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Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/bergsoniana/884>

DOI: [10.4000/bergsoniana.884](https://doi.org/10.4000/bergsoniana.884)

ISSN: 2800-874X

Publisher

Société des amis de Bergson

Electronic reference

Joël Dolbeault, "Panpsychism in Bergson and James", *Bergsoniana* [Online], 2 | 2022, Online since 01 July 2022, connection on 20 October 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/bergsoniana/884> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/bergsoniana.884>



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PANPSYCHISM IN BERGSON AND JAMES

Joël DOLBEAULT

The aim of this article is to show that Bergson and James defend a form of panpsychism, and that on this point, Bergson probably had an influence on James. Panpsychism is “the view that mentality is fundamental and ubiquitous in the natural world” (Goff, Seager, and Allen-Hermanson 2020, 2.1). So, for panpsychism, mentality is a character of all living beings, but also of inert matter.

As regards inert matter, some authors think that mentality is a character of elementary particles. We then speak of micropsychism. Others think that mentality is a character of the universe as a whole. We then speak of cosmopsychism (Goff, Seager, and Allen-Hermanson 2020, 2.4). As we will see, Bergson and James seem to embrace both ideas at the same time. In any case, panpsychism does not imply the idea that any material system (for example, a stone, a river, etc.) would have a mentality of its own. In this sense, panpsychism differs from the animism of early human societies. Bergson and James defend a form of panpsychism which is not an idealism.¹ For them, the whole of nature has psychic properties, but the whole of nature is not reduced to a psychic reality. There is also a physical reality.²

1. In the broad sense of the term, “panpsychism” includes idealism. The definition I mention above refers to this broad sense. For a similar definition, see also Skrbina (2005, 10-11). However, in philosophical discussions, the word “panpsychism” is rarely used to talk about idealism.

2. In his article “A World of Pure Experience,” published in 1904 (James 1976), James does not reject the physical/psychic distinction. He only attempts to give a new meaning to this distinction, by introducing the idea that the physical and the psychic are not

Moreover, as we will see, Bergson and James develop panpsychist ideas from a reflection *on causation in the physical world*. In this sense, their approach is different from that of contemporary panpsychism because, most often, the latter is motivated by a reflection *on the origin of consciousness in nature*. In Bergson's case, we find only the first approach, centered on causation. And in James, the two approaches exist independently.

For Bergson and James, the question is thus the following: can we understand causation in the physical world without introducing the idea that matter has psychic properties? And for them, the answer is negative. We must introduce psychic properties. This question is important because it probably concerns a weak point of physicalism, which is the dominant view in philosophy today. Many thinkers consider that physicalism fails to provide a satisfactory theory of consciousness. But maybe it also fails to provide a satisfactory theory of causation. This is what is at stake first in the panpsychism developed by Bergson and James.

The first part of this article will be devoted to Bergson's panpsychism; the second part, to James's panpsychism. In this second part, we will see how Bergson had an influence on James.

Bergson's Panpsychism

In most of his books, we find passages where Bergson asserts that matter has a kind of memory, a kind of consciousness. Bergson's panpsychism is therefore obvious.³ However, to fully understand this panpsychism, it is important to understand its relation to the question of causation in the physical world.

A Panpsychist Approach to Causation

From his first work, *Time and Free Will*, Bergson is interested in panpsychism. It is then a question of understanding causation in the external world, to answer certain objections against freedom. To begin with, Bergson asserts that, in the common idea of causation, there is the idea of a *preformation of the effect in the cause*, that is to say the idea of a kind of virtual existence of the effect in the

distinct elements, but distinct relations (between common elements). Note however that, in his last writings, James does not take up this hypothesis.

3. Bergson's panpsychist ideas are mentioned by many commentators. See in particular: Jankélévitch (1959, 120, 173-174), Capek (1971, 189-201, 302-312), Lacey (1989, 94, 129, 138), Worms (2004, 112-113, 164-165), Miquel (2010, 180-181), Barnard (2011, 152, 193-198), Fell (2012, 37, 51), Dolbeault (2018).

cause.⁴ In a second step, he points out that we can conceive this preformation in two ways: either on the model of the *mathematical* preformation of a theorem in certain definitions, or on the model of the *psychological* preformation of an action in an idea (Bergson 2001, 203-215). Bergson adds, however, that if the external world is intrinsically temporal, mathematical preformation cannot apply to it because, strictly speaking, the succession of a cause and an effect cannot be reduced to a logical deduction (Bergson 2001, 208-209). Therefore, if one believes that the external world is intrinsically temporal, the psychological approach to causation is more natural. This is equivalent to thinking that the physical world has psychic properties:

The qualities of things are thus set up as actual *states*, somewhat analogous to those of our own self; the material universe is credited with a vague personality which is diffused through space and which, although not exactly endowed with a conscious will, is led on from one state to another by an inner impulse, a kind of effort (Bergson 2001, 213).

However, in *Time and Free Will*, Bergson does not take a position on the intrinsic temporal character of the external world. Is time outside of us, or only within us? The question remains open (Bergson 2001, 227). Therefore, in this first book, it cannot be said that Bergson assumes a certain panpsychism. One can only remark that, for him, the question of panpsychism is closely linked to that of causation.

From *Matter and Memory*, things change. Bergson assumes the idea that the external world is intrinsically temporal (Bergson 1991, 193-196), and this leads him to assume a form of panpsychism. However, even if this panpsychism is always linked to the question of causation, Bergson presents things in a new way. This time, the emphasis is no longer on the notion of preformation, but on that of memory (Bergson, 1991, 202-203, 222-223; 1998, 200-201; 1965, 47-49; 1920, 22-23; 2007, 129-130). This is explained by the fact that, from *Matter and Memory*, the notion of memory takes a central place in Bergson's metaphysics. But, as I am going to try to show, the notion of preformation does not disappear from Bergson's panpsychism.

In *Matter and Memory*, the idea that matter is endowed with memory is linked to two questions related to causation. The first question is: how to explain the phenomenon of the conservation of matter over time? For

4. On the common idea of causation, Bergson thus disagrees with Hume. For Bergson, Hume does not really start from the common idea of causation. He cannot therefore understand the origin of this idea. For more on this question, see Bergson (1972).

Bergson, this phenomenon can only be explained by postulating a certain survival of the past. His argument is the following:

1. Matter tends to conserve itself.
2. However, this conservation is incomprehensible without the idea that the past of matter endures and is prolonged into its present. Without this, it would be necessary to admit that, at every moment, the universe dies and is born again by a real miracle.
3. In this sense, this conservation is incomprehensible without the idea that matter has a certain memory.
4. Consequently, we can make the hypothesis that matter has a certain memory (Bergson 1991, 149).⁵

Point (i) is empirically obvious. Point (ii) is the crucial point of the argument. It focuses on our ability to understand the phenomenon of conservation. According to Bergson, we can only understand this phenomenon by postulating a continuity of existence between material moments, and thus a survival of the past in the present. Point (iii) only introduces the notion of memory, understood then as a certain survival of the past in the present. Point (iv) is an affirmation about the physical world. Its scope is ontological. Of course, the passage from (iii) to (iv) implies a certain leap: a leap from the physical world *as conceivable by us* to the physical world *itself*. But for Bergson, this jump is methodologically justified. First, it leads us to a hypothesis that increases our understanding of the physical world. Second, it leads us to a hypothesis whose panpsychist content can be supported on other grounds (see below).

In other works, Bergson specifies that the continuity of existence of matter implies only *a memory of the immediate past*. In this sense, it is not necessary for each material moment to have the memory of all previous moments. It is sufficient that each material moment has the memory of the brief moment that precedes it (Bergson 1965, 47-49; 1920, 22-23; 2007, 129-130). I return to this point the next section.

This notion of memory of the immediate past raises a question: if matter has a memory of something, must it not first have the perception of this something? The answer is positive, and it has a direct relation with the question of movement as absolute reality. For Bergson, the physical world

5. In *Matter and Memory*, this argument is developed from a discussion about the conservation of the brain (which is supposed to make it possible the conservation of memories). But this point can be ignored here.

contains “real movements” (Bergson 1991, 193-194), that is to say absolute movements (*ibid.*). Now, according to him, the fundamental characteristic of an absolute movement is to be felt by the mobile (Bergson 1991, 195-196). In this sense, for Bergson, real physical movements *are felt* by the mobile (Bergson 1991, 246). In other words, they possess “something akin to sensation” (Bergson 1991, 247).⁶

Besides, it is important to emphasize that this notion of memory of the immediate past does not exclude the notion of preformation introduced in *Time and Free Will*. Intuitively, it even appears that these two notions complement each other. Let us admit that a material moment P (cause) preforms a material moment Q (effect). This preformation cannot be arbitrary. It must be determined by what precedes it, i.e., by the moment O that precedes P. Thus, P can only preform Q thanks to a memory of O. Another element in this direction is what Bergson says about the idea of instantaneous velocity in modern physics. According to him, intuitively speaking, the notation of an instantaneous velocity at a point is the notation of a kind of intention, that is, the notation of a virtual future that we can only understand concretely as an anticipation (Bergson 2017, 274-277). More generally, for Bergson, infinitesimal calculus arose from an intuitive approach to the continuity of movement, that is, from the idea that movement has an interiority (Bergson 2007, 133-134, 161; 2017, 270-283).

As I said earlier, in *Matter and Memory*, the idea that matter is endowed with memory is linked to two questions. The second question is: how to explain the phenomenon of regularities within matter? For Bergson, this phenomenon can be explained by making the hypothesis that matter has *a kind of motor memory*. Here is what he writes:

We may go further: memory does not intervene as a function of which matter has no presentiment and which it does not imitate in its own way. If matter does not remember the past, it is because it repeats the past unceasingly, because, subject to necessity, it unfolds a series of moments of which each is the equivalent of the preceding moment and may be deduced from it: thus its past is truly given in its present [...]. Thus, to use again a metaphor which has more than once appeared in this book, it is necessary, and for similar reasons, that the past should be *acted* by matter, *imagined* by mind (Bergson 1991, 222-223).

In this passage, Bergson obviously makes an analogy between the automatic behavior of matter and our own automatic behavior, which leads him to

6. On this point, see also Bergson (2007, 133-134).

make the hypothesis that matter also has a kind of motor memory. In detail, his reasoning is as follows:

1. The behavior of inert matter is automatic, in the sense that each of its parts reacts to the presence of the others in an immediate and typical way.
2. The behavior of living beings can also be automatic.
3. In the case of living beings, automatic behaviors are caused by a motor memory whose actions are triggered by perceptions.
4. Consequently, *by analogy*, one can assume that the behavior of inert matter is also caused by a kind of motor memory whose actions are triggered by perceptions.

The first three points are empirically obvious. Point (iv) is speculative because it is based on an analogy. But reasoning by analogy is not shocking: it is very common in human knowledge, including in science.

In the next section, I will come back in detail on the notion of motor memory, and on its relation to memory par excellence. For the moment, let us note that if matter is endowed with motor memory, it must also be endowed with perception. Now, this is affirmed several times in *Matter and Memory* (Bergson 1991, 38, 49).⁷ Thus, for Bergson, any elementary material part perceives itself by feeling its own movement (see above), but also perceives something of its environment.

Again, it is important to emphasize that the introduction of this notion of memory does not exclude the notion of preformation. On the contrary, it includes it, because a motor memory is made up of action principles of the type: if A, then B. It is therefore a set of anticipations.

Another element in this direction is the affirmation that matter as a whole is *a neutralized consciousness* (Bergson 1991, 219, 235, 248). For Bergson, a neutralized consciousness is a consciousness that only perceives and reacts automatically to what is perceived (Bergson 1991, 235; 1998, 143-144). Moreover, in the detailed explanation he gives of the notion of neutralized consciousness, he specifies that such a consciousness involves a certain representation, understood as *the preformation* of a movement to be accomplished according to a certain situation (Bergson 1998, 144). Thus, the very notion of neutralized consciousness is incomprehensible without the notion of a certain anticipation. It is only necessary to add that this anticipation

7. See also (Bergson 1991, 159-160) where Bergson suggests that the hydrochloric acid molecule has selective perception of other molecules in its environment.

is unconscious, precisely because its appearance in the consciousness is prevented (neutralized) by the action (Bergson 1998, 143-145).

From *Matter and Memory* therefore, Bergson develops a panpsychist conception of matter. In contrast to *Time and Free Will*, the notion put forward is no longer that of preformation, but that of memory. However, it appears that these two notions complement each other. The idea is that each material moment unconsciously preforms the moment that follows on the basis of a certain perception, a certain memory of this perception (the memory of the immediate past), and a certain motor representation.

From the point of view of contemporary panpsychism, one can ask the following question: for Bergson, does matter have perceptions in the phenomenal sense of the term? The answer is positive because, for Bergson, qualia (i.e., phenomenal qualities) have an objective reality. By contracting the elementary material vibrations, the human perception does not make the qualia appear, it only intensifies them (Bergson 1991, 182-183, 202-204).

Despite this, Bergson defends the idea of a difference in nature between matter and mind, matter and life. In the next part, I show that this concerns the different kinds of memory that Bergson distinguishes.

A Panpsychist and Dualistic Conception of Nature

Bergson argues that life is psychic in nature, that it is a kind of consciousness (Bergson 1998, 257, 181-186, 269). Moreover, as we have seen, he also asserts that matter has psychic properties, one or more kinds of memory in particular. Does this mean that, for him, there is no difference in kind between life and matter? The answer is negative because, in *Creative Evolution*, Bergson constantly stresses the difference in kind between life and matter (Bergson 1998, 197-198, 224). Life is capable of creation, matter is not (Bergson 1998, 249-250, 251). As I will attempt to show, this difference in kind can be explained by considering more precisely the notions of memory of the immediate past and motor memory.

As we have seen, Bergson first asserts that matter possesses a memory of its immediate past. This memory cannot be the memory-contraction of which Bergson speaks when it is a question of understanding human perception (as a contraction of multiple elementary material vibrations)⁸ because, in the texts which evoke this memory of the immediate past, Bergson never talks of contraction. Moreover, for Bergson, the rhythm

8. See in particular Bergson (1991, 33-34).

of duration of matter is that of the elementary vibrations (Bergson 1991, 208-209). Consequently, matter perceives and reacts at this rhythm, that is to say without contraction.

In fact, this memory of the immediate past is *a kind of pure memory*. Proof of this is this passage from “The Perception of Change”⁹ where Bergson affirms that the past preserves itself without material support:

Whatever we do, even if we imagine that the brain stores up memories, we do not escape the conclusion that the past can preserve itself automatically. This holds not only for our own past, but also for the past of any change whatsoever, always providing that it is a question of a single and therefore indivisible change: the preservation of the past in the present is nothing else than the indivisibility of change (Bergson 2007, 129).

In this passage, Bergson affirms that our past preserves itself without material support (without brain).¹⁰ And in *Matter and Memory*, this conservation is what he calls pure memory (Bergson 1991, 182, 238, 241). But Bergson also asserts that this holds for the past of any change, including purely physical changes. For that, it is only necessary that the change be indivisible, that is to say not composed of several changes, which is the case of elementary material vibrations. Therefore, it appears that by asserting that matter possesses a memory of its immediate past, Bergson asserts that matter is endowed with pure memory.

That said, this similarity between matter and ourselves, more generally between matter and living things, does not exclude a clear difference between the two. Proof of this is this passage from “Life and Consciousness”¹¹:

On the one hand, there is matter, subject to necessity, devoid of memory, or at least with no more than suffices to form the bridge between two of its moments, each of which can be deduced from its antecedent, each of which adds nothing to what the world already contains. On the other hand, there is consciousness, memory with freedom, continuity of creation in a duration in which there is real growth (Bergson 1920, 22-23).

Matter is endowed with pure memory, but it is incapable of creation. This is explained by the fact that creation does not only require the retention of the immediate past. It also requires *the retrieval of the distant past*, that is to say the past that has become unconscious. Thus, when we reflect, we retrieve memories or information that had disappeared from our consciousness. And

9. Lecture delivered in 1911.

10. On this point, see also Bergson (1991, 148-149; 1998, 4-5).

11. Lecture also delivered in 1911.

this ability to retrieve multiple memories and information is the basis for the creation of new ideas. Inert matter therefore has a kind of pure memory: a pure memory of the immediate past. But this memory differs from our own pure memory, more generally from the pure memory specific to the living.¹²

We have also seen above that Bergson makes the hypothesis that physical regularities are explained by a kind of memory. But what is this memory precisely? And does it really deserve the name “motor memory”?

First, it appears that this memory is really a motor memory. Several reasons justify this conclusion.

A first reason is that, in the passage I quoted above (Bergson 1991, 222-223), Bergson asserts that matter *imitates* memory par excellence¹³ (which is able to “remember the past”) because matter “repeats the past” in the form of actions. Now, this is exactly how he presents motor memory in Chapter II of *Matter and Memory*: for Bergson, motor memory hardly deserves the name of memory (Bergson 1991, 82, 84, 151) because it does not retrieve the past in the form of representations; it only “repeats” the past in the form of actions (Bergson 1991, 82). Moreover, in this passage, Bergson takes up the metaphor he has already used many times to characterize motor memory: matter “acts” its past as our motor memory “acts” our past (Bergson 1991, 82, 151, 155, 167).¹⁴ It is therefore a clear reference to the notion of motor memory.

A second reason is that Bergson affirms that matter is a neutralized consciousness, and that, for him, a neutralized consciousness behaves like a motor memory: it only reacts in an automatic and determined way to certain perceptions (Bergson 1991, 235; 1998, 143-144). Consequently, to affirm that matter is a neutralized consciousness is indirectly to affirm that it possesses a motor memory.

12. If life is a consciousness, it has necessarily a pure memory. I am not talking here about the individual memory of each living being, but about the memory of life as a unique *élan*, which allows it to act continuously on the germs of a species, in order to create a new organ (Bergson 1998, 84-87). The reasoning is always the same: all continuous action implies a kind of pure memory. The theme of the life's memory is briefly mentioned in certain passages of *Creative Evolution* (Bergson 1998, 19, 53-54).

13. The expression “memory par excellence” appears in *Matter and Memory* (Bergson 1991, 84).

14. In this passage, Bergson does not say that it is metaphorical to consider that matter has a memory. He says that, to characterize this memory, the metaphor he has already used many times remains valid: matter does not represent its past, it acts it. The French metaphorical expression is: “jouer le passé.” The English translation is: “to act the past” (Bergson 1991, 82, 151, 155, 167, 223). But a more rigorous translation would be: “to play the past” (as an actor plays a role). And the meaning of this metaphor is: to repeat the past.

A third reason is that, in theory, motor memory can exist without memory par excellence, and vice versa. Admittedly, Bergson explains that, in humans, these two memories rarely act separately (Bergson 1991, 155, 168).¹⁵ But that does not change the fact that these two memories are basically *two independent realities* (Bergson 1991, 81, 85), which means that they can exist without each other. On the one hand, in the living world, motor memory is a psycho-physical reality. It requires the body (Bergson 1991, 77, 81-82, 151-152). This means that the disappearance of the body entails the disappearance of motor memory. On the other hand, in the living world, and in humans in particular, memory par excellence is a purely psychic reality, independent of the body (Bergson 1991, 77, 177). As we have seen above, it implies a conservation of the past without any material support. This means that the disappearance of the body does not entail the disappearance of memory par excellence — a possibility that Bergson explicitly considers.¹⁶ For him, a memory *par excellence* can therefore exist without a motor memory. And symmetrically, a motor memory can exist without a memory par excellence. For this, a matter without mind is necessary. And, according to Bergson, inert matter is precisely a matter without mind (Bergson 1991, 221-223).¹⁷

It may be objected that, in the living world, motor memory requires a certain physical complexity: something like a nervous system, muscles, etc. But, for Bergson, it is not so. Any living being, animal or plant, multi- or unicellular, has a motor memory, because any living being is capable of reacting automatically and determinedly to certain stimuli.¹⁸ Basically, in order to act, a motor memory only needs centers of action, whatever those centers may be. Now, it happens that matter constitutes precisely a set of elementary action centers (Bergson 1991, 37-38, 200-201).

15. Such a separate action is not excluded, however, at least in very particular cases (Bergson 1991, 155, 168). For a possible separate action of the memory par excellence without the motor memory, let us think in particular of near death experiences (Bergson 1991, 155).

16. Bergson considers the possibility of an afterlife in numerous writings. See for example Bergson (1998, 268-269; 1920, 35, 72-73). As soon as this life concerns the person, it obviously concerns his or her memory par excellence.

17. In Bergson, the notion of mind is narrower than that of psychism. It implies the capacity for creation, therefore the memory par excellence. See for example Bergson (1991, 9, 221-223, 235, 249).

18. In this sense, Bergson asserts for example that some plants have instincts (1998, 170). Certainly, Bergson maintains that the activity of the simplest forms of life (unicellulars) is semi-automatic and semi-voluntary (Bergson 1998, 110-111). But this tendency to automaticity already requires a motor memory.

Nevertheless, a certain difference appears between matter and living things, concerning motor memory. While the motor memory of living beings is capable of evolution (at the level of the species and the individual), the motor memory of matter seems incapable of that. At least, Bergson does not say anything about this. Again, we find the idea that the living is capable of creation, as opposed to matter. And again, we can think that this capacity of creation can be explained by the fact that the living also has a memory par excellence (at the level of the species and of the individual), as opposed to matter.

To conclude, Bergson develops both a *panpsychist* and a *dualistic* conception of nature. On the one hand, he affirms that life is psychic in nature, and that matter has psychic properties. But, on the other hand, he maintains a clear distinction between the living and the inert. Moreover, for him, life does not originate from inert matter: life and matter were created at the same time by a supraconsciousness (Bergson 1998, 247-248, 261).

As we have seen, this difference in kind between life and matter largely overlaps with the question of memory. The following table summarizes what we have seen previously:

<p>The inert has two kinds of memory:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - a memory of the immediate past - a motor memory 	<p>The living has four kinds of memory:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - a memory of the immediate past¹⁹ - a motor memory - a memory par excellence²⁰ - a memory-contraction²¹
<p>In this sense, inert matter is a neutralized consciousness: it can just represent the present and immediately react.</p>	<p>In this sense, the living is a consciousness in the narrow sense of the term: it can represent the present, but also the past and the future before acting.</p>
<p>The duration of its perceptions and actions is that of the elementary material vibrations.</p>	<p>The duration of its perceptions and actions is extremely variable. This duration implies the phenomenon of contraction.</p>

Table 1. The difference between the inert and the living according to Bergson

19. This memory corresponds to what psychology calls sensory memory.

20. For Bergson, each living individual does not seem to have this memory. However, each living individual is linked to the *élan vital*, which is a memory common to all the living (Bergson 1998, 53-54).

21. This memory makes it possible to contract in a single perception a multitude of elementary physical vibrations (Bergson 1991, 34-35). Bergson seems to think that it is specific to living beings (Bergson 1991, 36; 1998, 301).

Micropsychism and Cosmopsychism

Micropsychism is the view that the elementary parts of matter are endowed with mentality, while cosmopsychism is the view that the universe as a whole is endowed with mentality. In contemporary debate, panpsychist thinkers tend to adopt one or the other view, with a preference for micropsychism. Yet the two are compatible.

In Bergson's work, certain ideas are on the side of micropsychism: the idea that elementary material parts are endowed with perception and automatic reaction, and the idea that all indivisible change is endowed with sensation and memory. However, other ideas are on the side of cosmopsychism: the idea that matter is a single neutralized consciousness. Does this imply a contradiction? The answer is negative because, for independent reasons, Bergson thinks that matter presents both a certain multiplicity and a certain unity. On the one hand, matter presents a certain discontinuity, which means that atomism is not totally wrong. On the other hand, matter is not divided into absolutely distinct parts. Hence the idea that it can be thought as a single field within which there would be centers of force (Bergson 1991, 196-201). In any case, for Bergson, the psychic properties of inert matter concern its elementary parts (micropsychism) or matter as a whole (cosmopsychism), but not this or that aggregate of parts, for example a stone (Bergson 1998, 144).²²

Let us recall, moreover, that Bergson's "cosmopsychism" is not a pantheism. Bergson is clear on this point: the supraconsciousness is distinct from the worlds it creates (Bergson 1998, 247-248; 1972, 766). In the same sense, Bergson does not conceive the universe as a living super-organism, but as a set of worlds crossed by as many vital *élan*s (Bergson 1998, 247-248; 1972, 766). For him, the indeterminacy of the becoming of the universe is due to the ceaseless activity of the supraconsciousness (Bergson 1998, 241, 247-248, 343) and to the presence of life in all the worlds.

His cosmopsychism is in fact a response to the problem of the order of the world. The physical world has regularities. How to explain this? Physicalism offers no answer to this question: for it, regularities are a raw fact. From this point of view, it constitutes an incomplete theory of nature. Furthermore, the most classical answer is a kind of Platonism adapted to modern science: it is the idea that the physical world presents regularities because it obeys

22. In the same sense, it can be argued that the spatial grouping of several human individuals does not create any additional consciousness.

Laws of Nature — as for Plato, the physical world presents regularities because it obeys Ideas. But the introduction of the notion of Law of Nature is purely ad hoc. In contrast, Bergson proposes another hypothesis, based on an analogy: a motor memory immanent to matter must explain the regularities we observe, just as a motor memory in the living world explains the regularities we observe (in a species or an individual). Shortly before, and independently, a similar hypothesis had been developed by Peirce.²³

James's Panpsychism

A Panpsychist Approach to Causation

In the contemporary debate on panpsychism, James is known for his discussion of the “combination problem”: assuming that each elementary material part is endowed with a certain mentality, how can several of these parts combine to form something whose mentality would have a unity (for example our consciousness)? This discussion is in *The Principles of Psychology* (Vol. I, Ch. VI), published in 1890. However, James also approaches the question of panpsychism from a reflection on causation. Moreover, it is from this reflection on causation that he begins to defend panpsychist ideas.²⁴ From this point of view, there is an obvious common point between him and Bergson.

As early as 1902, in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James made a link between causation and panpsychism. In the conclusion of the book, he asserts that “the world of our experience consists at all times of two parts, an objective and a subjective part.” Then he adds:

Yet the cosmic objects, so far as the experience yields them, are but ideal pictures of something whose existence we do not inwardly possess but only point at outwardly, while the inner state is our very experience itself; its reality and that of our experience are one. A conscious field *plus* its object as felt or thought of *plus* an attitude towards the object *plus* the sense of a self to whom the attitude belongs — such a concrete bit of personal experience may be a small bit, but it is a solid bit as long as it lasts; not hollow, not a mere abstract element of experience, such as the ‘object’ is when taken all alone. It is a *full* fact, even though it be an insignificant fact; it is of the *kind* to which all realities whatsoever must belong; the motor currents of the world run through the like of it; it is on the line connecting real events with real events. That unsharable feeling which each one of us has of the pinch of his individual destiny as he privately

23. For this metaphysical problem of the order of the world, and the ideas developed by Bergson and Peirce, see in particular Dolbeault (2017, 2021).

24. For the evolution of James's ideas and his final defense of panpsychism, see in particular: Gale (2005, 6-8, 154-155, 200-201), Dunham (2020).

feels it rolling out on fortune's wheel may be disparaged for its egotism, may be sneered at as unscientific, but it is the one thing that fills up the measure of our concrete actuality, and any would-be existent that should lack such a feeling, or its analogue, would be a piece of reality only half made up (James 1895, 393).

At the beginning of the passage, James evokes an interiority of the objects of the world. And at the end of the passage, he asserts that any complete existent must have an exteriority *and* an interiority. Moreover, throughout the passage, James asserts that the interiority of a reality is directly related to its activity. This interiority corresponds to the “motor currents of the world,” to what “connects” events to each other.

In 1905, in an article devoted to activity,²⁵ James continues to develop this panpsychist hypothesis. In addition, he mentions Bergson as a source of inspiration:

If there *be* real creative activities in being, radical empiricism must say, somewhere they must be immediately lived. Somewhere the *that* of efficacious causing and the *what* of it must be experienced in one, just as the what and the that of “cold” are experienced in one whenever a man has the sensation of cold here and now. [...] I conclude, then, that real effectual causation as an ultimate nature, as a “category,” if you like, of reality, is *just what we feel it to be*, just that kind of conjunction which our own activity-series reveal (James 1976, 92-93).

Further on, James adds:

The urgent problems of activity are thus more concrete. [...] They lead, however, into that region of panpsychic and ontologic speculation of which Professors Bergson and Strong have lately enlarged the literature in so able and interesting a way (James 1976, 95).

In 1909, in *Some Problems of Philosophy*, in the chapters devoted to causation, James defends the same idea:

Meanwhile the concrete perceptual flux, taken just as it comes, offers in our own activity-situations perfectly comprehensible instances of causal agency. [...] If we took these experiences as the type of what actual causation is, we should have to ascribe to cases of causation outside of our own life, to physical cases also, an inwardly experiential nature. In other words, we should have to espouse a so-called ‘pan-psychic’ philosophy (James 1979, 109).

And as a note to this text, James mentions Bergson as one of the thinkers “whose discussion most resembles my own.”

25. “The Experience of Activity.” This article was first published in the *Psychological Review* (James 1905). It was later republished in *A Pluralistic Universe* (James 1909), then in *Essay in Radical Empiricism* (James 1912).

As we can see, these two passages (and others)²⁶ focus on the question of activity. For James, activity is first a certain change (James 1976, 82). But change raises the question of causation: why is there change? And why such a change rather than another? On this point, James claims that the experience of our own psychic (or psycho-physical) activity is the origin and the basis of all our ideas of causation. Consequently, if there is any causation in the physical world, we are led to think that this world must have “an inwardly experiential nature.”

James himself writes that this hypothesis is panpsychist. And he asserts that a similar hypothesis can be found in Bergson, without however indicating a precise book.

James does not pretend that his panpsychist hypothesis is perfectly grounded. He just says that it is relevant and must be developed in more detail. In his writings of 1905 and 1909, he developed an argument to support it. This argument can be presented as follows:

1. In the physical world, at least some changes have causes.
2. However, the only causes of change *that we experience* are mental.
3. Therefore, the only causes of change *that we can conceive of* have a mental character, including when it comes to changes in the physical world.
4. Therefore, one can assume that, in the physical world, the causes of changes have a mental character.²⁷

Point (i) is not the principle of universal causation applied to the physical world: it only says that some changes, at least, have causes. James does not make this point explicitly in his arguments on panpsychism. However, he presupposes it. It must be said that it corresponds to a widely shared idea, both among philosophers and in common belief.

Point (ii) is crucial. It is explained as follows: any clear idea of cause is the idea of a fact A which, in a way or another, “contains” a fact B to come (James 1979, 97-98);²⁸ and only one experience corresponds to this idea,

26. See in particular a passage in *Pragmatism*, published in 1907 (James 1975, 138).

27. For another formulation and a discussion of James’s argument in the framework of contemporary panpsychism, see in particular Morch (2019).

28. According to Hume, the common idea of causation implies the idea of necessary connection. James disputes this point. According to him, the common idea of causation implies the idea of power (understood as the idea that one fact can, in one way or another, contain another fact). Hume’s mistake can be explained by the fact that he failed to find the empirical meaning of the idea of power (James 1979, 99-101).

that of the anticipation of an act (James 1979, 106-107; 1976, 84-85). In this case, indeed, a mental fact A contains *in a representation* a fact B to be produced.²⁹

Point (iii) is the consequence of points (ii) and (iii). It is based on the idea that any clear concept of something must be based on some experience (James 1979, 109; 1976, 81-82). In this regard, James points out that seeking to think causation by introducing an abstract principle into nature does not change anything, because it is impossible not to understand this principle in an animist way, that is, as something that would be a “little spiritual copy” of the fact to come (James 1976, 92-93).

Point (iv) is a passage to ontology. It is not logically deduced from point (iii). It is only a hypothesis based on considerations of method. In this hypothesis, “the causes” of physical changes designate the forces (and not the physical systems). Physics is used to speaking of “physical forces” to refer to what it studies. But James’s argument is aimed precisely at questioning the physical nature of these forces.

Methodologically, this hypothesis is justified by the fact that it increases our understanding of causation in the physical world. Without this hypothesis, indeed, causation remains enigmatic for our reason, which can lead us to deny its reality (James 1979, 109).³⁰

From the point of view of method, James’s argument resembles Bergson’s argument 1, on the memory of the immediate past. In both cases, indeed, the argument is based on our capacity to understand something: for Bergson, the phenomenon of the conservation of matter over time (which is a certain aspect of causation within the physical world); for James, causation as a whole. However, as regards its content, James’s argument rather echoes Bergson’s early panpsychist ideas, developed in *Time and Free Will*. Let us recall that, in this work, Bergson asserts that causation can be understood as a psychological preformation of the effect in the cause. In the same sense, James affirms that causation can be understood as the anticipation of a fact B by a fact A.

Certainly, from *Matter and Memory* onwards, Bergson questions causation in the physical world from the notion of memory. But, as we have seen, he continues to think that this causation implies a kind of psychological

29. For James, a crucial point is whether this anticipation is perfect or not, because only imperfect anticipation can guarantee indeterminism and freedom (James 1979, 97-98).

30. The path which leads from Hume to positivism (in Auguste Comte in particular) can be understood as a path leading to the negation of causation in nature.

preformation. Therefore, James and Bergson agree on this point. Both defend what we can call *a panpsychism of causation*, based on the idea that a cause psychologically preforms its effect.

James's panpsychism is, however, part of a global conception of nature different from that of Bergson.

A Panpsychist and Anti-Dualistic Conception of Nature

The above highlights the similarity of the panpsychisms of Bergson and James. Yet their analyses differ on one important point: while Bergson maintains a clear distinction between the inert and the living, in James this distinction seems to vanish. A first element in favor of this idea is that, in the passages which assert that matter has an experiential nature, James makes no remark about a possible distinction between the inert and the living. A second element is that, in *A Pluralistic Universe*, James is more interested in Fechner's panpsychism than in Bergson's. However, Fechner does not introduce a radical distinction between the inert and the living. For him, planets and stars are alive and conscious,³¹ as well as the universe which encompasses them.

This difference between Bergson and James has a direct consequence on their way of considering the relation between mind and matter. For Bergson, the idea that our mind would be composed of material parts, because of the psychic properties of the latter, is inconceivable: our mind has its origin in the *élan vital* (Bergson 1998, 269-270), which itself is something other than matter. In contrast, for James, this hypothesis is conceivable, even if it raises certain difficulties. In *The Principles of Psychology* (1890), he discusses this hypothesis, which he then calls the "mind-stuff theory," and he states the following difficulty:

The mind-stuff theory, in short, is unintelligible. Atoms of feeling cannot compose higher feelings, any more than atoms of matter can compose physical things. The 'things', for a clear-headed atomistic evolutionist, are not. Nothing is but the everlasting atoms. When grouped in a certain way, *we* name them this 'thing' or that; but the thing we name has no existence out of our mind (James 1981, 164).

That which is multiple cannot be one. Therefore, a set of atoms endowed with mentality cannot be a single mentality. Certainly, what is multiple can *cause* a single effect. But then there is a difference between the cause (the

31. James emphasizes this point (James 1977, 71).

atoms endowed with mentality in our brain) and the effect (our mental experience), and we cannot speak of composition.³²

In 1909, in *A Pluralistic Universe*, James points out the same difficulty. However, he asserts that philosophy is faced with a dilemma: to adopt the mind-stuff theory or the theory of the “substantial soul,” which asserts that our mind is a substance totally distinct from matter. However, for James, the substantial soul theory is purely ad hoc, and not explanatory (James 1977, 95). Consequently, in 1909, James asserts that the “mind-stuff theory” should be favored, and he tries to find a solution to the reported difficulty (James 1977, 94-96). According to him, a solution could be that the multiplicity of elementary material parts is only relative, and that a certain psychic unity between these parts exists from the start (James 1977, 129).

Thus, even if Bergson and James conceive causation in a similar way, both arriving at a panpsychist view of matter, their overall metaphysical conceptions of nature remain different. For Bergson, nature is dual: life and matter, i.e., mind and matter. In contrast, for James, nature has an ontological unity.

Micropsychism and Cosmopsychism

Another important difference between Bergson and James concerns cosmopsychism. For Bergson, there is cosmopsychism in the sense that matter as a whole (excluding the living) is a neutralized consciousness. For James, there is cosmopsychism in the sense that the universe as a whole (including the living) is identified with God. In other words, James defends a pantheistic conception of nature.

This position appears in Chapter I of *A Pluralistic Universe*. James then distinguishes two main forms of spiritualism: pantheism, defined as a monistic spiritualism, and theism, defined as a dualistic spiritualism. According to him, there are two reasons to prefer pantheism. The first is that this conception is more consistent with the mystical experience of religious people (James 1977, 18-19). The second is that the opposite conception, theism, has theoretical consequences that are difficult to

32. Let us recall that, for James, the mind cannot be a simple effect of cerebral activity, because this epiphenomenalist conception of the mind is in contradiction with the theory of evolution. The latter leads us to think that if human mind has been selected by evolution, it is because it has a practical utility (James 1879).

accept, especially the idea that man would only be a subject of God, not an “intimate partner” (James 1977, 18-19).

In this sense, for James, God is composed of the multiple parts of the universe, as our mind is itself composed of parts:

We have now reached a point of view from which the self-compounding of mind in its smaller and more accessible portions seems a certain fact, and in which the speculative assumption of a similar but wider compounding in remoter regions must be reckoned with as a legitimate hypothesis. The absolute is not the impossible being I once thought it. Mental facts do function both singly and together, at once, and we finite minds may simultaneously be co-conscious with one another in a superhuman intelligence (James 1977, 132).

For James, pantheism is not at all opposed to the idea that the parts of the universe would have a certain independence: living beings tend to act for themselves, as well as all the parts of the universe.³³ From this point of view, as with Bergson, his cosmopsychism is compatible with a certain micropsychism. However, because of his pantheistic commitment, the global conception of nature defended by James is different from that defended by Bergson.

Conclusion

For Bergson and James, matter has psychic properties, in the sense of properties similar to those of our own psychic life. In this sense, both defend a panpsychist conception of matter. Moreover, both reach this conclusion from a reflection on causation: within the physical world, causation must imply a certain preformation of the effect in the cause, that is, a kind of anticipation. Of course, Bergson also introduces considerations about the memory of matter. However, this does not imply that his approach to causation is fundamentally different from that of James. By affirming that matter has a motor memory, Bergson is only specifying the type of preformation of which matter is capable: an unconscious preformation whose effect is an automatic action, in response to a certain perception.

Nevertheless, in Bergson and James, this panpsychism of causation is part of two different global conceptions of nature. For Bergson, nature presents a duality between life and matter. Moreover, it is distinguished from the supraconsciousness which is at the origin of life and matter. For James, on the other hand, nature presents an ontological unity, and it is one with

33. This is what James calls the “pluralistic view,” as opposed to the “monistic view” (James 1977, 20).

God. This leads them to different approaches to the question of the relation between mind and matter. For Bergson, our mind is not the composition of material parts, even if the latter are endowed with mentality. For James, this hypothesis is quite conceivable, and it is even the hypothesis that should be privileged.

In the contemporary debate, the panpsychism of causation is an answer to the question of the order of the world. It challenges the idea that natural regularities can be explained by laws of nature, or by (non-psychic) dispositions immanent to matter. On the other hand, the opposition between Bergson and James on the composition of the mind concerns the question of the nature and the origin of consciousness, that is to say the central question of contemporary panpsychism.³⁴

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34. On Bergson and contemporary panpsychism, see Dolbeault (2018).

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Abstract: The aim of this article is to show that Bergson and James defend a form of panpsychism, and that on this point, Bergson probably had an influence on James. For Bergson, matter has psychic characters, in particular a memory of the immediate past and a motor memory. These characters are necessary to explain causation within the physical world, understood then as analogous to automatic activity in living beings. However, according to Bergson, there is a radical distinction between the inert and the living: only the living is capable of creation. Probably inspired by Bergson, James develops a similar idea: causation in the physical world is understandable only by admitting that matter has psychic characters. Nevertheless, unlike Bergson, James does not make a radical distinction between the inert and the living. This leads him to make a link between matter and consciousness.

Keywords: panpsychism, causation, consciousness, memory.

Résumé : Le but de cet article est de montrer que Bergson et James défendent une forme de panpsychisme, et que sur ce point, Bergson a probablement exercé une influence sur James. Pour Bergson, la matière possède des caractères psychiques, en particulier une mémoire du passé immédiat et une mémoire motrice. Ces caractères sont nécessaires pour expliquer la causalité au sein du monde physique, compris alors comme analogique à l'activité automatique des êtres vivants. Cependant, selon Bergson, il existe une distinction radicale entre l'inerte et le vivant : seul le vivant est capable de création. Probablement inspiré par Bergson, James développe une idée similaire : la causalité dans le monde physique n'est compréhensible qu'en admettant que la matière a des caractères psychiques. Néanmoins, contrairement à Bergson, James ne fait pas une distinction radicale entre l'inerte et le vivant. Cela le conduit à établir un lien entre matière et conscience.

Mots-clés : panpsychisme, causalité, conscience, mémoire.