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Bergson and Philosophy as a Way of Life

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Keith Ansell-Pearson

Introduction

In this essay I explore Bergson's relation to the conception of philosophy as a way of life. I take my cue from Pierre Hadot who has revealed that for him as a young student of philosophy at the Sorbonne, "Bergsonism was not an abstract, conceptual philosophy, but rather took the form of a new way of seeing the world."¹ From the beginning of his intellectual career, Bergson has an interest in philosophy as a way of life and in the practice of the art of life. This is first made manifest in his commentary on Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura* of 1884.² Moreover, even when Bergson is seeking to illuminate the character of the fundamental philosophical categories, such as we find in his essay on "The Possible and the Real," he is keen to convey the idea that the endeavour has a bearing on the practice of the art of living: thinking about metaphysical matters is not, Bergson says, to be regarded as a simple game but is a preparation for the art of living.³

I focus on a particular aspect of Bergson's thinking, namely, his insight into what we can call "the sympathy of life," and how this is related to the ancient Plotinian and Stoic conceptions of the world.⁴ Bergson thinks that we can establish contact with other forms of life and with the evolutionary movement as a whole. As he puts it in the opening section of chapter three of *Creative Evolution*, "Philosophy can only be an effort to dissolve again into the Whole" (*La philosophie ne peut être qu'un effort pour se fondre à*

nouveau dans le tout).⁵ His idea is that we are immersed in an “ocean of life” in which a beneficent fluid bathes us and from where we draw the force to labour and to live. It could be said that when we make the effort to go beyond the human condition we overcome our alienation from life. To practise philosophy as a way of life in the sense of cultivating a new attention to, and perception of, the world is to experience something of the character of this overcoming: it seeks to make contact with the Whole of life possible. In a certain sense Bergson is returning us to an ancient conception of the world and the doctrine of the sympathy of with the Whole. Of course, he does this in an original manner and within a modern context, namely, that of an appreciation of the neo-Darwinian conception of the evolution of life. Bergson provides a conception of philosophy as a way of life in this sense: he does not simply offer his readers the possibility of acquiring abstract knowledge, but instead his work aims to encourage the cultivation of a special mode of perception (intuition and intellectual sympathy) that will dramatically transform our vision of the world and in the process change one’s comportment and sense of being in the world.

Philosophy for Bergson has two main aims: (1) to extend human perception; (2) to enhance the human power to act and live. I wish to suggest that Bergson is a significant figure in the modern re-invention of philosophy as a way of life because he attends to both a care of the self and the care of life as a whole.

Pierre Hadot and The Vision of Philosophy as a Way of Life

Pierre Hadot (1922-2010) was a formidable scholar of classical thought and of the history of philosophy, and is best known for his conception of philosophy as a way of life

(*manière de vivre*). For Hadot, academic philosophy has essentially lost sight of the ancient conception and practice of philosophy as a set of spiritual exercises that include dialogue, meditative reflection, and theoretical contemplation. The goal of philosophy is to cultivate a specific, constant attitude towards existence and by way of a rational and perceptual comprehension of the nature of humanity and its place in the cosmos. This cultivation of the self through philosophy involves conquering the passions and overcoming the illusory evaluative beliefs that they, along with habits and upbringing, instil in us.

Consider Stoicism, as an example. Stoic physics, like Stoic logic, was not simply an abstract theory but the occasion for spiritual exercises. As Hadot notes, to put theory into practice requires the exercise of recognizing oneself as part of the Whole and elevating oneself to cosmic consciousness. Thus, while meditating on physics we are to see all things from within the perspective of universal reason, and to achieve this we need to practice a specific imaginative exercise, namely, that of seeing all human things from above. We can also see things as being in a perpetual state of transformation or metamorphosis. When we contemplate how all things transform themselves into one another the focus on universal change leads to a meditation on death, which we need to accept as a fundamental law of universal order: "...physics as a spiritual exercise leads the philosopher to give loving consent to the events which have been willed by that Reason which is immanent to the cosmos."⁶ In addition to consenting to the events that happen we need also to prepare ourselves for them. Thus, a key spiritual exercise for the Stoic consists in the pre-meditation of so-called evils, which is an exercise that prepares us for facing the trials of life in which we imagine in advance various difficulties,

reversals of fortune, sufferings, and even our own death and that of others. The idea is that such exercises will enable us to deal better with the blows of fate when they inevitably come. In Stoic ethics the aim is to reduce the shock of reality, and so as to maintain some peace and tranquillity of mind. To do this requires that we overcome the fear that would stop us thinking about events in advance (such as our death and that of others). The task for the Stoics is, in fact, to think about such events often so as to disclose to ourselves that future evils are not really evils since they do not depend on us. As Hadot puts it: “The Stoic’s fundamental attitude is this continuous attention, which means constant tension and consciousness, as well as vigilance exercised at every moment. Thanks to this attention, the philosopher is always perfectly aware not only of what he is doing, but also of what he is thinking and of what he is – in other words, of his place within the cosmos. This is lived physics...”⁷

As John Sellars points out, the phrase “spiritual exercise,” which denotes the transformation of one’s entire way of being, is derived from Ignatius of Loyola, a sixteenth century Spanish priest and theologian.⁸ For Ignatius a spiritual exercise is an exercise for the soul just as physical exercise is an exercise for the body. But is it not anachronistic to apply a sixteenth century Christian concept to the praxis of ancient philosophy? Hadot’s argument in favour of the adoption of the phrase is to suggest that the exercises of Ignatius stand in a Christian tradition that stretched back to antiquity and that is ultimately indebted to ancient philosophical practice. Hadot writes:

Spiritual exercises can best be observed in the context of Hellenistic and Roman schools of philosophy. The Stoics, for instance, declared explicitly that

philosophy, for them, was an “exercise”...philosophy did not consist in teaching an abstract theory...but rather in the art of living. It is a concrete attitude and determinate lifestyle, which engages the whole of existence. The philosophical act is not situated merely on the cognitive level, but on that of the self and of being. It is a progress, which causes us to *be* more fully, and makes us better. It is a conversion which turns out entire life upside down, changing the life of the person who goes through it. It raises the individual from an inauthentic condition of life, darkened by unconsciousness and harassed by worry, to an authentic state of life...an exact vision of the world, inner peace, and freedom.⁹

Hadot notes that although each school had its own therapeutic model, they all linked their therapeutics to a profound transformation of the way in which the individual sees and experiences the world, and it is the object of spiritual exercises to bring about such transformation.

The best way, then, of understanding the idea of philosophy as a way of life is through the notion of “spiritual exercises.” Just as there is a gymnastics of the body, so we can entertain the idea of exercises of the soul as a form or mode of mental training. Here philosophy is not simply to be conceived as a set of written doctrines but as a set of practices or exercises that seek to transform one’s way of life, indeed, one’s entire way of being and fundamental orientation in the world. Although we may have reservations over the word “spiritual,” Hadot thinks that none of the other adjectives we could use, such as “psychic” or “ethical,” covers all the aspects of the reality we wish to describe with this term. In essence, by means of such exercises the individual is meant to elevate himself to

the reality of objective spirit, which is to say, “he replaces himself within the perspective of the Whole.”¹⁰

Bergson and Philosophy as a Way of Life

The extent to which Bergson adopts aspects of this ancient conception of philosophy in his thinking on life is striking, and it is today an under acknowledged aspect of his philosophy. Of course, one cannot simply claim that Bergson is a Stoic: he eschews both fatalism and determinism, and in his final published text of 1932, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, it is clear that for him that what is to be prized in life is not Stoic *apatheia* but action, that is, the attempt to change the world in the direction of its progressive accomplishment of an open morality and an open society.¹¹ Moreover, even without this stress on the primacy of dynamic and vital action, it is clear that Bergson’s conception of the Whole of life is different to the ancient one, such as we find in Stoicism. For Bergson the Whole is not given and it does not precede the parts that make it up. Rather, for Bergson the Whole is the ever-changing, ever-mobile openness of reality, and as such, it does not cease to evolve and to become. Nevertheless, having noted this key difference, it remains striking the extent to which his notion of the sympathy of life, which resides in the Whole, is congruent with an ancient conception. As Plotinus puts it, the “All” is “one universally comprehensive living being, encircling all the living beings within it...”¹² At the same time, one might propose that Bergsonian intuition can be practised, as a unique mode of extended perception, as a “spiritual exercise.” Again, though, the mode of contemplation is of a specific kind: the aim is to not to attain a beatific state of ataraxia but to extend human perception and to think

beyond the human condition (that is, beyond the dominant modes and habits of representation that we have acquired in the course of our evolution). The ultimate aim of this quest is to restore us to the *élan* of life itself, and this is what motivates us to undertake it.

With respect to altering and extending our perception of the world, it is important to note that Bergson sees a close alliance between art and philosophy. He argues, for example, that both literature and philosophy are involved in a search of time gone by, shifting our attention from the plane of action, where the past is contracted into the present and only the present is of interest to us, to the dream plane, where “indivisible and indestructible, the whole of the past is deployed.”¹³ Still, Bergson draws a distinction between literature and philosophy: if the province of the former is one to undertake a study of the soul (*l'âme*) in the concrete and focused on individual examples, then it is the task of the latter “to lay down the general conditions of the direct, immediate observation of oneself by oneself.”¹⁴ And why is it important for philosophy to do so? Because its task is to defeat both spatial and social habits of representation, which are habits that make it impossible for us to have an immediate contact with life. For this to take place we need to cultivate intuition as a philosophical method.

Now, Bergson admits that “intuition” is a word that caused him some degree of hesitation.¹⁵ His hesitation is due in part to its use by the likes of previous philosophers, such as Schelling and Schopenhauer, to search for the eternal. By contrast, Bergson wants a mode of intuition that will find for us true duration. He thus speaks of an “intuitive metaphysics” that would be able to follow the real in all its undulations. He

adds an important set of qualifications as to just what this metaphysics will give us, and it is worth citing him at length so as to gain a sense of the unity of life that he is after:

[An intuitive metaphysics] would not embrace in a single sweep the totality of things; but for each thing it would give an explanation which would fit it exactly, and it alone. It would not begin by defining or describing the systematic unity of the world: who knows if the world is actually one? Experience alone can say, and unity, if it exists, will appear at the end of the search as a result; it is impossible to posit it at the start as a principle. Furthermore, it will be a rich, full unity, the unity of a continuity, the unity of our reality, and not that abstract and empty unity, which has come from one supreme generalization, and which could just as well be that of any possible world whatsoever.¹⁶

With “intuition” Bergson makes the bold claim that we move from representation to an absolute, providing us with a vision which is scarcely distinguishable from the object seen, a knowledge which is contact and even coincidence.”¹⁷

For Bergson, then, change is the stuff of reality and it is possible for us to experience this in a vital way. He thus appeals to a “true empiricism,” which he defines as the genuine metaphysics, as a way of seeking to capture what we fundamentally know, namely, that all living things are the subjects of a mobile and changing reality. It is only when we think in a superficial manner that we deem reality to be something inert, mechanical, and repetitive. It is not just misguided to see the world in these terms; it is also a profound spiritual loss. Bergson wants, then, a philosophy of life that will have a

deep effect on our lives and how we actually live these lives. For philosophy to do this, for it to make contact with human life, it is necessary to break with our fundamental mental habits – to think beyond the human condition or human state, as he puts it – and to ensure that philosophy does not degenerate into a merely scholastic exercise, divorced from the existential efforts of human beings to be equal to the durational conditions of their existence.

In his corpus, then, Bergson is deeply preoccupied with the reformation of philosophy. He is inspired by the ambition of taking philosophy out of the school, as he puts it, including the disputes between the different schools of philosophy, and bringing into more intimate contact with life. Indeed, if we follow the contours of intuitive life with its special kind of knowledge, then the promise is opened up of bringing an end to inert states and dead things: “nothing but the mobility of which the stability of life is made.”¹⁸ Such knowledge will do two things. First, it will enrich philosophical speculation: we see for the sake of seeing and the enrichment an enlarged perception offers us. Second, it will nourish and illuminate everyday life, and enhance our power to act and live.

The task is to extend perception and to affect a conversion of attention. The method for doing this is intuition, and the overriding aim is to become accustomed to seeing all things *sub specie durationis*: in this way what is dead comes back to life, life acquires depth, and we come into account with the original *élan* of life that attunes us to the vital and dynamic character of life and also serves to encourage us to create new things. The task of philosophical education is to become a master in the art of living.

Bergson's contribution to our re-engagement with philosophy as a way of life consists primarily of his attempt to provide an enlarged perception of the universe. For Hadot, Bergson's thinking effects a displacement of attention – similar in character to the phenomenological reduction or *epoche* as articulated in the work of Merleau-Ponty¹⁹ – and that amounts to a “conversion,” that is, a “radical rupture with regard to the state of unconsciousness in which man normally lives.”²⁰ What is being overturned is the “utilitarian perception we have of the world,” which conceals from us the world *qua* world. Hadot contends in closing his discussion of Bergson: “Aesthetic and philosophical perceptions of the world are only possible by means of a complete transformation of our relationship to the world: we have to perceive it *for itself*, and no longer *for ourselves*.”²¹ This statement is in accord with a core tenet of Hadot's thinking, constituting one of the main features of the cosmic consciousness he associates with the Stoic way of living, in which we make the conversion from prosaic subjective everydayness to the standpoint of universality and objectivity.

Bergson has his own unique gloss on this conception: the effort is to be made to make contact with the reality of duration, to even coincide with it. However, we need to properly understand Bergson on this point about coincidence, and here an insight developed by Merleau-Ponty is, I think, especially helpful. He argues that the famous coincidence with the real promoted by Bergson's new thinking does not mean “that the philosopher loses himself or is absorbed into being.” No, the experience is quite different to this: “It is not necessary for him to go outside himself in order to reach the things themselves; he is solicited or haunted by them from within.” Merleau-Ponty adequately appreciates the key insight: everything living thing that exists is implicated in duration as

an immanent reality. This means, then, that: “The relation of the philosopher to being is not the frontal relation of the spectator to the spectacle; it is a kind of complicity, an oblique and clandestine relationship.”²² The task at hand is one of embodying this relationship to oneself as a way of life and learning to appreciate the implication of one’s own *durée* in a reality of universal duration and that is made up of different tensions and rhythms. The solution to the problematic of being, then, is *within* us, and we go astray in our thinking and living when we posit an exterior being that is then supposedly discovered by an observing consciousness.

For Bergson it is primarily art and philosophy that exist to extend our perception. Although detached from reality in its ordinary, prosaic form the artist is the one who is able to see in it more things than is customary. Normally we are so attached to life, and on account of the needs of living and acting, that we do not perceive it. Philosophy takes up the aesthetic mode of extended perception and seeks to effect “a certain displacement of our attention... This conversion of the attention would be philosophy itself.”²³ Here it is a matter of turning attention aside from the part of the universe that interests us practically and turning it back toward what serves no practical end.

I have argued that throughout his writings Bergson is concerned to reform philosophy in a fundamental manner, seeking to take it out of the school and wishing to connect it intimately with life. He does this in a unique way by developing a close rapport with the sciences of his day, especially the study of life, and so as to ensure that philosophy remains modern and does not lose contact with advances in knowledge. For example, Bergson wants to show how, through an appreciation of the evolution of life, philosophy can expand our perception of the universe. How, though, is it possible to

think beyond the human condition and outside of its particular framing of reality? This is where Bergson appeals to evolution itself and stresses that the line of evolution that has culminated in the human is not the only line. His idea seems to be a radical one, namely, that there are other forms of life-consciousness that express something immanent to and essential in the evolutionary movement, and the critical task is to then bring these other lines of evolution into contact or communication with the human intellect. Bergson poses the question: would not the result be a consciousness as wide as life?

What does he have in mind? Bergson suggests that it is possible to cultivate, through intellectual effort, a perception of life where we experience something of the very impetus of creative life itself or what he describes as the push of life and that has led to the creation of divergent forms of life – such as plant and animal – from a common impulsion. In short, philosophy is that discipline of thinking that tries to make the effort to establish contact with the vitality and creativity of life and involves novelty, invention, process, and duration.

In the introduction to *Creative Evolution* Bergson tackles the objection that may be raised against the project he is inviting us to pursue: will it not be through our intellect and our intellect alone that we perceive the other forms of consciousness? In answer to this objection he points out that this would be the case *if* we were pure intellects, but the fact is, he thinks, we are not. Around our conceptual and logical modes of thought, and that have moulded themselves on certain aspects and tendencies of the real, it is possible to find powers of insight and perception the nature of which we have only an indistinct feeling when we remain shut up in ourselves and exist as closed beings. The task of

philosophy is to make these powers clear and distinct, Bergson says in a clear reference to Descartes.

Typically, we exist – both in terms of our species history and our individual development – as slaves of certain natural necessities. Philosophy is a practice and a discipline that can enable us to go beyond the level of necessities and enable us to become “masters associated with a greater Master.”²⁴ We exist as masters in two main forms: through science and the mastery of matter, and through philosophy and the mastery of life. One is more free than the other for Bergson: the mastery of matter is part of the human condition and is a necessity for us, but the mastery of life takes us beyond the human condition and represents a free activity. Moreover, whilst the former activity serves to provide us with security and is bound up with securing a life of convenience(s), the latter is something altogether different. Philosophy can become complementary to science with respect to both speculation and practice. More than this, it supplements science since science offers us only the promise of well-being and the pleasure of it – philosophy can give us *joy*, and this joy is bound up with the move beyond the limited character of the human condition.

Sympathy and the Evolution of Life

Bergson places the emphasis on sympathy and on intuition as the method by which we enrich our connection to the whole of life. I should perhaps make it clear that in Bergson's account sympathy plays both a descriptive and a prescriptive role: there is a level of sympathetic communication between forms of life within evolution *and* it is to be

cultivated as a mode of intuition and a new style of aesthetic-cum-philosophical intelligence. Bergson's argument is that we are estranged from evolutionary life and from the creative conditions of our existence; sympathy, then, has the effect of re-connecting the human to the non-human and to the whole of life. This is in accord with Bergson's conception of what philosophy is: an effort to expand our perception of the universe.

Although Bergson makes it clear that the intuition he will deploy bears above all upon an internal duration, this does not mean that he is restricting its use to a solely psychological reality: the method of intuition is intended to provide access to an ontological reality, even a cosmological one. Or, at least Bergson seems to be suggesting this in *Creative Evolution* (1907). In the "Introduction" (parts one and two; 1922) that forms the beginning of the collection of essays, *Creative Mind*, he elaborates his position quite carefully. Let me note the two key points he makes. First, he asks, whether through intuition we only intuit ourselves in our mobile and fluid reality. It is here that we encounter an important appeal to sympathy, as when Bergson suggests that "Unreflecting sympathy and antipathy...give evidence of a possible interpenetration of human consciousnesses," so providing possible evidence of the existence of psychological endosmosis.²⁵ Second, Bergson now asks after a possible extension of sympathy *beyond* the level of human consciousnesses. Allow me to quote him: "But is it only with consciousnesses that we are in sympathy? If every living being is born, develops and dies, if life is an evolution and if duration is in this case a reality, is there not also an intuition of the vital, and consequently a metaphysics of life, which might in a sense prolong the science of the living?"²⁶ Bergson appears to be suggesting that through

an expanded consciousness we can recapture the “*élan of life*” (*l’élan de vie*) that lies within us.

Let me now turn to the equally rich presentation of sympathy we find in *Creative Evolution*. The crucial distinction here is between intelligence as a faculty of understanding, and of action and intuition as the method and mode of perception that affords us access to duration and so to an absolute. The intellect has not been made to apprehend evolution conceived as the continuity of a change or pure mobility. Rather, it represents becoming as a series of states in which each is taken to be homogeneous and therefore as something that does not change. For Bergson, the intellect is not meant for pure theorizing, which would allow it to assume its place within movement; rather, the intellect, which is an instrument of manufacture, starts with immobility as if this was an ultimate reality. If the intellect does form an idea of movement it does so by constructing it out of immobilities put together. The intellect fabricates reality by thinking it can carve out matter at will. On account of the fact that it is always seeking to reconstitute with what is given, the intellect allows the new in each moment of a history to escape from its grasp, and therefore it does not admit the unforeseeable and the creative dimension of an evolution. Bergson reaches the conclusion that: “*The intellect is characterized by a natural inability to comprehend life.*”²⁷ The turn to instinct, which, Bergson claims is moulded on the form of life, is necessitated by this inability of the intellect to think life. We now get another key contrast: between treating things mechanically, as does intelligence, and treating things organically, as does instinct. Instinct, if it could provide us with knowledge, “would give up to us the most intimate secrets of life.”²⁸ Bergson adds: “The most essential of the primary instincts are really, therefore, vital processes.

The potential consciousness that accompanies them is generally actualized only at the outset of the act, and leaves the rest of the process to go on by itself. It would only have to expand more widely, and then dive into its own depth completely, to be one with the generative force of life.”²⁹ This valorization of the vital character of instinct leads Bergson to a consideration of sympathy, as when he declares, “Instinct is sympathy.”³⁰ He once again re-iterates his point that if this instinct qua sympathy could extend its object and reflect upon itself then we would have the key to life’s vital operations, just as intelligence guides us to the other half of the absolute, namely, the operations of matter. If intelligence, in the form of science, lays open the secrets of physical operations, and goes around life so as to take from outside the greatest possible number of views of life, intuition, which is now introduced into Bergson’s account, discloses to us the “inwardness of life.” He makes clear that by intuition he means instinct that has become disinterested and self-conscious, so “capable of reflecting upon its object and enlarging it indefinitely.”³¹

How is such an effort possible? Bergson provides the example of an aesthetic faculty that exists along with normal perception. Whereas our eye perceives the different features of a living being as merely assembled, not as mutually organized, the artist seeks to regain the original intention of life, that is, the simple movement that runs through the lines and binds them together. The artist does this precisely through an effort of intuition in which s/he is placed back within the object by a kind of sympathy, and so breaks down the space that separates subject and object. Bergson holds that it is possible to conceive an inquiry that is turned in the same direction as art but which takes as its object life in general, not simply, as in the case of the artist, the individual case. What would be the

result of such an exercise of our mental capabilities? On the one hand, the mechanism of intelligence would be utilized so as to show how our intellectual moulds cease to be applicable to the phenomena of life; on the other hand, intuition would bring the intellect to a point of recognition where it would acknowledge that life does not readily go into our categories, such as the one and the many, or that of mechanical causality and intelligent finality. But more than this intuition would transport us into life's own domain, "which is reciprocal interpenetration, endlessly continued creation."³² It would do this precisely through a sympathetic communication that is established between ourselves and the rest of the living. Here our consciousness is expanded and we think beyond the human condition, that is, beyond the limits of intelligence that closes us off from life and the evolutionary movement as a whole. The alienation of ourselves from nature and from life, from the Whole, would be overcome.

For Bergson, then, the problem of knowledge is one with the metaphysical problem, and the two in fact depend on experience. We reach a decisive insight that shows us why Bergson takes so seriously, as the fundamental component in his effort to think life, the study of evolution:

On the one hand, indeed, if intelligence is charged with matter and instinct with life, we must squeeze them both in order to get the double essence from them; metaphysics is therefore dependent upon the theory of knowledge. But, on the other hand, if consciousness has thus split up into intuition and intelligence, it is because of the need it had to apply itself to matter at the same as it had to follow the stream of life. The double form of consciousness is then due to the double

form of the real, and the theory of knowledge must be dependent upon metaphysics. In fact, each of these two lines of thought leads to the other; they form a circle, and there can be no other centre to the circle but the empirical study of evolution.³³

Bergson expresses his position in quite clear terms in his lecture of 1911 on “Philosophical Intuition.” The key point that needs grasping is this: what is outside us in the form of the real is equally inside us. Bergson writes: “the matter and life which fill the world are equally within us; the forces which work in all things we feel within ourselves; whatever may be the inner essence of what is and what is done, we are of that essence. Let us then go down into our own inner selves: the deeper the point we touch, the stronger will be the thrust which sends us back to the surface.”³⁴ In making the effort, then, to think beyond the human condition we come into contact, through intuition, with movements, memories, and a non-human consciousness deep within us. Deep within the human there is something other than the human. This means that for Bergson the sources of human experience are more obscure and distant than both common sense and science suppose, and these are sources that, Bergson contends, Kant failed to penetrate in his attempt to philosophize about the conditions of the possibility of experience. In essence, this is what Bergson means when he writes of “dissolving into the Whole” and experiencing “the ocean of life.” Although this dissolving experience may approach the insights of poetry or mysticism Bergson is after philosophical precision and clarity. He never ceases to emphasize the extent to which intuition requires long and stubborn effort.

As David Lapoujade notes, Bergson accords primacy in reality to alterity: “it is because the other is within us that we can project it outside us in the form of

‘consciousness’ or ‘intention.’”³⁵ What we project onto the world is our own alterity. However, it is clear that for Bergson when we experience sympathy it is not merely sympathy for others we subject ourselves to, but equally sympathy for one’s self and recognition of the alterity that lies concealed within ourselves. As Bergson puts it: “...one thing is sure: we sympathize with ourselves” (*Mais nous sympathisons sûrement avec nous-mêmes*).³⁶ Such an insight perhaps allows us to reconfigure the in-itself: “The in-itself no longer designates the way in which things will never be ‘for us’ but the way in which, on the contrary, things will be very much within us.”³⁷ This is one way in which we can grasp how Bergson configures philosophy as a way of life in his writings: his new modes of thinking provide us with an expanded perception both of the self and of the universe it inhabits. As Hadot notes, the task is to undo oneself from the artificial, the conventional, and the habitual, so as to return us to an elementary perception of the world, one removed from all prejudice. As he rightly notes, this effort of a renewed perception amounts to a spiritual exercise: “For me the essential of Bergsonism will always be the idea of philosophy as transformation of perception.”³⁸

For Bergson, then, the key move for thought to make lies in the direction of sympathy. By means of science, intelligence does its work and delivers to us more and more the secret of life's material or physical operations. But this gives us only a perspectivism that never penetrates the inside, going “all round life, taking from outside the greatest possible number of views of it...”³⁹ By contrast, metaphysics can follow the path of intuition, which affords insight into the durations of life. Rather than knowledge properly so-called, intuition provides us with a supplement that enables us to grasp that which intelligence fails to provide. More than this, it is intuition that can disclose to us in

a palpable form what the discoveries of modern biology have established, namely, that living systems are implicated in an evolving Whole of life.

When Bergson thinks about the sympathy of life he is engaging with modern accounts of evolution, but in order to do so he draws upon an ancient conception. He has two sources to draw upon – Plotinus and the Stoics – and it is Plotinus he refers to in the extended treatment of sympathy we encounter in *Creative Evolution*. He writes as follows: “Thus the instinctive knowledge which one species possesses of another on a certain particular point has its root in the very unity of life, which is, to use the expression of an ancient philosopher, a ‘whole sympathetic to itself.’”⁴⁰ Of course, Bergson has to acknowledge that life becomes caught up in particular species and, as such, it “is cut off from the rest of its own work, save at one or two points that are of vital concern to the species just arisen.”⁴¹ Nevertheless, having acknowledged this aspect of the evolution of life, Bergson wants to show that sympathy between different forms of life is operative in this evolution and he gives the example of the *Ammophila Hirsuta* (a species of parasitoidal wasp) and its prey. We do not need to follow the details of his account here. Rather, we need simply note that it serves for Bergson as an example of how evolution can only be partially understood by intelligence and that it needs the supplement of a philosophy of sympathy. What truly interests Bergson is how in the phenomena of feeling we experience in ourselves, albeit in a much vaguer form, something of what takes place in the consciousness of an insect acting by instinct. “Evolution,” he writes, “does but sunder, in order to develop them to the end, elements which, at their origin, interpenetrated each other.”⁴²

The extent to which *Creative Evolution* is an extraordinarily bold and ambitious work that seeks to marry the new science of evolution with the concerns of ancient philosophy has been forgotten. For Bergson, there is a Whole of life and of evolution, which he conceives in terms of universal interaction. The task, as he sees it, is to reintegrate the systems that science isolates into this Whole. We need to do this in order to adequately conceive of reality itself and to give ourselves the chance of re-connecting with the Whole of life. For Bergson this Whole is a natural system. He concedes at one point in his argument that life is a kind of mechanism. However, he asks whether it is the mechanism of parts artificially isolated within the whole universe or “the mechanism of the real whole,” and this real whole would be that of an indivisible continuity.⁴³

Bergson wants us to appreciate the complicated and implicated character of evolution. On the one hand, divergent lines characterize it, and, on the other hand, there is reciprocal interpenetration between the parts. The movement of evolution is complicated precisely because the evolution of life has not been characterized by a single direction. Rather its movement can be compared to that of an exploding shell bursting into fragments, shells that in turn continue to burst into other fragments. Continuing this analogy further, Bergson speaks of evolution in terms of the breaking of a shell that involves both an explosive force (the powder it contains) and the resistance it encounters (in the metal). Thus, the way life itself evolves into individuals and species depends on two similar causes, namely, the resistance of inert matter and the explosive force that life holds within itself owing to an unstable balance of tendencies. Life enters into the habits of inert matter and from this learns how, little by little, to draw from it living forms and vital properties. The complex and quasi-discontinuous organism arises from smaller,

more elemental, prototypes but in advancing in complexity such an organism introduces into life new components and evolves via new habits. The evolution of life for Bergson is characterized by divergent tendencies. Unlike an individual life that must choose between the interwoven personalities that characterize it, nature preserves the different tendencies that bifurcate. There is abundant evidence that there exists sympathetic communication between the different forms of life that shape evolution on earth, from the examples of insects and their prey that Bergson gives to modes of symbiosis.⁴⁴

Conclusion

As Lars Spuybroek has noted, and as we have seen ourselves, Bergson places his philosophy of perception or intuition in the framework of an old notion of sympathy.⁴⁵ The Stoics have a cosmological appreciation of sympathy since it applies to the world as a whole. For Epicurus, for example, sympathy is essentially psychological, and can explain the relation between mind and body; for the Stoics, by contrast, it is a feature of the world as a whole: the entities that exist in the world are in sympathy with one another.⁴⁶ Having noted this, however, it is important to appreciate that Bergson is developing his conception of the sympathetic Whole in terms of an engagement with modern evolutionary theory and the effort of developing a novel philosophy of life, one that we can incorporate as a way of life. To do this may require of us that we practice the method of intuition as a “spiritual exercise.” Such an exercise would not only allow us to contemplate reality in a new way, one that is attuned to its durational character, but it would also enhance our power to act and live. It would do this by showing the extent to

which our acting in the world is of a dynamical character, which is the character of time as duration: time is something real (at least for a living system); the portals of the future remain open; and creativity and novelty are real features of our existence and of life itself.

I have sought to show in this essay that for Bergson the principal way in which we can deepen ourselves in our lived existence is through sympathy. Intuition is a mode of sympathy and to be conceived as a mode of feeling-knowing that operates in the interior of things. In contrast to “analysis,” which is an operation that reduces the object to elements already known, intuition aims to place us into contact with what is unique and inexpressible in it. More than this it aims to “live again in creative evolution by being one with it in sympathy.”⁴⁷ This is quite different to the mode of mimesis, which, as Spuybroek notes, is too dependent on dualistic notions. In Bergsonian sympathy, “What takes place in each case is that a mobile, transforming, behaving creature synchronizes its own behavior with that of another.”⁴⁸ I agree with Spuybroek when he argues that it is necessary to resist what we have learned about sympathy in our own modern times, since it has turned it into a weak notion of mere identification and solely in the domain of psychology. There is a need to show that human psychology is one with the real physicality of things – two people dancing are just the same as two stars orbiting around each other – and in this way we can give ourselves back that which we are so alienated from, namely, the very life of things. For this to take place we need to grant an importance to intuition as a novel and special mode of attention since it is, “an extension of sympathy through a floating and modulating attention, a specific effort of gradation.”⁴⁹ Sympathy, then, is not an extra that is added on top of our relations with things but lies at

the core of these relations: “Sympathy is the power of things at work, working between all things, and between us and things.”⁵⁰

For Bergson the enterprise of dissolving into the Whole ends by expanding the humanity within us and so allows humanity to surpass itself.⁵¹ This is accomplished through philosophy for it is philosophy that provides us with the means – such as the method of intuition - for reversing the normal directions of the mind (instrumental, utilitarian), so upsetting its habits. As Deleuze notes, to “coincide with duration always necessitates a painful effort...The coincidence is a privileged moment of contraction. When it succeeds in this endeavor, philosophy has fulfilled its purpose. Then one has truly exceeded the ‘human condition.’”⁵²

It is with this idea of thinking beyond the human condition that Bergson can be seen to be making a novel contribution to the modern re-invention of philosophy as a way of life. Michel Foucault is well-known for his attempt in his late writings to re-awaken interest in ancient ethical practices of the care of the self. He has been roundly criticized by Pierre Hadot for the manner in which he does this. For Hadot, a key element of the psychic content of the spiritual exercises of ancient philosophy is the feeling of belonging to the whole or a cosmic consciousness of feeling oneself part of the cosmic whole, and he argues that this dimension of ancient thought is absent in Foucault’s appreciation and impairs our reception of it. For Hadot, this is what is crucial in ancient thought in the concern with self-care: to ensure that the movement of interiorization, in which self-mastery is practised and inner independence attained, is accompanied by another movement that raises the self to a higher level in which one is part of nature. The self and its perspective may even be surpassed in this spirituality. The aim and task are not

purely or largely aesthetic: self-transformation is involved but not simply to cultivate the self but to surpass it. There is a conversion to self that is a precondition of the spiritual transformation that constitutes philosophy. However, this conversion should not be confused with the kind of psychologization or aestheticization that reduces the world to the size of oneself.⁵³

Bergson is a unique modern figure with regard to this set of concerns since he teaches both the creation of self by self and, through his teaching on sympathy, the care of life as a whole. In *Creative Evolution* Bergson does not develop at any length an ethics out of his dual concern (he would not publish a work on ethics until twenty-five years later with *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, published in 1932). In spite of this lacuna I wish to suggest that the mode of thinking he unfolds in *Creative Evolution* at least indicates the need for both a care of the self and a care of life.

One final point is worth making, which concerns the anxiety Bergson expresses over the nature of philosophy in his last work, *The Two Sources*. As I have shown in this essay, Bergson's ideas provide a rich set of resources for thinking about philosophy as a way of life in a novel manner: philosophy is a mode of extended human perception that can re-connect us to the Whole of life. However, it needs to be acknowledged that Bergson is also a thinker who sees a limit to philosophy's power and a danger in its practice as a way of life. The danger is that there is too much contemplation in philosophy and to the point where the philosopher becomes utterly self-absorbed in the task of living a life of wisdom. Although Bergson admires the Stoics for their cosmopolitan ideals, he is also keen to acknowledge that "Stoicism is essentially a philosophy," and as such it was unable to draw humanity after it.⁵⁴ Ultimately, then, for

Bergson it is necessary to turn to dynamic religion and to the religious mystic as a way of breaking out of the limits of philosophy and the self-absorption of the philosopher.

¹ Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, ed. Arnold I. Davidson, trans. Michael Chase (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 278. For attempts to interpret Bergson in terms of philosophy as way of life see, Vladimir Jankélévitch, *Henri Bergson*, trans. Nils F. Schott (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015); Frédéric Worms, *Bergson ou les deux sens de la vie* (Paris: PUF, 2013); Michael Foley, *Life Lessons from Bergson* (Macmillan, 2013); Alexandre Lefebvre, *Human Rights as a Way of Life: Bergson's Political Philosophy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013).

² For insight see my chapter, "A Melancholy Science: Bergson on Lucretius," in Keith Ansell-Pearson, *Bergson. Thinking Beyond the Human Condition* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2018), 41-55.

³ Henri Bergson, "The Possible and the Real," in *The Creative Mind*, trans. Mabelle L. Andison (Totowa, New Jersey: Littlefield, Adams & Co., 1975), 106; *Oeuvres* (Paris: PUF, 1972), 1345.

⁴ For relevant insight into Plotinus see, Eyjolfur K. Emilsson, "Plotinus on *sympatheia*," in Eric Schliesser (ed.), *Sympathy: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 36-61. For insight into Stoicism and its appreciation of cosmic sympathy see Gilbert Murray, *The Stoic Philosophy* (1915) (Leopold Classic Library, no date given), 42-3. Bergson is mentioned on page 38. Bergson's lectures on Stoicism can be found in

Bergson Cours IV: Cours sur la philosophie grecque, ed. Henri Hude with Françoise Vinel (Paris: PUF, 2000), 115-136. For instructive insight into Bergson's lecture course on the Stoics see Simone Kotva, "The God of Effort: Henri Bergson and the Stoicism of Modernity," *Modern Theology*, 32: 3, 2016, 397-420.

⁵ Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, authorized translation by Arthur Mitchell (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1983), 191; *Oeuvres*, 658.

⁶ Pierre Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, trans. Michael Chase (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002), 136.

⁷ *Ibid.* 138.

⁸ John Sellars, *The Art of Living: The Stoics on the Nature and Function of Philosophy* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011), 111.

⁹ Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 82-3. Hadot develops the concept of spiritual exercises from Paul Rabbow, *Seelenführung: Methodik der Exerzitien in der Antike* (Munich: Kösel-Verlag, 1954).

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 82.

¹¹ For Bergson's critique of ancient philosophy see *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, trans. R. Ashley Audra and Cloudesley Brereton, with the assistance of W. Horsfall Carter (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977), 60 ff.

¹² Plotinus, *The Enneads*, trans. Stephen McKenna (London: Penguin, 1991), IV, 4, section 32. It should be noted that Plotinus's theory of cosmic sympathy is heavily indebted to Plato's *Timaeus*.

¹³ Henri Bergson, *Creative Mind*, 27; *Oeuvres* 1268.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid. 30; 1271.

¹⁶ Ibid. 31-2; 1272.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid. 127; 1363-4.

¹⁹ See especially Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 1992), Preface.

²⁰ Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 254.

²¹ Ibid.

²² M. Merleau-Ponty, *In Praise of Philosophy & Other Essays*, trans. John Wild, James Edie, & John O' Neill (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1963), 15.

²³ Bergson, *The Creative Mind*, 138; *Oeuvres*, 1373-4.

²⁴ Ibid. 105-6; 1345.

²⁵ Ibid. 32; 1273. The dictionary definition of 'endosmosis' concerns the flow of a substance from an area of lower concentration to one of greater concentration, or the inward flow of a fluid through a permeable membrane toward a fluid of greater concentration. As John Mullarkey has noted, Bergson uses the language of interpenetration and endosmosis with the aim of exemplifying the mixed nature of the real. See Mullarkey, "Henri Bergson" in Keith Ansell-Pearson & Alan D. Schrift (eds.), *The New Century: Bergsonism, Phenomenology, and Responses to Modern Science* (Durham: Acumen Press, 2010), 35.

²⁶ Ibid. 32-3; 1273.

²⁷ Bergson, *Creative Evolution* 165; *Oeuvres* 635.

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- 28 Ibid.
- 29 Ibid. 166; 635-6.
- 30 Ibid. 176; 645.
- 31 Ibid. 176; 645.
- 32 Ibid. 178; 646.
- 33 Ibid. 178; 647.
- 34 Bergson, *Creative Mind*, 124-5; *Oeuvres*, 1361.
- 35 David Lapoujade, "Intuition and Sympathy in Bergson," *Pli: The Warwick Journal of Philosophy*, 15, 2004, 1-18, 11.
- 36 Bergson, *The Creative Mind*, 163; *Oeuvres*, 1396.
- 37 Lapoujade, "Intuition and Sympathy in Bergson," 12.
- 38 P. Hadot, *The Present Alone is our Happiness*, trans. Marc Djaballah (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 126.
- 39 Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, 176; *Oeuvres*, 645.
- 40 Ibid. 167; 637.
- 41 Ibid.
- 42 Ibid. 175; 644.
- 43 Ibid. 31; 520.
- 44 Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, 189; *Oeuvres*, 655. It should be noted that contemporary science, for example in the form of complexity theory, is in tune with Bergson's conception of intuition as a mode of privileged access into the sympathetic character of life and its evolution. The best example I know of is the work of the late Brian Goodwin. See his *Nature's Due* (Floris Books, 2007), and the memorial collection,

Intuitive Knowing: A Tribute to Brian Goodwin, ed. David Lambert and Chris Chetland
(Floris Books, 2013).

⁴⁵ Lars Spuybroek, *The Sympathy of Things: Ruskin and the Ecology of Design*
(London & New York: Bloomsbury, second edition, 2016), 117.

⁴⁶ René Brouwer, “Stoic Sympathy,” in Eric Schliesser (ed.), *Sympathy. A History*
(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 15-36, 22.

⁴⁷ Spuybroek, *The Sympathy of Things*, 119.

⁴⁸ Ibid. 121.

⁴⁹ Ibid. 123.

⁵⁰ Ibid. 129.

⁵¹ Gilles Deleuze, “Lecture Course on Chapter Three of Bergson’s *Creative Evolution*,”
trans. Bryn Loban, *Substance*, 36: 3, 2007, 72-91, 79.

⁵² Ibid. 86.

⁵³ P. Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 211.

⁵⁴ Bergson, *The Two Sources*, 60; *Oeuvres*, 1026.