

## HENRI BERGSON'S OPEN SOCIETY: THE TRANSFORMATION OF HUMANITY IN *TWO SOURCES OF MORALITY AND RELIGION*

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ABSTRACT: In this article, I propose a reading of Henri Bergson's *Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, centering on how mysticism transforms *homo sapiens*. For Bergson, the mystics are exemplars of social innovation, representatives of a "new species." The open society, far from being a distant utopian social ideal, is already immanent to static, closed society. Openness can be achieved now, in the moment of mystical experience, defined by Bergson as unity with the flow of life. Instead of a rigid dualism between closure and openness, Bergson proposes that social change is driven from the inside by new moral ideas. Moral heroes are those willing to break the mould of social obligation. A form of non-discriminatory love is possible, going beyond the inner/outer distinction. Far from being a passive or contemplative practice, mysticism for Bergson is an active change of the human condition, a passage to the more-than-human.

KEYWORDS: Cultural evolution; Henri Bergson; Mysticism; Open society; Social change

### INTRODUCTION

We may differentiate two methods of philosophical composition. The former we identify with the concept of "recombination", whilst the latter can be equated with the central method of Bergsonian philosophy, "intuition." In *Les Deux Sources de la Morale et de la Religion* (*The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*), we find outlined the characteristics of what Bergson calls the "two methods of composition." With recombination, we keep "within the sphere of concepts and words", utilizing

ready-made ideas supplied by cultural contexts.<sup>1</sup> Recombination by no means precludes intellectual effort, for concept-engineers are perpetually engaged in “reshaping” the concepts they borrow, “to make them fit into” new combinations (ibid). This repetition is a productive synthesis, productive of results that, while already latent within ready-made concepts, remained hitherto unforeseeable, brought to the surface through the act of interpretation. The first method does not fundamentally alter the state of things, nor the condition of concepts utilized. Society remains as it was previously, the fundamental conventions underlying social life remain intact. Recombination does not give birth to a fundamentally new thought. Intuition though, if successful, “will have enriched humanity with a thought that can take on a fresh aspect for each generation” (*TS*: 218). The second method of composition is much more “ambitious”, for it “consists in working back from the intellectual and social plane to a point in the soul from which there springs an imperative demand for creation” (217). There is revealed here in this distinction a hidden affinity between repetition and intuition, for “repetition ideally creates the form that is to be taken, that is, it creates the form that is to be repeated”.<sup>2</sup> Is not intuition itself this “ideal repetition”?

Only intuition can take us straight to interiority, the endogeneous epochal duration of reality’s dynamism. Intuition is above all a transmission of “an impulse, an impetus received from the very depths of things” (*TS*: 217). Bergson readily admits that the two methods are not mutually exclusionary. Both may be found in his own works. A balance between recombination and intuition is needed. The former aspect is what makes a new philosophy articulable in terms of its relationship with a previous tradition, while the latter provides creative originality. Intuition is nonetheless more readily detectable, for it exhibits all the hallmarks of a new emergence. When engaged in the elaboration of an intuitive experience, we are constrained in our choice of words. Not all phrases are capable of transmitting the simple emotion of deep affectivity. Rather, when attempting to transmit experience, the concept-engineer “will be driven to strain the words, to do violence to speech” (*TS*: 218). Such is the spirit with which I strive to uncover the import of Bergson’s philosophy, both interpreting and actualizing this

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<sup>1</sup> Bergson, Henri. *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*. trans. Audra, R. A., Brereton, C. and Carter, W. H. London, Macmillan, 1935 [1932], p. 217., hereafter abbreviated as *TS*.

<sup>2</sup> Lawlor, Leonard. *The Challenge of Bergsonism. Phenomenology, Ontology, Ethics*. London and New York, Continuum, 2003, p. 107.

doctrine while adding my own intuitions to the mix. The method shall necessarily be a dual one, *a mixture of recombination and intuition*, repeating Bergsonian philosophy in an explicitly Bergsonian key, adding sediments of content. Each repetition is also a re-creation, a refreshment or “updating.”

#### FROM OBLIGATION TO LOVE: OPENNESS FROM CLOSURE

What is the goal of Bergson’s final work, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*? It is nothing less than an introduction to the landscape of religion, as viewed through the lens of duration. This book should also be read as an attempt to outline the contours of an open, dynamically-oriented spirituality. Authentic religiosity tends to perish, or at best, lose its force when subjugated to particular ends. Religion fossilizes when it becomes a set of mere rules. Custom and law are indistinguishable from one another: both are forms of obligation. Religion itself, in Bergson’s speculative social philosophy, has its origins in custom. “Originally”, he writes, “the whole of morality is custom” (*TS*: 102). As we shall see, however, that which was initially indistinguishable will, during *Two Sources*, inexorably come apart. What we witness is the progressive separation of obligation – identified with what Bergson calls “static religion” - from spirituality proper. As we delve deeper into morality itself, we discover that it is underlain by a vast bedrock of self-organizing biological and sociocultural processes.

Famously, Bergson asserts that “all morality, be it pressure or aspiration, is in essence biological” (*TS*: 82). Such statements must be treated appropriately. We are not dealing here with a reductivist or determinist Social Darwinism or sociobiology.<sup>3</sup> Rather, as Paola Marrati makes clear, for Bergson life must be identified “with an essential mobility” that permeates all evolutionary systems, be they societies or organisms.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, if we seek to understand religion, we must understand its source, which is life or *élan vital* itself. *Two Sources* is a continuation of Bergson’s more famous *Creative Evolution*, though here I shall not engage in a

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<sup>3</sup> Ansell-Pearson, Keith. *Bergson. Thinking Beyond the Human Condition*. London and New York, Bloomsbury, 2018, p. 112.

<sup>4</sup> Marrati, Paola. “Mysticism and the Foundations of the Open Society”. in de Vries, Hent. and Sullivan, Lawrence E. (eds.) *Political Theologies. Public Religions in a Post-Secular World*. New York, Fordham University Press, 2006, pp. 591-602., p. 597.

comparison of the two books.<sup>5</sup> To a large extent, religion, in its static form at least, is a self-reinforcement mechanism of in-groups. While intelligence threatens to undo group solidarity because of the egoistic and depressive tendencies it introduces, religion is an immune reaction of life, protecting the members of society “against the dissolvent power of intelligence” (*TS*: 101). In a similar vein, Alfred North Whitehead writes that “if men cannot live on bread alone, still less can they do so on disinfectants.”<sup>6</sup> Intelligence dissolves, while religion unites. Life is already inherently social to begin with but the advent of intelligence threatens to separate the organism from its community through individualization. Discouraged by their failures, sentient beings are capable of giving up on life. Suicide becomes the characteristic anomie of modernity.<sup>7</sup> A mythology is required that convinces individuals to continue their struggles for the sake of social solidarity and maintenance of prevailing social forms.

Religion corresponds to what James Burton calls “fabulation”, the ability to posit fictional entities as if they were real beings capable of acting in the world.<sup>8</sup> Fabulation or, to use the term from the official translation of *Two Sources*, the “myth-making function”, is therefore a defensive reaction manufactured by life itself against the onset of depression. Nature, when confronted with the dissolvent power of intellect, sets up “intelligence against intelligence” (*TS*: 107). *Divide et impera*, such is the imperative of life. Take two rival forces and confront them with each other, until they are suitably neutralized, until the system as an aggregate achieves stability. Myth-making serves to restore the balance lost during the course of the evolutionary intelligence explosion which produced rational, calculating beings capable of pondering whether to commit suicide or persist in the struggle of life. If individuated intelligent life is to be maintained, then collective life too must be kept vibrant and cohesive through representations

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<sup>5</sup> As Mathilde Tahar explains, in *Two Sources* “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.” Tahar, Mathilde. “Bergson’s Vitalisms.” *Parrhesia* 36, 2022, pp. 4-24., p. 19.

<sup>6</sup> Whitehead, Alfred N. *Science and the Modern World. Lowell Lectures 1925*. London and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1929 [1926], p. 74.

<sup>7</sup> Durkheim, Émile. *On Suicide*. trans. Robin Buss. New York, Penguin Books, 2007 [1897].

<sup>8</sup> Burton, James. *The Philosophy of Science Fiction. Henri Bergson and the Fabulations of Philip K. Dick*. London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2015, p. 40.

conducive to cohesion. *Two Sources* is permeated with a fundamentally Durkheimian focus on social integration. For Bergson, religion is originally a cohesiveness peculiar to human societies. In its original form, spirituality is, above all, obligation. Self-regulation commences where openness ends. Each obligation conforms to some functional social necessity (*TS*: 2). Humans have always been social. At the outset, obligation harmonizes with habit. "Obligation", Bergson states, "is to necessity what habit is to nature." (*TS*: 6) Obligation reconnects us to each other and ourselves, contributing to the cultivation of a "social ego" (Bergson's expression)

Needless to say, we must avoid the temptation to reduce obligation or, for that matter, morality in its germinal state, to anything like a "natural" predetermination. Whilst culturally coded habit resembles heredity, it does not follow that cultural norms can be unproblematically naturalized. Keith Ansell-Pearson is correct in emphasizing that "in no way does Bergson maintain that social and political forms of organization are biologically determined."<sup>9</sup> That being said, the social cannot be explained in isolation from vitality. Society is "not self-explanatory", as it is "only one of the aspects of life" (*TS*: 82).<sup>10</sup> The reason social life is not solely biologically determined is that, in Bergsonian philosophy, life itself is an open, undetermined process. The error of social Darwinism and sociobiology lies in their determinism, and not in their vitalism. Life for Bergson is indeterministic, being in itself an elaboration of creative freedom. That which is predetermined cannot be vital, because life in its essence is mobility, change and unpredictable creative power. Determinism cannot understand vitality considered in itself. With Bergson, sociology also loses its monopoly on social explanation. The primacy of life entails that we cannot privilege isolated models of purely social science.

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<sup>9</sup> Ansell-Pearson, *Bergson*, p. 114.

<sup>10</sup> In this regard, Bergson stands in direct contradiction with the Durkheimian school of French sociology. Following Émile Durkheim, the mainstream of sociology in the first half of the 20th century (at least in the French context) insisted on treating social phenomena separately from other disciplines. As opposed to the culturalist Durkheimian outlook, Bergson insists that we cannot treat social facts in isolation. There is no society *sui generis*. cf. Delitz, Heike. "Bergson und Durkheim, Bergsoniens und Durkheimiens." in Bogusz, Tanja and Delitz, Heike (eds.) *Émile Durkheim. Soziologie – Ethnologie – Philosophie*. Frankfurt am Main, Campus Verlag, 2013, pp. 371-403.; Lefebvre, Alexandre and White, Melanie. "Bergson on Durkheim: Society *sui generis*." *Journal of Classical Sociology* 10.4, 2010, pp: 457-477.

Society exerts pressure upon its interlinked, enchained members. Expectations are coordinated spontaneously through the institution of obligation, which has developed to aid the harmonization of otherwise varying life-plans. Society, through the production and communication of obligations, “draws up for the individual the programme of his daily routine” (*TS*: 10). Duty is a net, which gives ready-made outlets and shapes for the liquidity of individual actions. Optimally, obedience is unreflective, like sleep-walking. Social knowledge is mostly unreflective.<sup>11</sup> The underlying reason for conformity is, according to Bergson’s understanding of matters, similarly occluded from agents in social life. While “obedience to duty means resistance to self”, this resistance is normally effortless (*TS*: 11). It takes more expense to break the mould than to follow a convention or pattern. As we shall see, moral innovators must explode the crust of social custom. Two types of organisms, social insects and the hominids, have developed the capacity for social life to the highest degree. Social insects (*Hymenoptera*) are controlled entirely by instinct, whereas *homo sapiens*, or so Bergson supposes, are structurally open: “in a hive or an ant-hill the individual is riveted to his task by his structure, and the organization is relatively invariable, whereas the human community is variable in form, open to every kind of progress” (*TS*: 17-8). Here the human element would be differentiated from the insect by a greater morphic potential. The tendency is the same, yet in a qualitative sense, human society differs from insect society fundamentally. Jussi Parikka attributes “inventiveness” to the Bergsonian concept of life as such: “animals are in general inventors.”<sup>12</sup> Some species simply have greater latitude than others. Intelligence is what allows human societies to free themselves from reliance upon instinct, yet something of the instinctual remains intact within human societies in the form of obligation.

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<sup>11</sup> Bergson to a great extent anticipates Michael Polanyi’s later formulation of “tacit knowledge.” Intellect is, for the most part, deposited in the form of “inarticulate faculties”, collective potentialities that are utilized unreflectively and usually spontaneously in everyday life (Polanyi, Michael. (1998 [1962]) *Personal Knowledge. Towards a Post-critical Philosophy*. London and New York, Routledge, 1998 [1962], p. 72). Meaning resides in “the ineffable domain”; by definition, it cannot be rendered entirely explicit, for “the tacit is co-extensive with the text of which it carries the meaning” (Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, p. 90). Symbolic operations, which form the backbone of communication, are never entirely understood by individual participants.

<sup>12</sup> Parikka, Jussi. *Insect Media. An Archaeology of Animals and Technology*. London and Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2010, p. 21.

To bridge the apparent gap between social norms and biologically-embedded instinct, Bergson introduces the neologism “virtual instinct”, using this expression as a synonym for obligation. According to Bergson’s entirely speculative reconstruction of evolutionary history, “obligation as a whole *would have been* instinct if human societies were not, so to speak, ballasted with variability and intelligence. *It is a virtual instinct*, like that which lies behind the habit of speech” (*TS*: 18, emphasis mine).<sup>13</sup> In this framework, instinct relates to what is felt rather than thought. The instinctual is spontaneous action prior to the inhibiting intervention of reflection.<sup>14</sup> Obligation is an ubiquitous aspect of society. Despite appearances, obligation, because of its intermediate status as “virtual” (or virtualised) instinct, is also *continuous* with instinct. Emerging from the spiraling ascent of evolution from unorganized matter to self-organizing living *élan vital*, morality is a tool of life. Habits are not hereditary though. They are products of social and cultural evolution, similarly to other complex characteristics of life. Obligation is situated halfway between instinct and culture. It is a remainder, a trace that “remains in excellent condition, very much alive, in the most civilized society”, because all existent societies are structurally speaking “closed societies” (*TS*: 19-20).

At once artificial and natural, constructed and ready-made, obligation reveals a specious presence within the heart of civilization. A difficulty of evolution is the close connection, even, enchainment between social cohesion and loyalty to an in-group. Cohesion is achieved at the cost of excluding others (*TS*: 22). John Mullarkey emphasizes that for Bergson, achieving openness it is never a question of heading through a series of expanding circles. *Closure is the structure of society, whereas openness is the processual aspect of social life*. Universal openness can only be achieved through a leap that thrusts beyond closure, a break resulting in the creation of a morality transcendent to society.<sup>15</sup> Any structure is closed and self-interested which does not accept the ethical claim of the other, its existential

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<sup>13</sup> Bergson defines intuition as expanded instinct in *Creative Evolution*, “It is to the very inwardness of life that intuition leads us - by intuition I mean instinct that has become disinterested, self-conscious, capable of reflecting upon its object and of enlarging it indefinitely” (Bergson, Henri. *Creative Evolution*. trans. Mitchell, Arthur. New York, Random House, 1944 [1907], p. 194).

<sup>14</sup> Mullarkey, John. *Bergson and Philosophy. An Introduction*. New York, University of Notre Dame Press, 2000, p. 79.

<sup>15</sup> Mullarkey, *Bergson and Philosophy*, p. 146.

mode being prejudice. The open soul, on the other hand, is characterized by an unfathomable, unaccountable spirit of charity. It gives without expecting any return, disregarding economy or profit. Animated by generosity, the open soul cares not for the consequences of its abundance. In a remarkably “posthumanist” vein, Bergson leads us to understand the open soul as constituting a personage extending sympathy in all directions, without regard for even species differences, let alone cultural borders:

Suppose we say that it embraces all humanity: we should not be going too far, we should hardly be going far enough, since its love may extend to animals, to plants, to all nature. And yet no one of these things which would thus fill it would suffice to define the attitude taken by the soul, for it could, strictly speaking, do without all of them. Its form is not dependent on its content. We have just filled it; we could as easily empty it again. ‘Charity’ would persist in him who possesses ‘charity’, though there be no other living creature on earth (*TS*: 27).

Morality, enclosed within closed boundaries, or even the functional, impersonal frameworks of modern social systems, becomes deaf to the appeal of the other. Closure and openness are always internal to a society. As Richard Vernon points out, for Bergson every society is characterized by a tension between “pressure” (closedness) and “appeal” (openness).<sup>16</sup> Closed morality cannot “become” open through a mere spatial extension, because these are two fundamentally different and incommensurable forms of spirituality, standing in perpetual conflict with one another, even within the context of the same society. It is not a question of merely transcending closure through a political act. Instead, the self-disincarnating generosity of openness proceeds according to an economy that differs from any politico-economic logic. Bergson’s concept of open morality conforms to what Mullarkey calls “an economy of excess”, entirely alien to any idea of recompense or accumulation.<sup>17</sup> The open soul gives without asking; its gifts are irrespective of merit. Open morality, synonymous with selfless charity, is entirely independent of content. If obligation is impersonal pressure, tending towards conformity, then the egoless charity that characterizes open morality

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<sup>16</sup> Vernon, Richard “Bergson and Political Theory.” in: Lefebvre, Alexandre, and Schott, Nils F. (eds.) *Interpreting Bergson. Critical Essays*. Cambridge and New York, Cambridge University Press, 2020, pp. 155-172., p. 162.

<sup>17</sup> Mullarkey, *Bergson and Philosophy*, p. 145.



“finds its inspiration in a personal appeal.”<sup>18</sup>

#### LOVE WITHOUT BORDERS: OPENING MORALITY

At this stage, we must step beyond obligation, towards the *terra incognita* of open spirituality. As we have seen above, charity need not be necessarily directed towards human beings alone. The love of the open soul may extend to all sentient beings, even to “all nature.” The moral economy of excess recognizes no borders when it comes to the gift of cosmic sympathy. Moral constraints coordinate goal-directed responses. Such is their importance for the functioning of a social structure. But the economy of infinite love recognizes no goal apart from *self-disincarnating expenditure*. Whereas conformists see nothing apart from regularity, and never explicitly question social rules, for innovators “life holds” an excess waiting to be untethered, “unsuspected tones of feeling like those of some new symphony” (*TS*: 29). A mystic is an engineer of new affects. Novel spiritualities originate from the vital flow of life. Open morality is love that extends to all. As Alphonso Lingis has written, “we do have the power to crush the penguin chick and knock over the sunflower with a blow, as we may block and muddy the river, but our cruelty and our disdain feel the panic of the chick and the vertical aspiration of the sunflower.”<sup>19</sup> Sympathy is limitless, otherwise it would remain a mere affinity with the similar, a repetition of structure, and not a response to an appeal.<sup>20</sup> The dynamic, open soul, loosening itself from social constraints, is free to accept the appeal of every being. According to the Bergsonian view, open morality is the completion of all religious visions, the crowning achievement of spirituality.

While allowing us to recognize the imperative nature of every object, the feelings imparted by openness are nevertheless unattached, ethereal, like a breeze. The new emotions generated, however strong and intense they be, are “not attached to anything in particular” (*TS*: 29). Paradoxically, Bergsonian sympathy takes us back to the objects themselves, while also giving affordance to the weightlessness of unattachment. In charity, we let go of ourselves and our

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<sup>18</sup> Mullarkey, *Bergson and Philosophy*, p. 148.

<sup>19</sup> Lingis, Alphonso. *The Imperative*. Bloomington, University of Indiana Press, 1998, p. 126.

<sup>20</sup> Here I do not have space to discuss the history of the concept of sympathy, which has a long and rich provenance within philosophy, from the Stoics through the 18th century British moral philosophers to our time.

actions alike. Let us remember though, the two methods of composition – recombination and intuition – work together. Fresh emotions and new affects utilize previous forms and “preexisting notes as harmonics” for their own self-proliferation (*TS*: 30). Bergson holds that open morality and indeed all cultural norms spread through imitation (this applies to obligation as well) (*TS*: 23). Yet whilst closed morality is based on compulsion as well as the lack of reflexivity, openness expands voluntarily, without the threat of exclusion. By showing a pathway that may be followed by the devout, mystics, and other moral innovators set an example. In the sphere of open spirituality “we obtain the imitation of a person, and even a spiritual union, a more or less complete identification” (*TS*: 79). Bergson’s concept of open spirituality brooks no limitation. An authentic mystic cares nothing for success or failure. A mystic cannot be selfish, and neither can open morality behave in a self-interested manner. “True mystics simply open their souls to the coming wave” – without regard to success, failure, good or evil, reward, or punishment (*TS*: 81). We have in mysticism a vibratory repetition that has left behind any awareness of self.

Closed morality, while conducive to ingroup solidarity, remains trapped in a circle (*TS*: 44). However broadly we would seek to expand the circle of solidarity, it remains just that: a partial, self-referential circle. This point, in our age of expanding rights and much-vaunted moral progress, is a vitally important one. Openness cannot be thought of in terms of a mere quantitative enlargement of reciprocal altruism. Extending the scope of solidarity fails to undo the self-referential nature of closed morality. Exclusion remains fundamentally untouched by the relative expansion of the circle of inclusivity:

Just as members of one group, *Homo sapiens*, have distributed amongst themselves every right and privilege through the course of an enlarging enfranchisement, they have done so by invoking an identity that necessarily ostracises a vast out-group (‘non-human animals’ so-called) to the extent of either defining them in some jurisdictions as non-sentient beings or practically treating them as such in most others. Evidence of the exclusionist nature of liberation morality can be seen in the fact that any newly enfranchised group – the aged, the obese, persons of different colour, and so on – were only persecuted in the first place on account of a mere relative difference being turned into an absolute distinction.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Mullarkey, *Bergson and Philosophy*, p. 143-4.

Liberation and emancipation are all-or-nothing affairs. For Bergson, “the mystic love of humanity”, or even the all-encompassing love we may characterize as cosmic sympathy, differs from self-referential closed morality in a qualitative and not merely quantitative sense (*TS*: 200). Open morality is incommensurable with closed morality. If we are to break the circle of selfishness for good, we must make the leap from reciprocity to unconditional love. The stream of life is prodigality incarnate. Life knows no concept of economy, limitation or reciprocity. From a broadened, intensified perspective, “reciprocal altruism” represents but a small island within an expansive ocean of generosity, waste, and profligacy. The soul that has freed itself of the fetters of custom and social obligation achieves direct contact with the source of life. Those saints, however few in number they may be, who attain to the spirit of charity, nonetheless “represent a vast expenditure of energy,” serving as exemplars for all (*TS*: 198). Life is expenditure. Such extraordinary individuals, these avatars of expenditure, care not if they are labelled losers, for charity cannot ever recognize anything of reciprocity. Paradoxically, we may call this an “unjust charity”, as it breaks the spell of any notion of reciprocally enforced justice. As Leonard Lawlor summarizes, “(1) Unjust charity consists in the constant passivity of letting all the others go. (2) Unjust charity consists in the constant activity of loosening our (abstract and concrete, concepts and walls) grip on others. (3) And unjust charity consists in the constant search for ways out.”<sup>22</sup> Charity is never for the sake of something. As Bergson writes beautifully, “it is not for the sake of the poor, but for his own sake, that the rich man should give up his riches: blessed are the poor “in spirit”! The beauty lies, not in being deprived, not even in depriving oneself, but in not feeling the deprivation” (*TS*: 46).

However instinctually coded it may be, the self-sacrificing behavior of the female *Strepsiptera* strikes us with wonder. The female of this parasite species has evolved into “just a mere bad of eggs”; embedded within a host insect, the female is destitute, equipped with neither eyes, nor antennae, nor a digestive system. After fertilization, the eggs of the female hatch, killing it, allowing the larvae to emerge from its body, while gradually consuming their mother from the inside

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<sup>22</sup> Lawlor, Leonard. “Asceticism and Sexuality: “Cheating Nature” in Bergson’s *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*.” in Lefebvre, Alexandre. and White, Melanie (eds.) *Bergson, Politics, and Religion*. Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2012, pp. 144-159., p. 157.

out. Such a life-cycle can seem unnecessarily revolting, yet it also composes a profligate display of uncompensated bodily altruism, no less inspiring than the example of religious martyrs who give their lives for others. Rather than being the lack of just compensation, altruism represents an actual transcendence of self-referentiality. In genuine altruism, we have an expenditure, a *self-emptying disincarnation*. Similarly to the *Strepsiptera* larvae bursting out of their mother to consume their unsuspecting host, so too do those who aspire to complete altruism emerge from the shell of custom and social norms through a “burst of creativity” (*TS*: 49). Openness is the very antithesis of stoppage. “Between the closed soul and the open soul there is the soul in the process of opening”, yet the condition of openness is this ceaseless process itself. The possible disadvantages stemming from helping another simply do not form part of altruism at all.

Bergson does not err in claiming that morality is biological. Society, after all, is situated within a living context, an ecology of living processes animating culture. Remember, obligation is *virtual instinct!* It is the quasi-instinctual attachment which enchains us to our fellows and contemporaries, “a link of the same nature as that which unites the ants in the ant-hill or the cells of an organism” (*TS*: 67). To use another metaphor, obligation may be compared to a type of symbiosis. With some basis, Burton characterizes Bergson’s idea of “obligation” as a “proto-sociality”, comparing it to Lynn Margulis’ “serial endosymbiosis theory”, the idea that new lifeforms are generated through the symbiotic relations of microbes.<sup>23</sup> According to this latter view, the apparently dissociative tendencies of life are driven by syntheses. Whatever we make of this arguably speculative connection, we must note that Bergson resolutely refuses to equate the vital principle with any all-encompassing synthesis. Rather, life is fundamentally dissociative in nature, albeit occasionally displaying unifying characteristics during the course of its evolution. Bergson believed that a society composed exclusively of mystics is an impossibility. Some self-referentiality inevitably creeps into the picture. Rather, “pure aspiration is an ideal limit, just like obligation unadorned” (*TS*: 67-8). An open morality can also be called, following Michael Bennett, a “decentered” form of non-discriminatory ethics, in

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<sup>23</sup> Burton, *Philosophy of Science Fiction*, p. 44.

which no being occupies a position of exclusive moral relevance.<sup>24</sup> A society lacking any central position, entirely freed of self-referentiality, is a contradiction in terms. Such a society would lack structure. In practice, *appeal without structure is impossible*.

But Bergson does not leave the matter there. The open is what makes the unfathomable appeal a reality. “It is none the less true”, he continues, “that it is the mystic souls who draw and will continue to draw civilized societies in their wake” (*TS*: 68). Those who open their hearts spread inspiration throughout society, melting resistance, awakening outpourings of generosity that were not formerly thought possible. Each seeker can potentially “revive” in themselves the images of those souls who have managed to ascend to a more-than-human state. Open morality “incarnates itself in a privileged personality”, one who preaches “sacrifice of self, spirit of renunciation, charity.”<sup>25</sup> An apt description of the soul in the process of opening is to be found in the *Lotus Sutra*, specifically Chapter 23, which describes a sacrifice organized by the Medicine King Boddhisatva. Initially, he burns flowers for the Buddha. Such an act may be equated with an exchange, viewable as an example of reciprocal altruism. An effort is achieved so as to result in the return of a certain amount of good in the form of a blessing. After the deed is done and the ceremony is finished, the Medicine King Boddhisatva still feels a lingering sense of dissatisfaction. He feels that he has not done enough, despairing that his offering simply does not and cannot ever be proportionate with his wish, namely, the desire to free all beings of suffering. This causes spiritual anguish in the Boddhisatva. Flowers, in their frivolity, are akin to nothingness. Almost nothing had been achieved. Hence, something more was required, an excessive act, a gift that could never be repaid. “Although by means of spiritual powers I have made this offering to the Buddha, it is not as good as offering my body”, the Medicine King reasons, proceeding to immolate himself: “by means of spiritual penetration, power and vows, he burned his own body.

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<sup>24</sup> Bennett, Michael James. “Bergson’s Environmental Aesthetic.” *Environmental Philosophy* 9.2., 2012, pp. 67-94., p. 83. Bergson in many ways presaged the ecological and posthumanist concern with the inherent value of non-human beings. The question for such theories is whether the attribution of inherent value to non-human entities constitutes an anthropomorphization or not. Does extending our love to a non-human Other risk reducing it to a mere object of human emotions? To contend in this manner would be to say that our emotions do not express anything objective in the extrahuman world.

<sup>25</sup> Ansell-Pearson, *Bergson*, p. 121.

The light shone everywhere throughout worlds”.<sup>26</sup>

The vision of the Bodhisattva Medicine King, sacrificing his body for the liberation of all sentient beings, is a sublime image that burns itself into the seeker. We can be sure that the benevolence of such an open soul shines as an example to all creatures. Witness the moment of hesitation, the opening of the soul which has not yet achieved complete attainment. If anything, open spirituality is “religion in the making”, to borrow Alfred North Whitehead’s expression.<sup>27</sup> Once the soul bursts open, liberation has already been achieved, even if this openness appears not to have reached its culmination. The master exerts a “virtual attraction” upon us, influencing our behavior, softening interiority through rays of divine love (*TS*: 68). Leading through example, the master shows us that the heart can indeed be rendered liquid, its edges rendered supple, its hardness overcome. The discontinuity introduced by open spirituality allows for an exponential widening of imitation.

Gabriel Tarde, sociologist and contemporary of Bergson, described the mechanism of imitation in society. For both thinkers, imitation is embellished with a profoundly deracinating function. Be it the imitation of foreign fashions or the spread of a new morality, imitation is supposed by Tarde and Bergson alike to separate us from familial ties. In what Tarde calls “innovative ages”, mimesis becomes liberated from territorial and tribal constraints: “imitation frees itself from heredity, and ties between kindred, between forebears and descendants, are obliterated by the connections between the unrelated individuals who are detached from their families and brought together by the age.”<sup>28</sup> Aspiration in *Two Sources* tends similarly toward breaking free of customary constraints. Institutions, rules, and legislation are but instants within a greater process of change. Quite rightly, Marrati emphasizes that there is no place for anything resembling a linear “progress” in *Two Sources* or, for that matter, Bergsonism in general. “The notion of progress”, she writes, “is nothing but one of the forms of the retrospective illusion of the possible.”<sup>29</sup> Bergson is not necessarily a

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<sup>26</sup> <http://online.sfsu.edu/rone/Buddhism/BTTStexts/Lotus23.htm>

<sup>27</sup> Whitehead, Alfred North. *Religion in the Making. Lowell Lectures 1926*. London, Macmillan, 1927.

<sup>28</sup> Tarde, Gabriel. *The Laws of Imitation*. trans. Parsons, E. C. New York, Henry Holt & Company, 1903 [1890], p. 357.

<sup>29</sup> Marrati, “Mysticism Foundations of Open Society”, p. 595.

progressive. Rather, in *Two Sources* progress means the “joy of moving forward,” without any linearity or finality.<sup>30</sup> The soul in the process of opening experiences joy, because it is changing.

### HABIT AND CREATIVITY

Unlike Herbert Spencer, Bergson did not believe that there exists any teleology guiding the evolution of life or society.<sup>31</sup> Being must be understood as becoming, as permanent impermanence, without any substrate.<sup>32</sup> Disturbingly for some, Bergson’s social philosophy also rests upon a negation, or rather, a widening of rationalism. Neither aspiration nor imitation follow narrowly rational principles. Indeed, Tarde makes it clear that imitation is more powerful than human reason, as the latter is but a by-product of the former.<sup>33</sup> Similarly to Tarde, Bergson too notes in passing that morality does not have “its origin or even its foundation in pure reason” (*TS*: 69). The origin of morality is instinct, specifically its virtualised counterpart, social obligation. Morality is basically what lends regularity and coherence to social systems. Obligation is a sub-rational “system of orders dictated by impersonal social requirements”, whilst open morality, rooted in the appeal of a privileged ethical personality or exemplar, is “supra-rational” (*TS*: 68). Imitation is separated from filial bonds: “the social form of Repetition, imitation, tends to free itself more and more from its vital form, from heredity”, writes Tarde.<sup>34</sup> Bergson holds that mysticism would represent the supreme

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<sup>30</sup> Schott, Nils F. “Bergson’s Philosophy of Religion.” in: Lefebvre, Alexandre, and Schott, Nils F. (eds.) *Interpreting Bergson. Critical Essays*. Cambridge and New York, Cambridge University Press, 2020, pp 193-211., p. 195.

<sup>31</sup> Verdeau, Patricia. “Bergson et Spencer.” *Annales bergsoniennes* 3, 2007, pp. 361-377.

<sup>32</sup> As the German Idealist philosopher Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling noted, “Our philosophy (...) knows nothing of the product, it does not even exist for it. First and foremost, it knows only of the purely productive in Nature” (Schelling, Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph (2004 [1799]) *First Outline of a System of the Philosophy of Nature*. trans. Keith R. Peterson. Albany, State University of New York Press, 2004 [1799], p. 76). Such a summary accords remarkably well with Bergson’s views on evolution. As Bergson writes, “it is change itself that is real.” (Bergson, Henri. “Introduction (Part I). Growth of truth. – Retrograde movement of the true.”, 1913, in: Bergson, Henri. *The Creative Mind*. trans. Andison, M. L. New York, The Philosophical Library, 1946 [1934], pp. 9-33. p. 16). For comparisons of Bergson and Schelling’s philosophies of nature, see: Hamrick, William S. and Van der Veken, Jan. *Nature and Logos: A Whiteheadian Key to Merleau-Ponty’s Fundamental Thought*. Albany, State University of New York Press, 2011, pp. 123-153; Hausheer, Herman. “Thought Affinities of Schelling and Bergson.” *The Personalist* 14.2, 1933, pp. 93-106).

<sup>33</sup> Tarde, *Laws of Imitation*, pp. 373-4.

<sup>34</sup> Tarde, *Laws of Imitation*, p. 388.

example of such a non-reproductive, non-filial imitation.

Bergson expresses skepticism in connection with the supposed heritability of “habits of mind” – the advent of a new spirituality, as well as its proliferation through imitation, represents a break in repetition capable of overcoming even biological limitations (*TS*: 84). Moral innovators are best understood not through normative, loaded terms as “excellence” or “merit”, although they do display such characteristics. Rather, for Bergson they represent another stage of evolution, an unforeseeable, emergent development. Not unlike “a new species”, saints and heroes are unassimilable to the mass of humanity which follows in their wake (*TS*: 78). Moral innovators or heroes exercise an irresistible appeal upon others, driving society forward, bursting open static morality and dynamizing it, temporarily disturbing societal equilibrium.<sup>35</sup> To avoid misunderstandings and false interpretations, we must bring a sensitivity to contemporary concerns to our own investigation, without doing unnecessary violence to the original message of Bergsonism. Every new species is a fold, a curved loop of becoming, the exemplary personage included.

Habit is more than automatic activity.. Bergson’s own concept of habit shows affinities with that of his philosophical predecessor and mentor, Spiritualist philosopher Félix Ravaisson. Bergson readily acknowledged his indebtedness to the “spiritual realism” of spiritualist philosophers such as Maine de Biran, Jules Lachelier and Ravaisson.<sup>36</sup> In the 1838 work, *De l’habitude (Of Habit)*, Ravaisson defines habit as “a disposition relative to change, which is engendered in a being by the continuity or the repetition of this very same change.”<sup>37</sup> Perception denotes “movement, activity and freedom in the world.”<sup>38</sup> For habit to function, it cannot remain static for long. The change that resulted in the formation of the habit must

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<sup>35</sup> Mourélos, Georges (1964) *Bergson et les Niveaux de Réalité*. Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1964, p. 175.

<sup>36</sup> Grogin, Paul. *The Bergsonian Controversy in France 1900-1914*. Calgary, University of Calgary Press, 1988, p. 12.

<sup>37</sup> Ravaisson, Félix. *Of Habit*. trans. Carlisle, Clare and Sinclair, Mark London and New York, Continuum, 2008 [1838], p. 25.

<sup>38</sup> Ravaisson, *Of Habit*, p. 47. In his essay on Ravaisson, Bergson describes habit as the materialization or corporealization of spiritual energy: “Habit (...) gives us the living demonstration of this truth, [namely] that mechanism is not sufficient to itself : it is, so to speak, only the fossilized residue of a spiritual activity” Bergson, Henri. “The Life and Work of Félix Ravaisson”, 1904, in: Bergson, Henri. *The Creative Mind*. trans. Andison, M. L. New York, The Philosophical Library, 1946 [1934], pp. 261-300., p. 275.



be extended, maintained, and repeated throughout the body, otherwise, habit dries up and evaporates. Each habit is a condensation of movements. While Ravaissou does not apply these insights to the social realm as such, habit bears directly upon the relation between static and open religion. The former corresponds to the tacit dimension of habit and unreflective knowledge, whereas the latter is fresh, innovative movement, a reconnection with change.

By viewing habit as an interiorization of creative spontaneity by organisms, we can temper a certain tendency to equate the habitual with the automatic which at times threatens to obscure Bergson's points. Idella J. Gallagher, for example, uncritically associates Bergson's concept of "habit" with automatism and social obligation.<sup>39</sup> While obligation is capable of insinuating itself into habit, it certainly does not exhaust the latter. Drawing on Ravaissou's ideas alongside Bergson, Mark Sinclair argues convincingly that habit, far from being simply antagonistic to spontaneity, can also be perceived as a necessary basis for the freedom of living things.<sup>40</sup> To an extent, the static is dependent upon the open, while the open too must draw on a pre-existing ecology of tradition. Without the constant reinjection of new sources of indeterminacy, habit, as a spontaneous repetitive vitality, goes extinct. Life necessitates constant renewal and contact with its source. Habit cannot be entirely equated with sheer mechanism: it does not exist in isolation, for life is dependent upon repetition – the repetition of novelty! "Habit", writes Ravaissou, "is not an external necessity of constraint, but a necessity of attraction and desire. It is, indeed a law, a law of the limbs, which follows on from the freedom of spirit. But this law is a law of grace."<sup>41</sup> As Elizabeth Grosz highlights, "habit is how we modify instinct to produce the possibility of sometimes quite rare acts of freedom."<sup>42</sup>

Intelligence is meant to modify our trajectory, allowing us to escape the danger of entrapment within a schematic present. But intellect has its own dangers. The greatest risk is the ebbing of the will to live and destruction of traditional social bonds through excessive inquiry. Without habit, there would be

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<sup>39</sup> Gallagher, Idella J. *Morality in Evolution. The Moral Philosophy of Henri Bergson*. Cham, Springer, 1970, p. 57.

<sup>40</sup> Sinclair, Mark. "Is Habit 'The Fossilised Residue of a Spiritual Activity'? Ravaissou, Bergson, Merleau-Ponty." *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 42.1., 2011, pp. 33-52.

<sup>41</sup> Ravaissou, *Of Habit*, p. 57.

<sup>42</sup> Grosz, Elizabeth. "Habit today: Ravaissou, Bergson, Deleuze and us." *Body & Society* 19.2-3., 2013, pp. 217-239., p. 225.

no way for individuals to access the manifold structures of collective intelligence which have been accumulated throughout the history of a culture, or human culture in general, making cultural memory impossible to maintain. The experiences of generations preceding us are “deposited in the social environment, and given back to each of us by these surroundings” (*TS*: 84). Bergson shies away from explicitly positing a “social” or “collective intelligence” in the manner of Durkheimian sociologists (*TS*: 85). Bergson breaks with the Durkheimian tradition by claiming that the difference between socially institutionalized habit and natural instinct is one of degree only, and not a difference in kind.<sup>43</sup> Differently put, Bergson advocates for the continuity of social and biological processes. If moral obligation serves as the mechanism of control, it is nevertheless the individual through whom the vital current must flow, if life is to attain liberation.

The appeal of the mystic is addressed to every person, in their very oneness, yet this unity is indeterminate. “The mystic opening”, notes Marrati, “passes through humanity, so to speak, without tying itself down.”<sup>44</sup> We must not forget the indeterminacy of Bergson’s “mysticism,” especially when addressing allegations of cultural supremacism on Bergson’s part. From a 21st century perspective, such declarations as the following are dated, even prejudiced: “humanity had to wait till Christianity for the idea of universal brotherhood, with its implication of equality of rights and the sanctity of the person, to become operative” (*TS*: 62). Bergson equates open morality with a non-denominational Christianity, albeit one bearing little resemblance to the historical form of that religion. But is Simon Glezos correct in asserting that Bergson’s “religious universalism (backed as it is by a racist and Eurocentric world view) ultimately contradicts his vision of an open society?”<sup>45</sup> Certainly, *Two Sources* abounds in degrading second-hand anthropological descriptions of “primitive” natives, but it must also be recognized that mysticism and Bergsonian dynamic religion can be divorced from their specific cultural contexts.

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<sup>43</sup> White, Melanie. “Habit as a Force of Life in Durkheim and Bergson.” *Body & Society* 19.2-3., 2013, pp. 240-262., p. 252.

<sup>44</sup> Marrati, “Mysticism Foundations of Open Society”, p. 600.

<sup>45</sup> Glezos, Simon. “Bergson contra Bergson: Race and morality in The Two Sources.” *European Journal of Political Theory*, 2019, pp. 1-21., p. 11.

The problematic equation of open morality with Christianity, at the expense of other traditions, must be separated from the possibility of rediscovering a non-teleological conception of universal openness that is capable of drawing from a variety of cultures and traditions. Indeed, Glezos recognizes the rich possibilities inherent within such a dissociation between open religion and Bergson's unfortunately excessive reliance on one specific religious tradition.<sup>46</sup> But one must also realize that authors are always already situated within a cultural context. The aspiration towards universality is just that: a tendency, a movement that is never resolved. Marrati recognizes something that has escaped Glezos' notice, namely the *absolutely empty* nature of Bergson's universalist "mysticism": "the universal has no figure, the universal is empty. (...) The universal is a movement, a movement without preestablished direction and without continuity."<sup>47</sup> The issue of whether Bergson succumbed to his own cultural prejudices differs from the broader question relating to the status of openness. Each particular instantiation of open religion bears traces of the static religion it emerged from. Bergson was influenced by his autobiographical background as an assimilated Jew in secular France. In the words of Emmanuel Mounier, Bergson was "the last of the Jewish prophets," a "Jew completely penetrated with Christian tenderness."<sup>48</sup> The ambiguity of Bergson's assimilated, secularized Jewish identity may explain his inclinations towards Christianity.

As Richard Vernon explains in an essay on the political-philosophical concept of "openness", dispersal and plurality are fundamentally different. If by difference we mean a mere dispersion, a chaotic scattering of different cultures, without any common denominator whatsoever, then Bergson's concept, as outlined in *Two Sources*, cannot be called an affirmation of difference. But "in the model of plurality", what we have is a diversity of "perspectives" that "are, on the contrary, to be confronted directly with one another and *with a common reality*."<sup>49</sup> In the context of *Two Sources*, this shared reality, confronting all cultures alike, is that of openness. Despite Bergson's unfortunate equation of openness with

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<sup>46</sup> Glezos, "Bergson Contra Bergson", pp. 13-4.

<sup>47</sup> Marrati, "Mysticism Foundations of Open Society", p. 600.

<sup>48</sup> quoted in: Grogan, *The Bergsonian Controversy*, p. 149.

<sup>49</sup> Vernon, Richard. "The 'great society' and the 'open society': Liberalism in Hayek and Popper." *Canadian Journal of Political Science/Revue canadienne de science politique* 9.2., 1976, pp. 261-276., p. 267. - emphasis mine

“Christianity”, we can nevertheless reinscribe it in terms of plural encounters with mystic opening. The recognition of plurality within singularity allows for the avoidance of catastrophic cultural imperialism, without committing us to an overwhelming, even totalitarian hybridization or, worse, syncretism, of all extant cultures. The static and open themselves are already, in their actuality, hybrid forms. Nonetheless, as an absolutely empty singularity, complete openness can serve as the fundamental point of orientation for a plurality of cultures. Messaye Kebede is entirely correct in suggesting the jettisoning Eurocentric teleology: instead of being unilinear evolution having burst into various directions, the very terms of superiority and inferiority, of advanced and primitive societies, make no sense. All societies are imperfect because they all follow specific courses that particularize them; none is a model. Still less can a given society be backward, since what it achieves is one aspect of humanity, not its inferior stage.”<sup>50</sup> The spirit of a renovated, refreshed, updated Bergsonism must abandon the residues of Eurocentrism.<sup>51</sup>

#### FABULATION AND THE UNFATHOMABLE: MYTHOPOEISIS AS THE CONSTRUCTION OF NEW REALITIES

We are in dire need of a new religion, “a view of past–present–future life as a continuous, virtual and actual process which (...) means pure duration in Bergson.”<sup>52</sup> Social forms constitute a subset of a broader evolutionary movement, the general dynamism of reality. Change is creative and emergent: “evolution appears as a series of sudden leaps”, and this makes forecasting its direction an impossible task (*TS*: 95). We may only reconstruct the general direction of

<sup>50</sup> Kebede, Messaye. “Negritude and Bergsonism.” *Journal of African Philosophy* 1/5., 2003, pp. 1-18., p. 4.

<sup>51</sup> The problematic distinction Bergson drew, following cultural anthropologist Lucien Lévy-Brühl, between “primitive” and “civilised,” should not be taken as being fundamental to the content of *Two Sources*. The two authors corresponded extensively, and Bergson was influenced by the anthropologist’s views. (Bergson, Henri and Lévy-Brühl, Lucien. “La Correspondence Bergson/Lévy-Brühl” ed. Soulez, Philippe. *Revue Philosophique de la France et de l’Étranger*. 179.4, 1989, pp. 481-492.) Alia al-Saji has done excellent work in contextualizing and deconstructing the colonialist implications of the “primitive vs civilized” binary within *Two Sources*. (Al-Saji, Alia. “Decolonizing Bergson: The Temporal Schema of the Open and the Closed”, in: Pitts, Andrea J. and Westmoreland, Mark W. (eds.) *Beyond Bergson. Examining Race and Colonialism Through the Writings of Henri Bergson*. Albany, State University of New York Press, 2019, pp. 13-37.)

<sup>52</sup> Anderson, Pamela Sue. “Reorienting Ourselves in (Bergsonian) Freedom, Friendship and Feminism.” *Angelaki* 25.1-2, 2020, pp. 23-35., p. 25.

evolution uncertainly, as a tendency toward “ever higher complexity” (*TS*: 93). Bergson was acutely aware of the inherent indeterminacy of becoming. The very “distinction between the closed and open society is a distinction between static and dynamic forms *that is itself dynamic*.”<sup>53</sup> Far from being simple or unproblematic, such categories are agonistic, always open to renegotiation. No existing society may serve as an adequate model for social evolution. But nothing militates against utilizing the inspirational potential of such a vision in the course of improving, building, and broadening our actual societies. It is here that “fabulation”, or “myth-making” comes to the fore. As we have observed, Bergson stresses the “dissolvent” capacity of intelligence. Religion comes to our aid through the positing of nonexistent entities.

Fabulation serves as a short-cut to salvation. This assertion is illustrated in Bergson’s example of a woman who almost falls down an elevator shaft. She imagines a lift-operator who pushes her back, hence saving her from a deadly fall. Much to her surprise, there was no lift-operator there! He proved to have been a hallucination, retrospectively imagined by her. Bergson sees the origins of the myth-making function in this type of spontaneous hallucination: “the instinctive or somnambulistic self, which underlies the reasoning personality, came into action. It had seen the danger, it had to act at once. Instantly it had thrown her body backwards, at the same time inducing in a flash the fictitious, hallucinatory perception the best fitted to evoke and explain the apparently unjustified movement” (*TS*: 99-100). Fabulation is at once an instant soteriological action, salvation in the moment, and also a mythical, retroactively constructed soteriological narrative. The myth-making function is how we make sense of our immanent salvation. As Burton notes, the entire project of *Two Sources* may be summarized in terms of “an immanent soteriology”, an effort Burton compares with the views of American science fiction writer Philip K. Dick.<sup>54</sup> Intelligence, confronted with a complex reality, must circumvent itself. This method is myth-making, the production of fictitious saviors.

We feel endowed with a body, but on some occasions, this relation of ownership breaks down. Experience then rushes down toward antecedent structures. Dispersion loosens consciousness, resulting in a feeling of lightness,

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<sup>53</sup> Burton, *Philosophy of Science Fiction*, p. 47.

<sup>54</sup> Burton, *Philosophy of Science Fiction*, p. 53.

weightlessness. At the fringe of unconsciousness, a separation between one's body and one's self is imagined. Such visions may be referred to as "the visual image of the body detached from the tactile image" (*TS*: 110). Bergsonian fabulation connects with an "experience of liminality."<sup>55</sup> Any variety of immaterial, ethereal entities may be summoned into existence by imaginative minds, for the experience of detachment is one common to all of us. These images of untouchable bodies co-assemble into a completed fabulation, a narrative pertaining to fantastic creatures and entities beyond the confines of embodiment. The idea of ghosts or shades is perfectly natural, originating from the illusion of the separability of self from the vital stream of life. We cannot simply discount mystical experiences, relegating them to the confines of "fiction", hygienically sterilizing reality in the process. What the Bergsonian account of fabulation reveals is that reality is constantly permeated by a fictional, but effective fictional realm.

Fiction is a *mythopoesis*, a construction that produces new realities. "Fabulations", Burton explains, "are no less effective for being conceivable as delusions, hallucinations, fictions."<sup>56</sup> On the 2nd of March 1974, Philip K. Dick had a life-changing experience. In the driveway of his home, upon seeing a fish-shaped necklace worn by a delivery person, Dick was instantly transported to the era of the Roman Empire. The woman he had just met "was a secret Christian and so was I. We lived in fear of detection by the Romans. We had to communicate with cryptic signs. *She had just told me all this, and it was true.*"<sup>57</sup> Later, a pink light also visited Dick, communicating the secrets of the universe. Throughout the remainder of his life and works, Dick strove to interpret these mystical experiences. The mental health issues of Dick have been widely commented on by biographers. Could the visions related to him by VALIS (*Vast Active Living Intelligence System*) have been little more than the manifestations of paranoid schizophrenia? Not much separates religious experience from madness. In the mystic, however, we find aside from ecstasy a "prophetic discernment of

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<sup>55</sup> Stenner, Paul. "Machines for the Making of Gods? Henri Bergson and the Psychology of Fabulation." *International Review of Theoretical Psychologies* 1.1, 2021, pp. 125-141., p. 127.

<sup>56</sup> Burton, *Philosophy of Science Fiction*, p. 170.

<sup>57</sup> Dick, Philip K. "How to Build a Universe That Doesn't Fall Apart Two Days Later", 1978, in Sutin, Lawrence (ed.) *The Shifting Realities of Philip K. Dick. Selected Literary and Philosophical Writings*. New York, Vintage, 1996, pp. 259-281., p. 271. – emphasis mine.

what is possible and what is not, (...) a spirit of simplicity which triumphs over complications, in a word, supreme good sense" (*TS*: 195).

The fire that lit up Dick's mind was the same flame that burst into the human species through the mystics and prophets. We find proof of this in Dick's immense productivity following his formative, life-changing experience. "2-3-74", as he called the "event", proved to be the commencement of a mystical work, *Exegesis*, a document spanning 8000 pages, yet to be published in its entirety. As Dick writes in one of the notes contained in the greatly abridged, publicly available version, "I never anticipated such a tremendous payoff (breakthrough), despite the fact that the corpus of my writing is a map, an analysis, and a guide. The 26 years of writing, without 3-74, is a map of nothing, and 3-74, without the body of writing, is conceptually inexplicable."<sup>58</sup> Without inner experience, there can be no fulfillment. An irreducibly intricate experience forms the basis of mystically inspired composition. The mystical is immediate, unreserved belief: *she had just told me all this, and it was true.*

At this point, we must dispel a misunderstanding that has plagued the reception of Bergsonian philosophy. I refer here to the misguided idea that myth-making pertains exclusively to static religion. This assertion is repeated in several commentaries. Frédéric Worms makes the following surprising claim in a chapter dedicated to the "open/static" distinction, as explicated in *Two Sources: myths and fictions*, supposedly products of static religion exclusively, "fill the role of reassuring us and renewing our attachment to life, but they don't take us outside the sphere of human nature, of the species (...) Dynamic religion, however, proceeds in an altogether different manner. It does not compensate the representations of intelligence with representations from the imagination; it goes beyond them by way of contact with the very source of life."<sup>59</sup> Worms also ventures the claim that open or dynamic religion "provides us not only with security but serenity, not only fiction but experience, not only a fable but a genuine alternative."<sup>60</sup> Myth is thereby connected on this account to obligation

<sup>58</sup> Dick, Philip K. *The Exegesis of Philip K. Dick*. New York, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011, p. 268.

<sup>59</sup> Worms, Frédéric (2012 [2008]) "The Closed and the Open in The Two Sources of Morality and Religion. A Distinction That Changes Everything." 2008, trans. Lefebvre, Alexandre and Ravon, Perri. in: Lefebvre, Alexandre and White, Melanie (eds.) *Bergson, Politics, and Religion*. Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2012, pp. 25-40., p. 34.

<sup>60</sup> Worms, "The Closed and the Open", p. 34.

and static morality, without a doubt a gross oversimplification of the function of mythology in Bergson's work.<sup>61</sup> Worms does not countenance the possibility of open mythmaking, a fabulation that destabilizes social forms.

There can be no mystical experience without an accompanying mythopoeisis. This does not exclude the possibility that myth-making can function innovatively. The power of direct experience need not be thought of as being reduced or mitigated by its expression within an accessible language. While Bergson claims "heroism may be the only way to love", he qualifies this in the next sentence: "heroism cannot be preached" (*TS*: 40). Experience, conceived of as immediacy, itself cannot be communicated, yet the circle of imitation is amenable to a type of qualitative extension through perversions, mutations, and distortions of the predominant language. The Bergsonian method consists not in an overthrow of everyday language, but in its distortion. Similarly, in the case of science fiction writing, such distortion "makes additions of a qualitatively different order, supplying other possible worlds, multiplying the world itself."<sup>62</sup> Any restriction of the myth-making function to static religion seems artificial and unnecessary. Bergson is adamant that fabulation should not be equated with imagination alone: "we have said of this myth-making function that it would be wrong to define it as a variant of imagination. This last word has a somewhat negative meaning. We call imaginative any concrete representation which is neither perception nor memory" (*TS*: 165). The myth-making function has an extensive role to play in the dynamic dimension of religious experience.

Manole Antonioli, commenting on the work of Gilles Deleuze - a philosopher greatly influenced by Bergson - claims that "philosophy is also close to science-fiction in that one can write only about that which one knows badly, 'at the edge of his knowledge', just as the science fiction writer always writes from the scientific knowledge of the present in the direction of a knowledge that we do not yet possess."<sup>63</sup> This insight applies to the language of mysticism as well. In mystical experience, the disciple unconditionally accepts an inexplicable communication. For Dick, 2-3-74, was a revelation. The authorial voice is affected, changed by a

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<sup>61</sup> Worms, "The Closed and the Open", p. 35.

<sup>62</sup> Burton, *Philosophy of Science Fiction*, p. 12.

<sup>63</sup> Antonioli, Manole. *Deleuze et l'histoire de la philosophie ou de la philosophie comme science-fiction*. Paris, Editions Kimé, 1999, p. 16.



true communication. As Burton reminds us, “fabulation must always in some sense constitute meta-fabulation; the dynamic process of fabulating always operates against static fictions that have been falsely perceived as concrete, immutable reality.”<sup>64</sup> Each mythology can be confronted with a new mythopoiesis.

#### DYNAMIC FABULATION AS SUBVERSION

In our day and age, there may be found a persistent belief in the efficacy of science, in the revelatory power of the scientific method. A substantial part of *Two Sources* is devoted to reminding readers of the dangers of an instrumentalizing, utilitarian worldview overly dependent upon scientism: “since our science is constantly extending the field of our prevision, we conceive it as ending in a perfect science in which the unforeseeable would cease to exist”, yet such a completion of knowledge is, for Bergson, impossible (*TS*: 119). Mystics are the agents who keep the myth-making faculty open and creative. As Burton notes, “dynamic fabulation describes (or imagines, conceives, depicts) that which has become mechanical (including the fabulator) as not so, and by this description renders it ‘open.’”<sup>65</sup> Within the myth-making function too, there lies a type of creativity. Fabulation is a manifestation of freedom: by creating deities “humanity has given free play to its instinct for myth-making” (*TS*: 164-5). Without doubt, Worms is entirely accurate in pointing out that “the distinction between the ‘closed’ and the ‘open’ itself commands the *whole* of Bergson’s *Two Sources*.”<sup>66</sup> Myth-making can, be generative of new social and spiritual realities. The proliferation of supernatural entities can break the predominant sense of reality, piercing holes in the narrative. Even within static religion, which includes all manner of magic and superstition, things are not as clearcut as they would seem.

Certainly, Bergson is intent upon advocating for an open, all-inclusive spirituality. But it would be mistaken to discount the reality of those representations and intentionalities manufactured by static religion. For the gambler, “chance is (...) an intention emptied of its content”, a personification of contingency (*TS*: 124). Contingency is a reality that cannot be dispelled by

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<sup>64</sup> Burton, *Philosophy of Science Fiction*, p. 58.

<sup>65</sup> Burton, *Philosophy of Science Fiction*, p. 150.

<sup>66</sup> Worms, “The Closed and the Open”, p. 26.

equating myth-making with the fabrication of fictions. No player genuinely believes that Lady Luck or Fortuna can be wooed or influenced in any untoward manner. Furthermore, it must not be forgotten that good fortune can also generate enmity. Chance would mean here an exemplification of our special interest in the situation. The accident is transformed into an evil event, contrived by some intention unknown to us, or summoned by a malicious sorcerer, or even the murderous intent of the stone itself (*TS*: 123-4). Bergson holds that religion, in its origin, is “an assurance against fear” (*TS*: 128). Projections need not be dismissed as unfounded or illusory. The environment is already full of intentionalities, defined as pathways for action. “The ordinance in our environment”, writes Lingis, “is not grasped through a systematic formulation of laws we devise; it directs us in the coherence and consistency with which the landscapes converge and pass into one another when our sensory-motor movements comply with the ordinance in their levels.”<sup>67</sup> In other words, our ecology is always already intentional, the latter being not an aspect of consciousness alone. Intentionality is directionality, the inherent, unavoidable direction-boundedness of all relational entities (the sole entities that *are* in any meaningful sense of the term, “beings”).

The positing of intentionality in one’s environment is an adaptation to a reality that already contains directions and virtual pathways prior to our emplacement within the world. Bergson holds the animistic attribution of intentionality to be an entirely natural adaptation to the eternally changing nature of reality as actualized both inside of us as the experience of change and “outside”, in the self-actualizing becoming of reality-as-process.<sup>68</sup> Bergson quotes William James’ account of the San Francisco earthquake of 1906, without denying the validity of the animist view of things. Far from experiencing the event as a natural disaster, James was struck by the lively familiarity of the earthquake. Because he had been informed by a “Californian friend” of the frequency of earthquakes in California, the rumbling came as no surprise to James. The earthquake was (...) not unlike

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<sup>67</sup> Lingis, *The Imperative*, p. 67.

<sup>68</sup> In this sense, contemporary “animists” such as Jane Bennett are consistently Bergsonian, for the attribution of agency to the inorganic dimension is not alien to this mode of philosophy. In essence, Bennett articulates her own “vital materialism” in terms of a continuation of Bergson and Hans Driesch’s “non-naïve”, scientifically informed vitalism (Bennett, Jane. *Vibrant Matter. A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2010, p. 63).

the visitation of a familiar friend, “and the perception of it as a living agent was irresistible.”<sup>69</sup> The earthquake, in the moment of its advent, expresses something like a living intention. This personality attributed to the seismic event need not be a completed, “integral personality” (*TS*: 131). Change is irreducible to anthropomorphic form, while nonetheless displaying a strange subjectivity. The earthquake was familiar to James not because of any resemblance to a human personality. Instead, the source of its relatability must be sought in nature as event. As Mullarkey emphasizes, “we perceive movement as something life-like.”<sup>70</sup> The earthquake experienced by James was not any earthquake: it was an exemplary personality, an exemplar of the Californian seismic shift. “I felt no trace whatever of fear; it was pure delight and welcome. ‘Go it’, I almost cried aloud, ‘and go it stronger!’” – exclaims James enthusiastically.<sup>71</sup>

James’ enthusiasm stems from the pure moment of joy, produced in turn by the singularity of the earthquake’s becoming. “There is a soul”, Bergson comments, “but that soul is simply the intention pervading the act” (*TS*: 131). Static religion originates in a spontaneous feeling of reassurance flowing from within the personality, provoked by the advent of exteriority. Confronted with the singularity of an event, consciousness reassures itself. Lawlor’s assertion that “by means of the fabulation function, static religion fills in” the deficiency of attachment to life “and reattaches us, or more precisely, individuals, to life in closed societies” is not entirely borne out by the spectacle of James perversely enjoying the San Francisco earthquake.<sup>72</sup> This would only be so if the myth-making function were reducible to static religion. Yet James’ enjoyment of the earthquake is subversively anti-social. In a later passage, not quoted by Bergson, James recounts the experience of traveling to disaster-stricken San Francisco. Far from joy or passive self-surrender, “physical fatigue and seriousness were the only inner states that one could read on countenances.”<sup>73</sup> James’ dynamic fabulation introduces a separation between storyteller and audience. None of us presently

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<sup>69</sup> James, William. “On Some Mental Effects of the Earthquake” 1906, in: James, William. (1988) *Writings 1902-1910*. Library of America, 1988, pp. 1215-1222., p. 1217.

<sup>70</sup> Mullarkey, John. “Life, Movement and the Fabulation of the Event.” *Theory, Culture & Society* 24.6, 2007, pp. 53-70., p. 54.

<sup>71</sup> James, “Mental Effects of the Earthquake”, pp. 1215-6.

<sup>72</sup> Lawlor, *Challenge of Bergsonism*, p. 133.

<sup>73</sup> James, “Mental Effects of the Earthquake”, p. 1219.

alive in the early 21st century can ever experience the San Francisco Earthquake of the 18th of April 1906. Curiously, while many details of property damage are recounted, no mention is made of the sizeable loss of life. Far from reattaching us to social life, fabulation can and does serve the opposite goal, separating our experience from any given society.

“Dynamic fabulation” refuses “any easy distinction between fiction and reality, between authentic and artificial.”<sup>74</sup> Bergson himself describe his inexplicable bemusement upon hearing of the commencement of World War One: “I opened the *Matin* newspaper and read in great headlines: “Germany Declares War on France”, I suddenly felt an invisible presence which all the past had prepared and foretold, as a shadow may precede the body that casts it. It was as though some creature of legend, having escaped from the book in which its story was told, had quietly taken possession of the room” (*TS*: 134). As he had lived during the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, international conflict on a large scale was nothing new to Bergson. The monster of war was familiar, its individuality not without precedent. In neither James nor Bergson’s case was there a loss of confidence or fear.. What we have so far objected to is the erroneous equation of myth-making with the static side of this opposition. Dynamic fabulation is entirely within the realm of possibility. James and Bergson themselves provide the most excellent proofs of this.

We could do worse than take for granted the idea that “the universe” is “peopled with intentions which are, it is true, fleeting and variable.” (*TS*: 137). The unpredictability and immense complexity of becoming renders us vulnerable: “in default of power, we must have confidence” (*TS*: 138). Myth-making animates the social world. Does novelist Norman MacLean err when comparing the story of a life to the flow of a river? “I started this story, although, of course, at the time I did not know that stories of life are often more like rivers than books. But I knew a story had begun, perhaps long ago near the sound of water. And I sensed that ahead I would meet something that would never erode so there would be a sharp turn, deep circles, a deposit, and quietness.”<sup>75</sup> What resemblance could there be between a human life and a body of water? Duration

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<sup>74</sup> Burton, *Philosophy of Science Fiction*, p. 154.

<sup>75</sup> MacLean, Norman. *A River Runs Through It*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2001 [1976], p. 62.

supplies the answer. Both have an unexpected shape, both abound in surprises, both are prone to turbulence. In a similar vein, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o relates the vision of a people united in liberty, "the vision of a people who could trust one another, who would sit side by side, singing the song of love which harmonized with music from the birds, and all their hearts would beat to the rhythm of the throbbing river."<sup>76</sup> Neither of these metaphors may be dismissed as erroneous or misguided, for they express a preexistent similitude between an aspect of the landscape and the emotional life of the participants. It is not our goal to mix all existents and becomings. The story of a life is akin to the flow of a river.

Magic would correspond, in Bergson's view, to the "idea that things are charged, or can be charged, with what we should call human fluid" (*TS*: 143). To produce novelty out of a coincidence of opposites, the desirous mind must be concentrated upon its objective. Indeed, magic, for Eliphas Levi Zahed (born Alphonse Louis Constant), is the coincidence between freedom and necessity: "will is the directing faculty of intelligent forces for the conciliation of the liberty of persons with the necessity of things."<sup>77</sup> Will, in the context of magic, is an aggregation of forces redirected toward the realization of the sage's desire. Internal goals achieve an evanescent, fleeting concomitance with the impersonal energies permeating the cosmos, but this does not vitiate their extra-subjective ontological status. There is a magical aspect to the evolution of society in general: "the inertia of humanity has never yielded, save under the impulsion of genius", notes Bergson (*TS*: 144). Hardness of heart, the rigidity of custom, and the deadlock of "politics-as-usual" are broken, melted down by the advent of extraordinary personalities, who, leading by example, accelerate cultural evolution.

Suzanne Guerlac makes a forceful case for the influence of Tarde upon Bergson.<sup>78</sup> Both Bergson and Tarde share a distinction between stasis and dynamism. As Tarde states, "under the different terms of matter and motion, of organs and functions, of institutions and progress, this great distinction between

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<sup>76</sup> Thiong'o, Ngũgĩ wa. *The River Between*. New York, Penguin Books, 2015 [1965], p. 92.

<sup>77</sup> Levi, Eliphas. *Transcendental Magic. Its Doctrine and Ritual*. London, Rider & Company, 1896 [1856], p. 29.

<sup>78</sup> Guerlac, Suzanne. "Bergson, the Void, and the Politics of Life" in: Lefebvre, Alexandre and White, Melanie (eds.) *Bergson, Politics, and Religion*. Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2012, pp. 40-61., pp. 45-6.

the static and the dynamic, in which is also included that between Space and Time, divides the whole universe in two.”<sup>79</sup> Tarde describes “progress” as “a kind of collective thinking, which lacks a brain of its own but which is made possible, thanks to imitation, by the solidarity of the brains of numerous scholars and inventors who interchange their successive discoveries.”<sup>80</sup> If the magical act of innovation proves successful, those seeking social change must bring their desires into evanescent coincidence with the spirit of humanity’s collective fantasies.<sup>81</sup> It is only after the myth-making function has been installed securely in a society that dynamic morality can proliferate.

#### TOWARDS AN OPEN SOCIETY

Civilization on Earth is in dire need of a new dynamic fabulation, a reset reorienting civilization in another direction. Worms highlights the “urgency” of Bergson’s historical situation, drawing parallels with our globalized age which is yet to resolve the major issues that plagued the 20th century (Worms 2012 [2008]: 27). But this urgency cannot be faced without recourse to dynamic fabulation. Open religion makes possible “the creation of new qualities”, even a new species (*TS*: 151). In openness, we experience progress not as the fulfillment of some abstract plan or end-goal of history. Through a short-lived opening up to unknown others, “we experience progress that is experienced in the enthusiasm of a forward movement.”<sup>82</sup> Alexandre Lefebvre, in a book-length study of *Two Sources*, identifies four specific types of closure: political, legal, moral and affective.<sup>83</sup> Static religion never ceases to revolve in a circle. Hence, for Bergson, the inadequacy of all concepts of morality which think in spatial terms. The idea that morality is composed of concentric circles, expandable at will, stems from the structure of intelligence itself. Intellect is naturally spatial, because its function is to aid our adaptation to an otherwise hostile environment.<sup>84</sup>

<sup>79</sup> Tarde, *Laws of Imitation*, p. 147.

<sup>80</sup> Tarde, *Laws of Imitation*, pp. 148-9.

<sup>81</sup> Hjorth, Daniel. "Absolutely fabulous! Fabulation and organisation-creation in processes of becoming-entrepreneur." *Society and Business Review* 8.3, 2013, pp. 205-224.

<sup>82</sup> Ansell-Pearson, *Bergson*, p. 121.

<sup>83</sup> Lefebvre, Alexandre. *Human Rights as a Way of Life. On Bergson's Political Philosophy*. Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2013, pp. 25-6.

<sup>84</sup> see: Bergson, Henri. *Time and Free Will. An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*. trans. Pogson, F. L. London, George Allen & Unwin, 1950 [1889].

Lefebvre writes that “intelligence views all forms of change in terms of (quantitative) difference of degree rather than (qualitative) differences in kind. This includes moral change, of course.”<sup>85</sup> In and of itself, the mere size of a society, or even its degree of cultural or industrial advancement, are unable to immunize society against the tendency toward closure. However open a society’s culture or morality may be, closure may persist, in a functional sense: “society still has need of that primitive instinct which it coats with so thick a varnish. In a word, the social instinct which we have detected at the basis of social obligation always has in view instinct being relatively unchangeable a closed society, however large” (*TS*: 21).<sup>86</sup> The present ecological crisis points increasingly toward the unsustainability of closure. Matters are greatly complicated by the permeability of the open/closed boundary. Openness would, in a sense, designate at once a functional and a normative dimension. As Guerlac has rightly recognized, the “open” is descriptive and prescriptive simultaneously. In our age of planetary imperilment, Guerlac asks “does a leap to the open become an option only when the closed society has reached a condition of autoimmunity on a grand scale, such that the imperative—or the call—of humanity has also become the imperative—or is it the call?—of sustainability: the imperative of life itself?”<sup>87</sup>

One could surmise that the problems facing human civilization on Earth are, because of their complexity and breadth, unresolvable within a closed context. It could very well be the case that there exist no solutions to the crisis of self-

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<sup>85</sup> Lefebvre, *Human Rights as a Way of Life*, pp. 49-50.

<sup>86</sup> We are reminded here of Niklas Luhmann’s functionalist sociology, which emphasizes the closed, self-referential and self-creative (autopoietic) nature of modern social systems. Similarly to Bergson, Luhmann too holds closure to be the fundamental fact of social life, a tendency which has only been strengthened by the functional differentiation of social systems in modernity. While societies have become territorially speaking larger, even global in their spatial dimensions, they are nonetheless dependent upon separation from their environments. Luhmann draws on the idea of autopoiesis to describe the functioning of social systems. Any system may be described as autopoietic whose “self-referential operations can be produced only within the system and with the help of a network of the same operations” (Luhmann, Niklas. *Ecological Communication*. trans. John Bednarz, Jr. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989 [1986], p. 7). At issue today is whether the externalized costs of closure do not outweigh the benefits of decreasing, degrowing the complexity of society. See: Valentinov, 2014. To the extent that self-referentiality and the intendant outsourcing of environmental damage in the form of “externalities” is questioned by the ever more pressing urgency of ecological crisis, self-enclosed “system rationality increasingly loses its claim to be world rationality” (Luhmann, *Ecological Communication*, p. 138).

<sup>87</sup> Guerlac, “Bergson, the Void, and the Politics of Life”, p. 56.

referential closed societies *on this planet*. But if we were to literalize Guerlac's "leap to the open", could it not be argued that the horizon of outer space represents the next logical stage of human expansion, one that would extend closed morality to new solar systems? In Emil Carl Wilm's view, the success of a philosophy may be found in its proximity to the spirit of its age.<sup>88</sup> If we are to achieve a refreshing, an update of Bergsonism, we are bound to relate the concerns of Bergson's social philosophy to the issues facing contemporary global society. How is closure to be broken? With the appearance of "privileged souls" evolution "reboots itself and becomes capable of creating new life energy and new forms of social life."<sup>89</sup> The action of the mystic is a *destructuring action*, a discontinuity, what Eric Voegelin and Karl Jaspers later called a "leap in being."<sup>90</sup> Much effort is required to free us of preexistent social notions and conformity to institutions. Mystics, as moral innovators, emancipating themselves from circularity, plunging "anew into the current of evolution, at the same time carrying it forward" (*TS*: 158). This movement is itself dynamic religion. As Lefebvre emphasizes, there can be no stoppage in a spirituality of dynamism: "it is not as if this movement can be accomplished once and for all", because the temptation of closure and the threat of falling back into ready-made habit are ever-present aspects of our social lives.<sup>91</sup> Conformity requires no special effort, whereas innovation necessitates the application of intellectual and emotional endeavors to our thoughts and actions. Future spirituality is never a given, while human personality is seldom acclimatized to openness. Dynamic morality must be the object of ceaseless reinvention, returning us to the source: "the circle, intended by nature, was broken by man the day he became able to get back into the creative impetus, and impel human nature forward instead of letting it revolve on one spot" (*TS*: 169). The intuitions of the great mystics and sages allow us glimpses of virtue. Their example is nonetheless conducive to the ripening of our intellect.

Open religion loosens itself from language. Silence is "the very essence of the soul"; the "silent 'middle', in which there can be "no image, nor has the soul there

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<sup>88</sup> Wilm, Emil Carl. *Henri Bergson. A Study in Radical Evolution*. New York, Sturgis & Walton Company, 1914, p. 6.

<sup>89</sup> Guerlac, "Bergson, the Void, and the Politics of Life", p. 55.

<sup>90</sup> Gontier, Thierry "Open and closed societies: Voegelin as reader of Bergson." *Politics, Religion & Ideology* 16.1, 2015, pp. 23-38., p. 30.

<sup>91</sup> Lefebvre, *Human Rights as a Way of Life*, p. 80.



either activity or understanding; therefore, she [the soul] is not aware there of any image, whether of herself or of any other creature.”<sup>92</sup> Echoing the words of Meister Eckhart and many other mystics, Bergson privileges worldless prayer over spoken phrases and formulas codified by institutionalized religion: “in the religion which we shall call dynamic, verbal expression is immaterial to prayer, an elevation of the soul that can dispense with speech” (*TS*: 171). Dynamic religion is access to a presence that does not exhaust itself in presentation or explication. The call to mysticism is experienced, according to Bergson, as appeal. This voice has an imperative, hence we *must follow the call*. Perfection hinges upon a traumatic opening of one’s personage. Prior to the advent, we must be affected, both an emotional and spiritual sense. In its beginnings, the mystical experienced is therefore often felt to constitute a “feeling or emotion that disturbs well-being.”<sup>93</sup> Instead of immediate satisfaction, the advent heralds a disturbance, unbalancing the personality’s homeostasis. Tellingly, Bergson emphasizes the need for inner strength on the part of the spiritual seeker. The soul must be “strong enough”, so as to be able to feel “joy in joy, love of that which is all love” without perishing (*TS*: 181).

True mystics are, quantitatively speaking, few and far between. Not many of us are ready to take the leap. It takes a more-than-human intensity of motivation to break the barriers, and give expression to the unexpressed dimension of excess Bergson calls the “vital impetus.” Were mysticism a mass movement, humanity would already have left its limited mode of being behind, “nature would not have stopped at the human species” (*TS*: 182). Each species, we must remember, is a stoppage, a deposit within the broader sedimentations of evolution. If anything, mysticism in this context is a collective elaboration, a reconnection with torrential life and pure movement. What makes this prospect a daunting one is the necessity for an all-encompassing “detachment”, a state that can easily lead to a loss of moorings: “now detachment from each particular thing would become attachment to life in general” (*TS*: 181). Actual concordance with the manifold nature of difference necessitates a transitory separation, a scission between

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<sup>92</sup> Meister Eckhart. *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart*. trans. Maurice O’C. Walshe. New York, The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2009, p. 30.

<sup>93</sup> Lawlor, *Challenge of Bergsonism*, p. 100.

ourselves and any particular object of attachment: “The opening has no object.”<sup>94</sup> This universal disincarnation opens up to the *qualitative enhancement of time*. Persistence carries us beyond, into a situation of novelty, a persisting-in-common without boundaries. Donna V. Jones finds Marrati’s emphasis on the absent, empty status of universal openness in the Bergsonian account puzzling: “she insists that the opening has no object, not even humanity in general, which she claims is too abstract an object for real ethical concern. But that leaves me with little understanding of what the value and meaning of openness are.”<sup>95</sup> Mystical practice lacks a termination. Instead of a model waiting for an application, “Bergsonian political theology” and dynamic religion alike present us with “an act of belief in the moving and in change.”<sup>96</sup>

God is love, and love is impermanence, the impermanence that permits modification of all entities so that they should not be compelled to suffer concretion, ossification, and fossilization for eternity. Yet “power,” African-American thinker James Baldwin reminds us, “is real, and many things, including, very often, love, cannot be achieved without it.”<sup>97</sup> Open religion relies upon static religion for its social efficacy. What open spirituality affirms is *the persistence of the unfinished*. Lacking faith in change, how could we even dream of hoping? When the seeker re-enters the vital flow, they are coupled with indeterminacy. The present becomes the imperfection of a sensible existence, a sense of different tendencies that nonetheless coalesces into detachment, within the suitably silenced and purified mind: “listen in silence, and do not raise your voice against Him. For He teaches the miracle of oneness, and before His lesson division disappears.”<sup>98</sup> Strength is required for the joy of oneness with the Protean nature of reality. The God of mysticism is, to quote Lawlor, “the God in me.”<sup>99</sup> If interiority is a possibility common to all sentient beings, or even all beings in general, then such a dynamic, transient God must be considered a mobile universality. Plural spirituality denotes diverse gravitation around a common

<sup>94</sup> Marrati, “Mysticism Foundations of Open Society”, p. 599.

<sup>95</sup> Jones, Donna V. “The Career of Living Things is Continuous. Reflections on Bergson, Iqbal, and Scalia.” *Qui Parle* 20.2., 2012, pp. 225-248., p. 246.

<sup>96</sup> Marrati, “Mysticism Foundations of Open Society”, p. 601.

<sup>97</sup> Baldwin, James. *The Fire Next Time*. London, Michael Joseph, 1963, p. 81.

<sup>98</sup> Schucman, Helen. *A Course in Miracles*. New York, Foundation for Inner Peace, 1975, p. 14:87.

<sup>99</sup> Lawlor, *Challenge of Bergsonism*, p. 101.

core, a mutual coming-into-contact at once multiple and singular.

When an international conflict of large proportions breaks out, each side stakes a claim to “God” or moral “goodness.”<sup>100</sup> In such cases, we are witness to a remarkable mythical transfiguration or, less charitably, regression: “when nations at war each declare that they have God on their side, the deity in question thus becoming the national god of paganism, whereas the God they imagine they are evoking is a God common to all mankind” (*TS*: 183). In an age of universal conscription God too cannot escape enlistment in the cause of each belligerent party. Societies at war claim a reprieve from the need to adhere to human rights and other abstract, universal categories. They take a break, so to speak, from the universal imperative to protect the rights of the person, for such rights are routinely denied to the enemy population. During conflict, “murder and pillage and perfidy, cheating and lying become not only lawful, they are actually praiseworthy. The warring nations can say, with Macbeth's witches: ‘Fair is foul, and foul is fair’” (*TS*: 20). War for Bergson is a normal part of social life. Closed societies are geared towards military conflict, social cohesion being most easily achievable by demonizing the Other. No solidarity is possible without some kind of ostracized scapegoat against whom the solidarity of the group must be maintained. Organization is necessarily an organization *against* the enemy. “War”, as an inherent and, unfortunately, unavoidable characteristic of closed societies, “shows that moral obligation is always already exclusive.”<sup>101</sup> Open morality indicates a breaking of the circle, a complete shattering of social obligation. Universal, unbounded respect for any Other whatsoever cannot be based on legislated justice, because the latter is the prime source of what Bergson calls the war-instinct. “Barring the scenario of an attack by aliens (a la *Independence Day*), moral obligation has no place or purchase” in a genuinely Bergsonian universalism and a truly open morality.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Not even Bergson was not immune to nationalistic jingoism though, as demonstrated by the attribution of a supposed vitalistic goodness to the Allied forces fighting in World War One, as opposed to the Germans, who represented mechanistic industrialism. A sad regression for an otherwise universalist thinker. (Bergson, Henri. *The Meaning of the War. Life and Matter in Conflict*. trans. H. Wildon Carr. London, T. Fischer Unwin, 1915. For an outline of Bergson's role in international diplomacy and politics during and after World War One, see: Somsen, 2020.

<sup>101</sup> Lefebvre, *Human Rights as a Way of Life*, p. 22.

<sup>102</sup> Lefebvre, *Human Rights as a Way of Life*, p. 48.

## MYSTICS AS SOCIAL INNOVATORS

Biographers have collected many facts relating to the lives of ethical geniuses such as the Buddha, Martin Luther King Jr. or Mother Theresa, to name three uncontroversial exemplars drawn from the pages of history. But it is only after the fact that a mystical narrative may be reconstructed, a movement charted which reticulates the lives and acts of the saints. The leap into the open, much like any other creative act, cannot be forecast in advance. More than anything else, mysticism is directed at “the establishment of a contact, consequently of a partial coincidence, with the creative effort of which life is the manifestation” (*TS*: 188). Underlying the conspicuous passivity of the mystic, pure creativity may be uncovered. True mystics, for Bergson, abound in creativity, “they radiate an extraordinary energy, superabundant activity.”<sup>103</sup> Far from abstaining from action, the spiritual guides of humanity achieve a serene passivity through an excess of activity. Bergson’s is an “activist mysticism.”<sup>104</sup> Mysticism would be the reticulation of creative activity running along the great lines unleashed by the will to transformation. Completed mysticism, after detaching us from our culture and our surroundings, brings us back to creation. Undifferentiated, thereby perfectly coincident with the imperfection of coming-into-being, completed mysticism is “action, creation, love” (*TS*: 192). *My heart is not yet satisfied* – this is the eternal lament of the mystical soul in the process of opening, animated by limitless love, aching for oneness through action.

Far from contemplative passivity, the mystic is motivated by a desire for superhuman feats, cracking open the human shell. A release beyond the borders of excess – this and nothing less is requisite if the ripeness is to be attained. “Completed mysticism is action”, but not any action shall do (*TS*: 193). Is charity not, ultimately, a disincarnation, a discernible expenditure of one’s self for the other? To leave existence, to achieve detachment, we must become ourselves creators. Instead of turning back, of regressing into self-referentiality, true mysticism for Bergson breaks down the barriers separating ourselves from the other. The advent of mystical experience meant that the soul can “open wide its gates to a universal love” (*ibid*). Emptiness is the ultimate guarantee of

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<sup>103</sup> Ansell-Pearson, *Bergson*, p. 141.

<sup>104</sup> Germino, Dante. "Henri Bergson: Activist Mysticism and the Open Society." *The Political Science Reviewer* 9, 1979.

boundlessness. If we are to love everything, our desire must encompass nothing in particular. Such is the meaning of loves' "neutrality." Mystical love brooks no partiality. Open love is neutrality, insofar as it composes "a kind of love that is without preference, exclusion, or even object."<sup>105</sup> Needless to say, Bergson has no illusions: spiritual effort is unavoidable. Anything short of a superhuman, supra-intellectual struggle, cannot take us beyond the unremitting cruelty, selfishness, and ruthlessness of nature in its closed state.

If anything, Bergson is a pessimist. Obligation is a construct, designed by evolution to keep social animals together. Anything less than an absolute relinquishment of obligation would be a capitulation to selfishness. A "shock to the soul" is required, if we are to truly awaken and release our clenched fists (*TS*: 196). When shaken by an experience of the limit, "the soul ceases to revolve round itself and escapes for a moment from the law which demands that the species and the individual should condition one another" (*ibid*). Each traumatic effect becomes the power-source of a new experience of consciousness. The sincerely shocked soul is not satisfied any longer with the social roles and expectations allotted to the individual. This traumatic awakening, when successful, results in what David Lapoujade calls "a health beyond the normal."<sup>106</sup> The individual whose soul has been opened by the shock of reality is transfigured into a *person*. The mystic performs a metamorphosis that is no longer in accordance with any guiding dogma or doctrine. Building on Bergson's insights in *Two Sources*, Lefebvre believes that the fundamental function of an open concept of human rights may be identified with conversion. The ultimate aim of human rights is to "transform the species."<sup>107</sup> Because of its dependence on the myth-making function, even the most open of souls cannot avoid a certain degree of fictionality. Similarly to Burton, Lefebvre too underscores the necessity of counter-mythology, fictions which, through creative repetition, destabilize dominant, static narratives, preventing human rights from becoming a stale, fossilized doctrine, a mere orthodoxy. The idea of "human dignity" is a myth, a product

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<sup>105</sup> Lefebvre, *Human Rights as a Way of Life*, p. 112.

<sup>106</sup> Lapoujade, David. *Powers of Time. Versions of Bergsonism*. trans. Andrew Goffey. Minneapolis and London, University of Minnesota Press/Univocal, 2018 [2010], p. 73.

<sup>107</sup> Lefebvre, *Human Rights as a Way of Life*, p. 133.

of fabulation.<sup>108</sup> Open morality, in the realm of empirical facts, only ever presents itself in a mixed state.

Bergson is under no illusions that open spirituality can be hygienically separated from the static, closed variety. Borrowing from static and conventional concepts is “simply what love must do to communicate itself.”<sup>109</sup> This circumstance need not deter us, nor does it impair the authenticity of the mystical experience of simplicity. Without any cultural frame whatsoever, the soul would go astray, losing its moorings or, at the other extreme, becoming trapped in abstractions. Freed of immediate attachment to convention, the mystical soul can ceaselessly renew its commitment to the vital flow, resulting in a liquified style of mind. Each stream illuminates the impetus, which is equal to the movement itself. All separation between lover and loved evaporates in the heat of union, a calefaction that melts hardness. How could the heart remain adamant, when “God is there, and joy is boundless”? (*TS*: 197). The penultimate achievement of individuality, the birth of an exemplary person, necessitates a supreme involvement in immediacy. Instead of stages, we have in the case of the mystic a moment of liberation exploding closure. Vladimir Jankélévich characterizes the Bergsonian idea of “intuition” as an “entirely gnostic and drastic *sophia*.”<sup>110</sup> The transition from closed to open cannot be thought of in terms of a temporal succession or spatial expansion. Conversion is a sudden event, a drastic disincarnation, the achievement of a moral person produced by the annihilation of socially conditioned somnambulistic false individuality. The point of the spiritual exercise is a transformation of the self’s reality into a supernatural mode of being.

After surviving the desolate night, the soul awakens to a morning spent with its lover. Two loves neutralize one another. Bergson’s doctrine of the two types of love, closed and open, bear a striking resemblance to the Christian idea of *sensual* and *spiritual* love. Saint John of the Cross describes a mutual neutralization of these two loves in the condition of solitude: “when the soul enters the dark night, (...) affections are ruled by reason; that night strengthens and purifies the affection

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<sup>108</sup> Lefebvre, *Human Rights as a Way of Life*, p. 132.

<sup>109</sup> Lefebvre, *Human Rights as a Way of Life*, p. 118.

<sup>110</sup> Jankélévich, Vladimir. (2015 [1959]) *Henri Bergson*. trans. Nils F. Schott. Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2015 [1959], p. 194.

which is according to God, and removes, destroys, or mortifies the other.”<sup>111</sup> Note that reason is sovereign solely upon entry into the night of solitude. After penetration, affections are mutually neutralized. In the aftermath of the night, every affection lies obliterated by the blissfulness of unity. Let us not forget that Bergson emphasizes the present! “*Now* it is God who is acting through the soul, in the soul; the union is total” (*TS*: 198). In the mystic moment, there emerges the singular morality of the mystic tradition, the assertion of a purity of Being whose ineffable truth guides the seeker beyond any conventionality.

In the context of the mystic life, the heat of love liquifies the heart. Love becomes indivisible. The loss of particularity must be understood as an indivisible transition. In the night, the soul is converted into a superabundant generosity. Manifest throughout Saint John’s description is a language of excess and wealth, while also emphasizing the value of simplicity. “The mind”, we read, “must be pure, simple, and detached from all kinds of natural affections, actual and habitual, in order that it may be able to participate freely in the largeness of spirit of the divine wisdom, wherein by reason of its pureness it tastes of the sweetness of all things in a certain pre-eminent way.”<sup>112</sup> Initiation into an extended love means the extraction of a superior multiplicity from the indivisible stream. What Bergson is after, in *Two Sources* and other places, is a “complex simplicity”, a mode of being at once one and several, “beyond all categories”, definable “only by an apophantic description.”<sup>113</sup> Better yet, we could call the communication adequate to Saint John’s “largeness of spirit” an apophantic de-scription, an unwriting in which the dissolving, opening self nonetheless feels itself *ripening into the divine*.

Instead of the unproductive passivity all too frequently (mis)attributed to mysticism, Bergson sees in it a “vast expenditure of energy”, a “superabundance of vitality” that, breaking open the shell of personality, yields access to “the very source of life” (*TS*: 198). The dark night entails a separation from society, indeed, even from God as such, with a simplicity that shakes us to our core. Bergson underlines the active nature of mysticism: “he has felt truth flowing into his soul from its fountain-head like an active force. He can no more help spreading it

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<sup>111</sup> Saint John of the Cross. *The Dark Night of the Soul*. trans. David Lewis. London, Thomas Baker, 1908 [1579], p. 20.

<sup>112</sup> Saint John of the Cross, *The Dark Night of the Soul*, p. 100.

<sup>113</sup> Jankélévich, *Henri Bergson*, p. 192.

abroad than the sun can help diffusing its light” (TS: 199). The moral innovator represents, for Bergson, an expansionary force, an explosiveness actualizing the innermost potential of humankind and even life in general. Each night spent in solitude correlates with an involutive crusade, a war whose expenditures are directed not outward, at foreign enemies, but inward. If the representatives of static, conventionalized morality, including the self-proclaimed apostles of human rights and liberal democracy, spread their particular concept of the good in an external manner, waging wars against all foes, *moral innovators wage war against themselves*. The inner war, the war-instinct inverted against our selves is, to quote the great Sufi poet Rumi, the “Greater Jihad”:

“Don’t overrate the lion which can kill!

The one who breaks himself is greater still.”<sup>114</sup>

Underneath social obligation, Bergson finds the “war-instinct.” The secret of cohesion is our collusion with fellow members of our own in-group against outsiders. The war-instinct is the underlying substrate of social life, animating all societies without exception (TS: 245). What is to be done? Puzzlingly, Lefebvre, while mentioning Bergson’s skepticism regarding pacifism, side-steps the role of inner struggle in mysticism. Instead of breaking ourselves wide open, Lefebvre’s recommendation boils down to an affirmation of “self-care” as constituting the fundamental basis of “open human rights.”<sup>115</sup> This is a rather tepid solution, one that cannot liquidate, once and for all, the war instinct. An effective counterbalance to war lies in the frenzy of inner struggle against one’s self. Care of self is still a form of self-referentiality, whereas breaking of the self is a docile yet active practice. Instead of side-stepping the war-instinct, the mystic inverts the will to aggression. All hardness abates in the soul illuminated by the flow of life. More than anything, the mystic way is an invitation “to complete the creation of the human species” (TS: 200).

Similarly to Saint John of the Cross, Bergson too builds upon a paradox.

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<sup>114</sup> Rumi, Jalāl al-Dīn Muḥammad. *The Masnavi. Book One*. trans. Jawid Mojaddedi. Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, 2004 [1273], p. 86.

<sup>115</sup> Lefebvre, *Human Rights as a Way of Life*, p. 141.



While the former gains light from darkness, the latter discovers active creation in passivity. Immediate access to the vital impulse liberates “the impetus of love” which, transmitted by the mystic tradition to humankind, has the potential to illuminate all sentient beings (*TS*: 202). If there are two sources of morality and religion, these are far from symmetrical. For Bergson, even apparently exterior social phenomena are, in actuality, solidified products of moral innovation. Religion and, more broadly, culture generally, is “the crystallization, brought about by a scientific process of cooling, of what mysticism had poured, while hot, into the soul of man” (*TS*: 203). Every aspect of contemporary society originates from the pluripotentiality of open religion. According to the Bergsonian view, the phrase “secular” has no meaning. Later on, Bergson even speculates on “a possible link between the mysticism of the West and its industrial civilization” (although this intriguing idea is, unfortunately, left unelaborated and, to the best of my knowledge, still has yet to be properly investigated by any historian) (*TS*: 251). From a social and historical perspective, the cardinal importance of the mystics lies in their innovatory potential.

All great mystics, while adjusting their conduct to the traditional cultural context they happen to operate in, are nonetheless profoundly original (*TS*: 211). What the mystic does is illuminate the life of every sentient being with a new halo. In a word, innovators produce new desires. Through specifying a preexistent social desire, the innovator allows a concentration and rechannelling of energies on an enormous scale. In *Two Sources*, the mystic is the ultimate innovator. One could say that the degree of innovation corresponds to the intensity of the innovator’s mysticism. The illuminated life, the contemplative experience, and the joy of creation, these are three forms or lines of lucidity which, at their common terminus, coincide with one another. However secular a culture may appear, its first principle invariably conforms to some mystery, an advent mandated by the heavens. In accordance with the pragmatist tradition of philosophy, Bergson affirms forcefully and unapologetically that “experience is the only source of knowledge” (*TS*: 212).

All do not hear the mystical appeal, however. Lefebvre designates as “nonmystics” those who are utterly impervious to the appeal of the other. War criminals such as Adolf Eichmann constitute exemplars of this almost completely

closed, utterly remorseless personality.<sup>116</sup> For an Eichmann, the other has no voice, the other's need is naught. But the malicious indifference of those who close in upon themselves, matters nothing in its turn for the mystic. Bergson indicates that the contrary experience of the closed, self-referential soul need not impinge upon the validity and truth of openness: "some people are doubtless utterly impervious to mystic experience, incapable of feeling or imagining anything of it. But we also meet with people to whom music is nothing but noise; and some of them will express their opinions of musicians with the same anger, the same tone of personal spite. No one would think of accepting this as an argument against music" (*TS*: 210-1). True renunciation is perseverance tending toward a universally applicable demonstration of divine love. That part of humankind which participates in open religion becomes a divine humanity.

Simplicity does not negate the preexistent units, renunciations, efforts, and perseverances. In the simple yet creative mode, nothing is lost. As in perception, so in the intuitive moment also, all is well and all is preserved as an actuality. The simple is, to quote Jankélévich, "the plural itself in its greatest density."<sup>117</sup> As Nicolas de Warren points out, in *Two Sources* "the 'true life' is not elsewhere," in a nother time or place, but here, in the moment.<sup>118</sup> In mysticism we "revert" to a "simple emotion" (*TS*: 218). Bergson's assertion of simplicity has important ramifications. Moral innovators illuminate the pathways upon which civilization advances. By "triumphing over materiality" by the mere fact of experiencing a love lacking any object, mystics prove that life cannot be reduced to deterministic matter (*TS*: 221). On the human level, the mystical love of everything is an affection that has been successfully extended to nothing in particular. Echoing conclusions he reached decades prior in *Matter and Memory*, Bergson notes that "if our body is matter for our consciousness, it is co-extensive with our consciousness, it comprises everything we perceive, it reaches as far as the stars" (*ibid.*)<sup>119</sup> Our

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<sup>116</sup> Lefebvre, *Human Rights as a Way of Life*, p. 127.

<sup>117</sup> Jankélévich, *Henri Bergson*, p. 192.

<sup>118</sup> De Warren, Nicolas. "Miracles of Creation: Bergson and Levinas." in: Kelly, Michael R. (ed.) *Bergson and Phenomenology*. Basingstoke and New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, pp. 174-201., p. 178.

<sup>119</sup> Matter, for Bergson, corresponds to consciousness itself. In truth, there is no dividing line between these two categories: "Extended matter, regarded as a whole, is like a consciousness where everything balances and compensates and neutralizes everything else; it possesses in very truth the indivisibility of our perception; so, inversely, we may without scruple attribute to perception something of the extensity of matter" Bergson,

destiny is inescapably heaven-bound. If it is to be made productive, mental disequilibrium must tend toward a pure comprehension of simplicity, growing the soul.

#### MYSTICISM AND THE FUTURE OF INDUSTRIAL SOCIETY

There is no dividing line between industrial and spiritual growth, both being products of the innovative faculty. In Chapter Four of *Two Sources*, we find a diagnosis of the impasse of Western culture in the 1930s. The human, for Bergson, is a tool-making animal, *homo faber*, whose evolutionary success has been reliant, in no small measure, upon the faculty for manufacturing. In the present, however, humanity has created an immense inorganic body, “distended out of all proportion”, while the soul “remains what it was, too small to fill it, too weak to guide it” (*TS*: 268). Bergson relates the social problems of his age to the overdevelopment of the industrial apparatus and the relative underdevelopment, even atrophy of spirituality which has accompanied the growth of industrial civilization. This imbalance must be addressed through an expansion of the soul, otherwise, humanity may very well exterminate itself through wars waged with unimaginably effective weapons. Bergson even seems to anticipate nuclear weapons: “that day is not far off when one of the two adversaries (...) will have the means of annihilating his opponent. The vanquished may vanish off the face of the earth” (*TS*: 246-7).

The threat of planetary-scale destruction has become a depressingly permanent topic. The solution cannot be immanent to the social realm, for the social as such has evolved to serve as a defense mechanism against external enemies. Closure and, by extension, war are inherent to society (*TS*: 239). Similarly, we cannot expect any help from politics, as “murder has all too often remained the *ratio ultima*, if not *prima*, of politics” (*TS*: 241). At the end of *Two Sources*, Bergson recommends a growth of the soul intended to fill the mechanical shell. The gap between the advance of the technological infrastructure and the relative paucity of spiritual maturity is to be filled by what Guerlac calls “a kind of time energy, a reserve of virtual energy.”<sup>120</sup> If we are to reach our destination

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Henri. *Matter and Memory*. trans. Paul, Nancy M. and Palmer, W. Scott New York, Zone Books, 2005 [1896], p. 219.

<sup>120</sup> Guerlac, “Bergson, the Void, and the Politics of Life”, p. 55.

in the heavens, we must recalibrate our spiritual coordinates. This demands another paradoxical operation, a repetition of mystical inner experience, but on a societal scale. Bergson recommends a colossal simplification of society, but of a kind that shall be conducive to an unprecedented expansion of human civilization beyond Earth.<sup>121</sup> Looking back upon the trajectory of *Two Sources*, we can see it is animated by a recognition that the open society cannot be achieved through mere quantitative expansion of existing structures of governance. Certainly much is to be done, and Bergson himself views “regimentation” as unavoidable especially if the population explosion is to be managed effectively (*TS*: 250). But expansion of the government and more regulation cannot, in and of themselves, halt the destructive feedback mechanisms that have been unleashed by industrialization.

Without a renewal of morality, machinic civilization is fated to remain uncontrollable. In the final instance, *Two Sources* is a hybrid work, as Bergson explains in an interview with spiritualist philosopher Jacques Chevalier: “if in these pages I bring something new, it’s this: I have attempted to introduce mysticism to philosophy, as a procedure for philosophical research.”<sup>122</sup> We cannot isolate the mystical element from the political dimension, for it is the spiritual realm that provides resolutions to social problems. The war-instinct cannot be overcome by political means, for the political as such is not independent of selfishness. Any form of self-referentiality is always already a form of closure: “self-centredness, cohesion, hierarchy, absolute authority of the chief, all this means discipline, the war-spirit” (*TS*: 245). If all manifestations of self-centredness correspond to the war-instinct, then pacifism cannot find sustenance in a mere spatial rearticulation of the political.<sup>123</sup> As Philippe Soulez notes, by this stage “there is no longer any teleology of the species for him that would drive humanity

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<sup>121</sup> The implicit transhumanism of Bergson in *Two Sources* has not been lost upon commentators. (see: Bialecki, Jon. *Machines for Making Gods: Mormonism, Transhumanism, and Worlds without End*. New York, Fordham University Press, 2022).

<sup>122</sup> quoted in: Lefebvre, *Human Rights as a Way of Life*, p. 102.

<sup>123</sup> However much he would have liked to believe in the efficacy of international governing bodies such as the League of Nations – Bergson himself having worked as first president of the International Committee on Intellectual Cooperation of the League of Nations between 1922 and 1925 - , by *Two Sources* he was clearly unable to persevere in any kind of belief in the eventual peaceful unification of humanity under a single world government (Grogin, *The Bergsonian Controversy*, p. 203).

to unite.”<sup>124</sup> Association seems an exception, and dissociation is very much the rule in human affairs. Not even a world government, after all, would be altogether immune to the temptation to self-interest and self-aggrandizement. Even if an international body were to be created with effective military might, sooner or later it would founder upon the innate selfishness of one or another society that constitutes it (*TS*: 248).

Bergson is no wishful thinker: he recognizes that global structures of governance are a mere “Band-Aid solution,” to a more fundamental problem.<sup>125</sup> Society and its various subsystems, cannot, in and of themselves, be trusted upon to love. The true opening can only be achieved through returning to the creative impetus. The immense problem facing society, in Bergson’s time and today, is overproduction. Industry requires a vacuously scientific and materialist culture geared toward consumerist lifestyles, as well as the constant threat of war (*TS*: 249). An overcomplicated system of technology coexists uneasily with the still tribalistic mentality of human beings. All of human history may be characterized by a “law of twofold frenzy”, which signifies “progress by oscillation” (*TS*: 258). We see a “frenzy” for asceticism, then a subsequent materialism and a striving for physical possessions and immanent, worldly happiness. This “law of twofold frenzy” described by Bergson in the closing chapter of *Two Sources* corresponds to a fatalistically cyclical view of history as an inescapable alternation between asceticism on the one hand and hedonism on the other.<sup>126</sup> Modern society has become overly complicated. A wholesale rejection of technology *tout court* though is out of the question. Not only is Ludditism implausible, it is also completely unacceptable, if we remain true to Bergson’s teaching. After postulating an imbalance between material wealth and spiritual atrophy, Bergson claims that

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<sup>124</sup> Soulez, Philippe. “Bergson as Philosopher of War and Theorist of the Political.” 1989. trans. McMahon, Melissa. in: Lefebvre, A. and White, Melanie (eds.) *Bergson, Politics, and Religion*. Durham and London, Duke University Press. pp. 99-126., p. 102.

<sup>125</sup> Lefebvre, *Human Rights as a Way of Life*, p. 92.

<sup>126</sup> The later work of the Russian American sociologist, Pitirim Sorokin, bears resemblance to Bergson’s theory of “twofold frenzy.” In a strikingly similar vein, Sorokin differentiates between “ideational” (ascetically oriented) and “sensate” (hedonistic) social forms, conceiving of history as a ceaseless, dialectical struggle between these two extremes. In rare instances, a condition of equilibrium is achieved, an “idealistic” society managing to combine the best of both worlds. Sorokin, Pitirim. *Social and Cultural Dynamics. A Study of Change in Major Systems of Art, Truth, Ethics, Law and Social Relationships*. Boston, Porter Sargent Publisher, 1957.

our only hope for our civilization is to bridge this gap:

What we need are new reserves of potential energy – moral energy this time. (...) We must add that the body, now larger, calls for a bigger soul, and that mechanism should mean mysticism. The origins of the process of mechanization are indeed more mystical than we might imagine. Machinery will find its true vocation again, it will render services in proportion to its power, only if mankind, which it has bowed still lower to the earth, can succeed, through it, in standing erect and looking heavenwards (*TS*: 268).

Social reality can be reanimated, driven out of its blind alley, only through a fresh breath of mysticism, this time a machinic mythology. Outer space beckons, in the form of a prospective liberation from our enchainment to the fate of a single planet. If humanity is to achieve a transformation, even a radical expansion or extension, its level of spiritual tension must be enflamed to new summits. Bergson implies that the new technological innovations and social advances of the coming centuries can only be achieved by privileged souls who have breathed in the perfume of a love knowing no boundaries. Disarticulated, deterritorialized, the task of future humanity lies in redirecting the immense release of energy achieved by technological innovation to specifically spiritual goals. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, with their concept of the Mechanosphere, continue this project. Does their machinic mythology not echo Bergson? “We thus leave behind the assemblages to enter the age of the Machine, the immense mechanosphere, *the plane of cosmicization of forces to be harnessed*.”<sup>127</sup> Industrialized modern humans “must use matter as a support if he wants to get away from matter. In other words, the mystical summons up the mechanical” (*TS*: 267). A religious character can enter unknowingly, seeping through the interstices of machinery, mysteriously animating the machinic in unfathomable directions, permitting an immense enhancement of terrestrial civilization. Bergson’s affirmation of complexity is far from unequivocal. One crucial additional step is

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<sup>127</sup> Deleuze, Gilles and Guattari, Félix (1987 [1980]) *A Thousand Plateaus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia Volume 2*. trans. Massumi, Brian. Minneapolis and London, University of Minnesota Press, 1987 [1980], p. 343. Bergson’s teaching bears remarkable similarities in turn with the Cosmist ideas of Nikolai Fedorov, a Russian philosopher-prophet whose entire worldview was predicated on the utopian and spiritual potential of a literal cosmic and demographic expansion of humans into all corners of the universe, and whose ideas influenced several important participants in the later Soviet space research programs as well as later generations of Russian artists and thinkers. (see: Young, George M. *The Russian Cosmists. The Esoteric Futurism of Nikolai Fedorov and His Followers*. Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, 2012).

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required, if humans are to realize their evolutionary potential and become something more than yet another overgrown animal species doomed to extinction or, worse, suicide: “humanity must set about simplifying its existence with as much frenzy as it devoted to complicating it” (*TS*: 266).

If the next stage of social complexity is to be reached, a simplification of human desires is nonetheless required. Some consumerist aspirations are superfluous, hence a mode of selection is required to sort out those tendencies which do not contribute meaningfully to the prospective future explosive proliferation of humankind across the universe. We are compelled, through temporary inversions and contractions, to pull back, building up our spiritual virtual moral energies, if we are to subsequently expend these energies at a later point in time through protracted expenditure, during the course of a hypothetical extraterrestrial expansion of civilization. Deleuze and Guattari echo this view decades later when they write that “sobriety: that is the common prerequisite for the deterritorialization of matters, the molecularization of material, and the cosmicization of forces.”<sup>128</sup> Simplicity is a mode, a transition, between two phases of exponential complication. Becoming simpler is our guarantee, our gift to future generations, so that they may have the opportunity to transfigure themselves into something vastly more complicated than our present, all too human state.

#### CONCLUSION: MYTHOLOGY AFTER EARTH

What would the paradoxical Bergsonian “complication through simplification” look like in practice? Discontent is the normal state of a democracy (*TS*: 253). Simplification must be mythologized, rendered acceptable as a voluntary sacrifice or expenditure. A complete transformation of humankind is required, the creation of a new species capable of bracketing its speciesist interests in favour of a communal forgetfulness of self. Without dynamic fabulation, lacking a mythology, technology will remain a hollow form without content, and democracy a mere procedure for depositing discontent upon the shoulders of an irresponsible political class unwilling and unable to address or solve any major social issues. A planetary-scale cosmopolitics is required, a fabulation allowing

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<sup>128</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 344.

citizens to look heavenward once more. Cosmicization would be a selfless love directed outwards, in all directions. Instead of jealousy, we require a “fan-wise” growth in both the intensity and extensity of our love (*TS*: 254). Bergson’s logic is the logic of explosion, a decisive break with the merely terrestrial in favour of the extraterrestrial, a rupturing of convention leading to a new collective rebirth. Not so much world-denial as world-multiplication, exponential terraformation.

Many luxuries and unnecessary desires shall be exposed for what they really are: superfluities. If and when humankind loses its enviousness in the dark mystical night, machinery could then become a source of strength and salvation, an instrument of upwardly turned spiritual emancipation. Bearing modest witness to the involution of humanity, the machinic will condense into a unified artificial will, striving to explode out of Earth’s temporary motherly embrace. Once imbued by the sweet perfume of a cosmic mysticism, the “balloon” of overconsumption “wildly inflated” by deranged industrialized humanity “will deflate just as suddenly” (*TS*: 262). Deflation is the prerequisite for the next great inflation. Belief in the efficacy of science does not suffice in Bergson’s view. Revealingly, Bergson parallels religion and science: “there is such a thing as high-level popularization” and, further, “religion is to mysticism what popularization is to science” (*TS*: 204). Following this train of thought, we may add a third member to this list of correspondences: *applied science is the popularization and dissemination of mysticism*. Oscillation and progress are synonymous. Once the machinic is endowed with a soteriological mythology, unheard of possibilities will become actualized. Dynamic fantasy precedes practical lines of action.

What dynamic fabulation does is condense and concentrate the practical energies latent within intelligence, identified with the tool-making function. It is only after maximal concentration has been achieved on the virtual level that actualization commences at a speed adequate to overcoming the next material barrier to movement. Freedom as pure negativity lies in the “conception of a field (ideally) without obstacles, a vacuum in which nothing obstructs me.”<sup>129</sup> Each achievement of civilization is the overcoming of a material hurdle by the power of spirit. Every overcoming is an answer to a question, each species the resolution

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<sup>129</sup> Berlin, Isaiah. “Two Concepts of Liberty.” 1958. in: Berlin, Isaiah. *Liberty*. Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, 2002, pp. 166-218., p. 190.



of a problem. Life is the statement and resolution of problems.<sup>130</sup> If there is reason for optimism on the part of those who persist in believing in the reality of an ontological category somewhat similar to what is denoted by “spirit”, as Bergsonians are bound to be, then it lies in the possibility of new triumphs and advances. The subtle illuminations *Two Sources* contains point towards the sweeping ascendancy of a new life and a renewed creation. The barrier separating the organic from the inorganic has been all but obliterated by the developments of applied science. Situated as we are on the cusp of a posthuman age, Bergsonism, with its positing of an unbroken, indivisible continuity of creative energy, is as relevant as ever.

The possibility that life could very well transcend its attachment to Earth not only by way of geological and astrophysical accidents such as asteroids but through a conscious effort of intelligence is a monumental, almost unfathomable evolutionary prospect. By unceasing education of the will, static religion and closed society may liquify into an open, vacuous, even panpsychic or panentheistic dynamic spirituality. Darkened as it is by the clouds of yet another looming world war, *Two Sources* nonetheless has good news for us all: “tomorrow the way will be clear” (*TS*: 270). The phrase “clear”, understanding under this term an affordance, an opportunity for freedom. If obstacles can be removed from the continuation of the life force, an original elaboration will be able to emerge. Liberty is, for the Bergsonian, freedom of movement, a curious point of commonality with the “negative freedom” of Isaiah Berlin, a thinker who, incidentally, erroneously labelled Bergson an irrationalist.<sup>131</sup> Life is the extraction of extrovertive growth from the inverted, closed way of being dualists call, for lack of a better word, “matter.” The introvertive mystical experience is a preparation for exponential, explosive outgrowth from material determinateness. And what is the goal of liberty? It is none other than the clear simplicity of creation: “joy indeed would be that simplicity of life diffused throughout the world by an ever-spreading mystic intuition; joy, too, that which would automatically follow a vision of the life beyond attained through the furtherance of scientific experiment” (*TS*: 274). Scientific practice and mystical rapture: two

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<sup>130</sup> Deleuze, Gilles. *Bergsonism*. trans. Tomlinson, Hugh and Habberjam, Barbara New York, Zone Books, 1997 [1966], p. 16.; Popper, Karl. *All Life Is Problem-Solving*. London and New York, Routledge, 2001.

<sup>131</sup> Berlin, Isaiah. “Impressionist Philosophy.” *London Mercury* 32.191., 1935, pp. 489-490.

sides of the same coin. Both are part and parcel of the striving of life tending toward direct coincidence with its fundamental source, which is the vital force, pure creative change without any object. Technical training, technological implementation, and practical administration and their quantitative spirit are but crystallizations of religious passions. *Thou must set off into the beyond, so that thou mayest be in the clear.* Bergson's final message amounts to an appeal to reset our vision, to lift our heads upward, and expand our thinking.

Openness knows no doctrine and brooks no limitation. Claire Colebrook notes, "if there is a future then it cannot be for us: it cannot ground itself upon man as some good life-furthering form."<sup>132</sup> Why not? The future cannot ground itself *exclusively* upon the human. But surely, as the examples of the great innovators and mystics show, some human individuals have existed and doubtless will exist, who are capable of ascending into simplicity and transcending their human natures. Such individuals have become authentic persons. *A person is an individual who is in the clear.* Open religion is about opening life, erasing limitation, so that the pure moment can forge new lines, recomposing reality. A new moment supervenes upon the past, immediately treating consciousness to an original vista of creation. Ours is the responsibility for deciding whether we perish on a dying planet, or whether we disseminate ourselves into the remotest reaches of the cosmos, filling the entire world with the light that is life. The whole universe will then have become akin to a tree that has borne truly divine, luscious, ripe fruit.

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<sup>132</sup> Colebrook, Claire (2012) "The Art of the Future." in: Alexandre Lefebvre and Melanie White (eds.) *Bergson, Politics, and Religion.* Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2012, pp. 75-99., p. 94.

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