergson translated, had warned of the illusions generated by the prejudices of the investigators and the setting of the séances.⁵⁸ Consequently, we cannot explain Bergson's ideas by taking recourse to the ideals of science of his time or to nescience: he was certainly aware of the critiques of his colleagues.⁵⁹

What is to be concluded then? I think that Bergson's involvement in psychical research reveals the intricate dialectic between the thought of a philosopher and his assessment of the research of contemporaneous science - where the plausibility of the existence a phenomenon is determined by (prior or posterior)

philosophical commitments and *vice versa*. Although Bergson presents himself as a careful and cautious scrutinizer of the results of psychical research, I maintain that his philosophical and metaphysical considerations constantly govern his views and assessments of what is worth investigating. In addition, what he takes to be philosophical arguments, such as the contradictory nature of parallelism or the ineffability of freedom, are rather acutely tainted by empirical convictions concerning the nature of consciousness or the structure of the mind. Of course, we should not be astonished by this: Bergson himself is always keen to stress that the metaphysical and scientific are never distinct: the *a priori* and the empirical are never pure. Yet, this does not put him in the clear, it makes the issue even more acute: if we aim for a coherent interpretation of his philosophy, we cannot simply dismiss his beliefs concerning hypnosis or telepathy as irrelevant. We must realize that his philosophical arguments function only in the conceptual state of the sciences of his time, they are developed through an engagement with nineteenth-century empirical findings. In the end, if we want to take seriously Bergson's arguments for the interdependence of the empirical and the *a priori*, we should no longer distinguish between his philosophical arguments for the independence of the spirit and his personal convictions regarding psychical phenomena *within* his own oeuvre. To be Bergsonian today, then, would no longer mean 'adopting a broader, expanded bergsonism' or translating his claims into the language of present-day discussions of the life sciences, but – without *a priori* adopting any of his philosophical commitments – completely reworking, reconstructing, and reformulating the problems he posed within contemporary science.⁶⁰

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NOTES

1. Dominique Janicaud, *Une Généalogie du spiritualisme français. Aux sources du bergsonisme: Ravaisson et la métaphysique*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1969; Giuseppe Bianco, *Après Bergson: Portrait de groupe avec philosophe*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2015; Jean-Louis Vieillard-Baron, *Le spiritualisme français*. Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 2021.
2. Larry Sommer McGrath, *Making Spirit Matter: Neurology, Psychology, and Selfhood in Modern France*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020, 1. See also, Pietro Terzi, “Determinism and moral freedom: spiritualist fault lines in a debate at the Société Française de Philosophie.” *History of European Ideas* 46:6 (April 2020, 876).
3. Nonetheless, I believe that one can make a similar case for other spiritualist philosophers: Maine de Biran, Émile Boutroux, Alfred Fouillée, Jean Jaurès, Victor Egger, and Gabriel Marcel all showed a profound interest in psychical phenomena. See, Robert Grogin, *The Bergsonian Controversy in France 1900-1914*. Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 1988, 64; Pierre Maine de Biran, *Nouvelles considérations sur le sommeil, les songes et le somnambulisme*. Paris: Librairie de Ladrange (1841, 259-295); Victor Egger, “Le moi des mourants.” *Revue philosophique de la France et de l'étranger* 41 (June 1896, 26-38); Gabriel Marcel, *The Influence of Psychical Phenomena on my Philosophy*. London: Society for Psychical Research, 1956.
4. For a declaration of fidelity to Bergsonism by contemporary philosophers, see Elie During and Paul-Antoine Miquel, “We Bergsonians: The Kyoto Manifesto.” Trans. Barry Dainton. *Parrhesia* 33 (2020, 17-42).
5. Henri Bergson, “De la simulation inconsciente dans l'état d'hypnotisme.” *Revue Philosophique de la France et de l'Étranger* 22 (December, 1886, 525-531).
6. Henri Bergson, *Mind-Energy*. Trans. H. Wildon Carr. New York: Henry Holt and Co, 1920, 75-103.
7. Throughout this paper, I will use the term psychical phenomena to denote phenomena as diverse as somnambulism, telepathy, and manifestations of ectoplasm. What binds them, I think, is that all played a considerable role in discussions concerning the relation between the spirit and the body around the turn of the century. It is during these discussions that concepts, such as the psychic, the mental, and the (un)conscious, were beginning to be differentiated. Although psychical research is widely discredited by scientists today, there is still extensive research on extrasensory perception and hypnosis.
8. James Sully, *Les illusions des sens et de l'esprit*. Paris: Germer Baillière, 1883.
9. James Sully, *Illusions: A Psychological Study*. New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1881, 186. Heidenhain's work is also mentioned by Bergson in his lectures at Clermont-Ferrand. Henri Bergson, *Cours I: Leçons de psychologie et de métaphysique*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1990, 278.
10. Sully, *Illusions*, 186-187.
11. For an in-depth analysis of the influence of Sully's *Illusions* on Bergson's philosophy, see Gilles Tiberghien, “Une source inconnue du bergsonisme.” *Bergson: naissance d'une philosophie*. Eds. Jean-Claude Pariente. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1990, 43-56
12. Gilbert Maire, *Bergson: mon maître*. Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1935, 28; George Mead, *Quests Old and New*. London: G. Bell, 1913, 276.
13. The Jacques Doucet Literary Library, Fonds Bergson, BGN 2960. Bergson's heavily annotated, personal copy is also preserved by the Doucet Library, see Fonds Henri Bergson, BGN 434-435.
14. Carlos Alvarado and Renaud Evrard, “Nineteenth Century Psychical Research in

- Mainstream Journals: The *Revue Philosophique de la France et de l'Étranger*." *Journal of Scientific Exploration* 27:4 (2013, 655-689).
15. Bergson, "De la simulation", 525-531
 16. The belief that people under hypnosis sometimes acquire extraordinary sensibilities and capabilities, such as clairvoyance, hyperesthesia, and telepathy, goes back all the way to the days of Mesmer. Alan Gauld, *A History of Hypnotism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 62-64.
 17. The fact that Bergson and Robinet believed it was possible to hypnotize non-pathological subjects indicates that their approach was allied to that of the Nancy school, one of the two rival schools of hypnosis at the time, the other being the school of Salpêtrière, famously represented by Jean-Martin Charcot. For the controversy between the two competing schools, see Andreas Mayer, *Sites of the Unconscious: Hypnosis and the Emergence of the Psychoanalytic Setting*. Trans. by Christopher Barber. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2013.
 18. Hyperesthesia was an important topic in discussions on hypnosis in late nineteenth century France. Kim Hajek, "Imperceptible signs: remnants of magnétisme in scientific discourses on hypnotism in late nineteenth-century France." *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences* 51:4 (2015, 366-386). Although discussion of hyperesthesia waned over the years, it should be noted that Bergson's claims concerning hypnosis continued to be cited by hypnotists far into the twentieth century. Cf. Eric Cuddon, *Hypnosis: Its Meaning and Practice*. London: George Bell & Sons, 1938, 38.
 19. For a more extensive discussion of Bergson's recourse to unconscious simulation, see André LeBlanc, *On Hypnosis, Simulation, and Faith: The Problem of Post-Hypnotic Suggestion in France 1884-1896*. Toronto: University of Toronto, 2000, 70-74.
 20. Pricking was at the time common practice in hypnosis-experiments. Cf. Hippolyte Bernheim, *De la suggestion dans l'état hypnotique et dans l'état de veille*. Paris: Octave Doin, 1884, 559.
 21. Bergson was not the first to explain mental suggestion in this way: already in 1833, the chemist Michel Eugène Chevreul had explained occult phenomena by unconscious micro-muscular expressions. Sofie Lachapelle, *Investigating the Supernatural: From Spiritism and Occultism to Psychical Research and Metapsychics in France, 1853-1931*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011, 17.
 22. Giuseppe Bianco, "What Was "Serious Philosophy" for the Young Bergson?" *Interpreting Bergson*. Eds. Alexandre Lefebvre and Nils Schott. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2020, 27.
 23. Jan Goldstein, *The Post-Revolutionary Self: Politics and Psyche in France, 1750-1850*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press
 24. Régine Plas, "Psychology and Psychical Research in France around the End of the 19th Century." *History of the Human Sciences* 25:2 (2021, 91-107).
 25. Joseph Delboeuf, "Sur l'explication fournie par M. le Dr. Bernheim des hallucinations négatives suggérées." *Revue de l'Hypnotisme* 3 (1889, 202-205); Pierre Janet, *L'automatisme psychologique*. Paris: Félix Alcan, 311; Ludwig Büchner, *Thatsachen und Theorien aus dem naturwissenschaftlichen Leben der Gegenwart*. Berlin: Allgemeiner Verein für Deutsche Literatur, 1887, 210-213.
 26. Frederic Myers "On a Case of Alleged Hypnotic Hyperacuity of Vision." *Mind* 12:45 (January 1887, 154-156).
 27. Fonds Myers, Myers 1620, Trinity College, Cambridge. Thanks to Renaud Evrard for sending me the scans of the letters made by Andreas Sommer.
 28. Bergson, *Course I*, 271. For his enthusiasm for psychical transference, see Bergson, *Course I*,

280.

29. Alphonse Darlu, "La liberté et le déterminisme selon M. Fouillée." *Revue philosophique de la France et de l'étranger* 23 (January 1887, 561-581).

30. Jules Liégeois, "De la suggestion hypnotique dans ses rapports avec le droit civil et le droit criminel." *Séances et travaux de l'académie des sciences morales et politiques* 120 (1884, 220-290). This discussion would culminate in a fierce public debate during the trial of The Gouffé Case. Ruth Harris, "Murder under hypnosis in the case of Gabrielle Bompard: Psychiatry in the Courtroom in Belle Époque Paris." *The Anatomy of Madness: Essays in the History of Psychiatry, Volume 2*. Eds. William F. Bynum, Roy Porter, and Michael Shepherd. London: Routledge, 2004, 197-241.

31. Bergson, *Cours I*, 280.

32. *Ibid.*, 278.

33. Bergson, *Mélanges*, 1225.

34. Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will*. Trans. F. L. Pogson. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1910, 172.

35. Brady Bower, *Unruly Spirits: The Science of Psychic Phenomena in Modern France*. Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2010, 47-48.

36. Lachapelle, *Investigating*, 78. See also Bergson, *Mélanges*, 509-510.

37. The other members were: Joseph Maxwell, Arnaud de Gramont, Jean-Charles Roux, Albert von Schrenck-Notzing, Jules Courtier, Cesare di Vesme, a physician called Watteville, the engineer Lemerle, and the physician Bourbon. Henri Bergson, *Écrits philosophiques*. Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2011, 130. For Bergson's assessment of Boirac's book *Our Hidden Forces: An Experimental Study of the Psychic Sciences*, see Bergson, *Mélanges*, 760-761. For Bergson's enthusiasm for *métapsychique*, see the letter by Bergson reprinted in Jean Labadié, *Aux frontières de l'au-delà, Choses vécues*. Paris: Grasset, 1939, 7-8.

38. For biographical information, see Hereward Carrington, *Eusapia Palladino and her Phenomena*. London: T. Werner Laurie, 1909.

39. Andrea Graus, "Discovering Palladinos' Mediumship. Otero Acevedo, Lombroso and the Quest for Authority." *The History of the Behavioral Sciences* 53:3 (2016, 211-230).

40. Bower, *Unruly Spirits*, 64-74.

41. Bergson, *Mélanges*, 673-674.

42. Lachapelle, *Investigating*, 105-106.

43. Bower, *Unruly Spirits*, 69.

44. Georges Meunier, *Ce qu'ils pensent du merveilleux*. Paris: Albin Michel, 1911, 81-107.

45. The use of this term for what we now call supernatural phenomena was popularized by the scientist Louis Figuier. Louis Figuier, *Les merveilles de la science ou description populaire des inventions modernes, 4 vols*. Paris: Hachette, 1867-91.

46. Meunier, *Ce qu*, 84-85. Translation by Grogin, *The Bergsonist*, 52.

47. According to his brother-in-law and founder of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, Samuel Liddell MacGregor Mathers, Bergson also dismissed magic in the same way. Grogin, *The Bergsonist*, 43.

48. Bergson, *Mind-Energy*, 76-103.

49. For a discussion of the role of testimonies in psychical research, see Lachapelle, *Investigating*, 94-97.

50. For a similar expression of his belief in telepathy, see Renaud Evrard, "Bergson et la télépathie: à propos d'une correspondance inédite." *Bergsoniana* 1 (2021).

51. For a more elaborate discussion of Bergson's belief that we can perceive much more than we think we can, see Howard Caygill, "Hyperaesthesia and the Virtual." *Bergson and the Art of Immanence: Painting, Photography, Film, Performance*. Eds. John Mullarkey. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 247-259.
52. For even stronger claims concerning his belief in the survival of the soul, see Herman Bernstein, *Celebrities of Our Time*. London: Hutchinson & Co, 1924, 149.
53. Cf. Camille Flammarion, *Mysterious Psychic Forces*. Boston: Small, Maynard and Company, 1909.
54. Bower, *Unruly Spirits*, 93.
55. Marcel, *The Influence*, 1956, 13.
56. Cf. Gustave Geley, *De l'inconscient au conscient*. Paris: Librairie Félix Alcan, 1919; Oliver Lodge, *Modern Problems*. London: Methuen & co, 1912. Even a participant in a discussion on the value of Bergson's philosophy in a Dutch novel from 1916 could rhetorically ask: "And is his doctrine of "intuition" not ingenious? Does it not explain the wonders of clairvoyance and telepathy and mind-reading and somnambulism?". Jeanne Reyneke van Stuwé, *Câline: Roman uit het Parijsche leven*. Amsterdam: L.J. Veen, 87.
57. Justin Sausman, "It's organisms that die, not life': Henri Bergson, Psychological Research, and the Contemporary uses of Vitalism." *The Machine and the Ghost*. Eds. Sas Mays and Neil Matheson. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013, 27.
58. Sully, *Illusions*, 103, 107, 123.
59. Cf. Meunier, *Ce qu*, 81-84; Bergson, *Mind-energy*, 75-77.
60. Durring and Miquel, "We Bergsonians", 19.