

Bergson & Lévinas on the Genealogy of Mind

The Version of Record of this manuscript has been published and is available in
The Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology 48 (4):304-318 (2017)
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00071773.2017.1299960>

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July 2016

Abstract:

This paper presents the influence that Bergson's theory of subjectivity had on Lévinas. We start by examining Bergson's 'centripetal theory of mind'. Considering the relationship between perception and action, Bergson develops an understanding of subjectivity as a process that unifies disparate perceptions. Guided by the body, this unifying principle is deemed affective. This being done, we then present a contradiction in Bergson's thinking: While humans are described as different in kind from other animals, the framework used to determine the nature of their world remains unchanged. Bergson never fully embraced the centripetal theory. We then turn to Lévinas and compare his critiques of Bergson and Heidegger. Lévinas believes that both instrumentalize desire, and that a philosophy of subjectivity can only escape this problem by radically embracing the affective nature of Bergson's centripetal theory. The latter accounts for the place of Lévinas' phenomenology of enjoyment.

Word Count: 8309

Key Words: Bergson, Lévinas, Mind, Subjectivity, Affect, Enjoyment.

Introduction

Bergson is the source of an entire complex of interrelated contemporary philosophical ideas, it is to him, no doubt, that I owe my modest speculative initiatives¹

—Lévinas

While one would be hard pressed to find a more influential figure for the thought of Emmanuel Lévinas than Heidegger, it is nevertheless also true that excessive concerns about Heidegger, his thought and their relationship, have come to dominate Levinasian scholarship to a fault. Much in the same way as Lévinas' phenomenology is commonly relegated to the one theme of ethics and the Other, so is the understanding of his intellectual development for the most part limited to his encounters with Husserl and Heidegger. And yet, while these concerns are indeed justifiable they are by no means exhaustive. The soil of Levinasian thought is rich with a variety of sources; literary, philosophical, and Talmudic. This paper hopes to unearth one particularly underdeveloped instance of influence behind Levinasian ontology: Bergson's theory of mind. Such an investigation is pertinent for a variety of reasons.

On the one hand, what English language literature exists regarding Bergson and Lévinas has mostly been relegated to exploring theological concerns. Outside of theology, the name 'Bergson' is usually only mentioned in Levinasian scholarship as historical context.² As will be made evident however, Bergson's influence on Lévinas went much further than theology. In fact, many key features of Levinasian ontology are thoroughly Bergsonian. In particular, we refer to Lévinas' rarely discussed phenomenology of enjoyment (*jouissance*). As will be argued below, both the theoretical necessity for this moment as well as its precise character are due to Lévinas' engagements with Bergsonian philosophy. On the other hand, an understanding of Bergson's place

¹ Levinas, *Entre Nous: Thinking of the Other*, 194

² Cf. for instance De Warren, *Miracles of Creation*, 2010 and Critchley, *The Problem With Lévinas*, 2015

in Levinasian ontology can also help illuminate the latter's critique of Heideggerian ontology. We will argue that Lévinas' critique of Heidegger can actually also be read as a critique of Bergson. For Lévinas, the problem with both Bergson and Heidegger is the instrumentalization of desire. As such, a careful study of Bergson's relation to Lévinas is instrumental in clarifying the latter's metaphysics, a move which in turn can help make sense of some of the more unique moments in Lévinas' thought.

If so influential then, why the dearth of studies relating Bergson and Lévinas? One reason is the unfortunate fact that Bergson's theory of mind, the very theory that Lévinas took so much from, has itself received negligible attention.³ Specifically, we refer to Bergson's theory of the genealogy of mind and its emphasis on affect. Just as the literature on Lévinas rarely treats Bergson directly, recent studies on Bergson fail to consider the importance of affect in his theory of subjectivity.⁴ Although unfortunate, its omission in scholarship is of course not gratuitous. The bulk of Bergson's metaphysical studies are concerned with the nature of time, memory, and creative evolution. And while all of these are related to and indeed are meant to elucidate the workings of mind and consciousness, they nowise illuminate the emergent character of mind that Bergson laid out. It is this emergent process specifically which Lévinas takes up as a point of

³ The reason for this might be due entirely to the contingent historical circumstances that characterize contemporary interest in Bergson. After years of abandonment, it was Deleuze's *Bergsonism* that first rekindled interest in Bergson's thought. And while very interesting, *Bergsonism*, like all of Deleuze's monographs, is highly idiosyncratic. Deleuze wasn't so much interested in this theory of subjectivity as he was in concepts such as virtuality and multiplicity. In thus framing how Bergson was to be encountered anew, his emergent theory of subjectivity was almost entirely left aside. That being said, it is clear that many found the ideas discussed below worth further study. Particularly relevant here are the works of Hans Jonas & Whitehead, who explicitly note a heavy Bergsonian influence. Tracking the development of this line of influence is part of a broader work currently underway.

⁴ To cite a few examples, Mullarkey's collection *The New Bergson* contains essays by Worms, Carius, and Matthews, neither of which treats place of affect at all. Further, in the subsequent *Bergson and Philosophy: An Introduction*, discussion of the relationship of influence between Bergson and Lévinas is limited to the theme of ethics and the Other. There is no discussion of how Bergson might have influenced Lévinas' theory of subjectivity. Even in the recently translated *Henri Bergson* by Vladimir Jankelevitch (2015), Bergson's emphasis on affect is discussed mainly in terms of *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*.

contention and which shapes both his philosophy of enjoyment as well as his critiques of Heidegger and Bergson.

This paper hopes to shed some light on these mostly unexplored issues by spelling out Bergson's theory of the genealogy of mind and its influence on Lévinas. The paper will have the following parts: First, we will lay out Bergson's theory of the emergent mind. This will be analysed both from a first-person perspective, as discussed in *Matter and Memory*, as well as in a third person perspective, as laid out in *Creative Evolution*. Throughout we will emphasize the central role played by affect and end by offering some criticisms of Bergson's analyses. The second part will then directly discuss Lévinas' criticisms of Bergson and show the similarities between these and Lévinas' critique of Heidegger. Lastly, the paper will argue that Lévinas' vital but oft overlooked ontology of enjoyment is the direct result of his engagement with Bergson's emergent theory of mind.

Bergson & the Genealogy of Mind

Our needs are, then, so many searchlights which, directed upon the continuity of sensible qualities, single out in it distinct bodies. ... To establish these special relations among portions thus carved out from sensible reality is just what we call living.⁵

—Bergson

Bergson's most direct engagement with the question of mind can be found in *Matter and Memory*. Setting itself the task of resolving the debate between materialists and idealists, *Matter and Memory* maintains that at the root of this false problem, and, more generally, the problem of the relation between matter and spirit, lay a misunderstanding of the nature of perception. Both

⁵ Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, 198 (Hereafter cited as *MM*)

materialism and idealism hold the unwarranted assumption that perception has something to do with knowledge. As such, both theories are forced to contend with the existence of representations—the ‘real’ here is always somehow symbolically mediated—and in so doing, are led to the most extravagant of hypotheses. Either we dismiss consciousness entirely, as hard materialism would have it, or we radically redefine what we might mean by an objective, mind-independent world.

Rather than sacrifice reality to the injunctions of theory however, Bergson embarks upon an investigation of the nature of perception so as to determine whether we can avoid problems such as these altogether.⁷ Analysed in its purity,⁸ perception is seen to have nothing to do with knowledge at all, at stake is always *action*. The simplest way to see this, Bergson claims, is by directly analysing the brain and perceptual apparatus of the physical body. By looking at their relationship with the rest of the organism it becomes clear that the relationship with the world we call perception is not one of knowledge. This clarification, and its elucidation, resolves the problems that stem from both idealism and materialist theories while also providing the foundation for an emergent theory of the mind.

Bergson begins his argument by noting the differing functions performed by two elements of an organism, the spinal cord and the brain. In all higher vertebrates, automatism seems to have

⁷ As an exercise in the description of the ‘immediate data of consciousness,’ Bergson’s work is thus exemplary phenomenology. The idea here is similar to Heidegger’s discussion in *Being and Time* regarding Kant and proof of ‘the world outside me’. Kant said that it is the scandal of philosophy that it hasn’t been able to prove the existence of the real world. As Heidegger points out, this is absurd. The scandal is that it keeps trying! The world is of course what is there, given to us in experience. The point is to systematically describe it, thereby elucidating experience and providing an understanding of what the world is in the first place. This is phenomenological grounding, and these false problems are precisely what the epoché is meant to prevent. (cf. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, pp 203-4)

⁸ Much can and has been said about the issue of ‘pure’ analysis in Bergson. For our purposes here, it is enough to note that ‘pure perception’ here means considering perception as entirely separated from memory. Bergson acknowledges that such ‘purity’ is merely theoretical, as actual perception *can never* be entirely free from memory, but since what is at stake is merely the clearing up of a philosophical confusion, the idea remains useful and illustrative. For more on ‘pure perception’ cf. Harward *What does Bergson Mean by ‘Pure Perception’?* And Carr’s various subsequent replies in *Mind*. 1918-1920

its seat in the spinal cord. It is what receives sensory input and redirects it towards particular muscles for contraction; a basic reflex arc. Although clearly a matter of motion and action, then, an organism functioning so simply could not be said to be free in any meaningful way. And yet, with the introduction of a brain, a hesitation is introduced into the system. Now, received sensory input doesn't directly cause any one specific movement. Rather, sensory input is redirected towards the brain, and only from there is it then redirected to the various motor mechanisms. With the brain, that is, the arc is no longer closed; sensory input is disconnected from any one particular motor mechanism. In such organisms, stimuli received can be redirected towards a variety of outputs. In effect, Bergson claims, the organism here *chooses* its action. In all of this, neither knowledge nor representation are to be found.

The brain is no more than a kind of a central telephonic interchange: its office is to allow communication or to delay it. It adds nothing to what it receives; but, as all the organs of perception send it to their ultimate prolongations, and, as all the motor mechanisms of the spinal cord and of the medulla oblongata have in it their accredited representatives, it really constitutes a center, where the peripheral excitation gets into relation with this or that motor mechanism, chosen and no longer prescribed... In other words, the brain appears to us an instrument of analysis in regard to the movement received and an instrument of selection in regard to the movement executed. But, on the one case as in the other, its office is limited to the transmission and division of movement. [MM 30]

While the upshot of limiting the body's function to movement is thus clear, Bergson does however somehow still need to account for consciousness. Along with affect, this is the role played by memory.¹⁰

¹⁰ The theme of memory is one of the most studied topics in Bergsonian scholarship and won't be treated here beyond a few quick notes (For more on memory and Bergson's metaphysics cf. notes 3 and 4 above). Unlike his monist counterparts, Bergson's metaphysics does "affirm the reality of spirit," although this in a very qualified, and distinctly non-Cartesian sense. Memory, Bergson says, must be understood as being completely unextended. As is explained then, his metaphysics are, "...frankly, dualistic. But... [they] deal with body and mind in such a way as to lessen greatly, if not to overcome, the theoretical difficulties which have always beset dualism and which cause it, though suggested by the immediate verdict of consciousness and adopted by common sense, to be held in small honour among philosophers." [MM 9]

Details aside, memory is said to be that which inserts itself in the hesitation opened up by the brain and allows for the deliberative moment inherent in choice.¹² Thus, in everyday life, an organism's experience of the world results from the mixture of perception and memory. Throughout this process, however, what matters is to note that everything remains determined by possible action on the world. The particular aspect of memory which finds ingress in any one moment of perception is delimited according to that which corresponds to the necessities and current bodily attitudes of the perceiving organism. Representation is nowhere to be found. What, then, does this all mean for the achievement of consciousness?

A Centripetal Theory of Consciousness:

Perception, we have said, is always about action. This amounts to saying that the 'things' we distinguish in the world are delimited according to our possible action upon them. 'Things' are precisely images that we can do something with. Bergson's reasoning here is fundamentally biological. Objects are distinguished in the world according to an organism's biological needs, things such as basic nutrition for instance, always with the purpose of preserving life. It is our needs which cut up the real along the lines of maximum biological utility. As much of what follows will depend on this argument, we quote at length,

Already the power conferred on the individual consciousness of manifesting itself in acts requires the formation of distinct material zones, which correspond respectively to living bodies... But this body itself, as soon as it is constituted and distinguished, is *led by its various needs* to distinguish and constitute other bodies. In the humblest living being *nutrition demands research*, then contact, in short, a series of efforts which converge toward a center: this center is just what is made into an object—the object which will serve as food. Whatever the nature of matter, it may be said that life will at once establish in it a primary discontinuity, expressing *the duality of the need and of that which must serve to satisfy it*. But the need of food is not the only need. Others group themselves round it, *all having for object the conservation of the individual or of the species*; and each of them leads us to distinguish, beside our own body, bodies independent of it which we must seek or avoid. *Our needs are, then, so many searchlights which, directed upon the continuity of sensible qualities, single out in it distinct bodies*. They cannot satisfy themselves except upon the condition that they

¹² The particular dynamics of memory's ingestion are explained by a series of conical diagrams found throughout MM which I also won't be discussing.

carve out, within this continuity, a body which is to be their own and then delimit other bodies with which the first can enter into relation, as if with persons. *To establish these special relations among portions thus carved out from sensible reality is just what we call living.* [MM 198 cf also 38, 49, 229]

Now, as perception has nothing to do with knowledge, the question regarding the achievement of consciousness becomes not, ‘How is the representation or image of the world created?’ or ‘How do *I* gain consciousness of an outside-of-myself?’ but rather, because of the nature of perception, ‘How do all these useful images find a centre?’ In other words, the problem of consciousness is not whether or not *the world as experienced* is objectively real, but rather, how it is that a scattered, impersonal series of images can find a centre? The process is not one of representation or projection, but rather one of gathering, of involution.

There is, first of all, the aggregate of images; and then, ‘centres of action,’ from which the images appear to be reflected. Thus, perceptions are born and actions made ready. My body is that which stands out as the center of these perceptions; my personality is the being to which these actions must be referred. The whole subject becomes clear if we travel thus from the periphery to the centre, as the child does, and as we ourselves are invited to do so from immediate experience and by common sense. [MM 47]

This theory, which we might call ‘centripetal’ following Bergson’s terminology, now requires some sort of organizing principle so as to account for subjectivity. How are these perceived disparate actions referred to a centre? Bergson answers: by the existence of a privileged image, known in a privileged way; *through affect*.

My perception... in its pure state ...does not go on from my body to other bodies; it is, to begin with, in the aggregate of bodies, then gradually limits itself and adopts my body as centre... it is led to do so... by the experience of the double faculty, which this body possesses, of performing actions and feeling affectations; in a word, it is led to do so by the experience of the sensory-motor power of a certain image, privileged among other images. For, on the one hand, this image always occupies the centre of representation, so that the other images arrange themselves around it in the very order in which they might be subject to its action; on the other hand, I know it from within, by sensations which I term affective, instead of knowing only, as in the case of other images, its outer skin. There is then, a privileged image, perceived in its depth and no longer only on the surface—the seat of affection and the source of action: it is this particular image which I adopt as the centre of my universe and as the physical basis for my personality. [MM 61]

As we will see below, Lévinas will make much of this idea. Placing affect at the crux of the creation of subjectivity can solve a host of issues, beyond simply that of representation. It allows Bergson

to account for the special place human persons seem to have relative to other organisms while also allowing Lévinas to distance himself from what he sees as the mistaken, utilitarian ontology of *care* developed by Heidegger. And yet, perhaps because his concern wasn't the rise of subjectivity specifically, Bergson's discussion of affect remains somewhat vague and underdetermined. More importantly, however, in extending the discussion of perception to the moment of the creation of subjectivity, another problem arises.

Bergson began with an analysis of perception 'in its purity' and concluded that perception has nothing to do with knowledge. In discussing the rise of subjectivity, however, Bergson himself acknowledges that pure perception is not its sole ingredient. As we saw, even if putting memory aside for now, affect is key. By his own admission then, the very rise of subjectivity already includes at least two very different factors. Subjectivity is heterogeneous from birth, an impure mixture of elements. So, while Bergson does provide an interesting account of a whole that is greater than its parts, of an organism in which the mixture of matter and memory, perception and affect, allow for the creation of a subjectivity, he nevertheless engages in a problematic shift between levels of analysis here. Granted, perception in its purity may have nothing to do with knowledge or representation, but if his analysis is meant to meaningfully apply to the fully existing subject then the relationship between perception and knowledge would have to be analysed *at the level of subjectivity*. The question is not whether 'pure' perception is related to knowledge, for of course that would be impossible as representation and speculative knowledge do not occur at the level of 'pure' analysis at all. By Bergson's own metaphysics this is a meaningless question. The question could only make sense when asked at the level of subjectivity. Since however, the determination that perception doesn't involve knowledge is only operative at the level of 'pure' perception, the question regarding their relationship remains open. Speculative knowledge,

representation, and in fact perception in the full sense of the word, can only occur at the level of subjectivity. Any discussion regarding their relation must be had at this level of analysis. And, as we saw above, subjectivity doesn't allow for a pure perception. Affect is inextricably linked to the very creation of personality and as such should play an important role in any consideration regarding the relationship between perception and knowledge.

Nevertheless, while the role of affect in subjectivity might not have received its due, failure to note its importance doesn't necessarily imply Bergson was wrong to separate representation from perception. Justificatory analysis is here lacking but may very well remain possible. The interesting question to ask here, then, is not whether or not perception is involved with representation but rather, Why take it for granted that the opposite of representation is action? Why does Bergson uncritically move from speculative knowledge to the idea of action understood as biological utility? As Lévinas will later show, *neither representation nor utility should lie at the heart of the creation of subjectivity*. Rather, as Bergson himself mentioned but never fully developed, *it is affect which must be understood and theoretically developed to be at the core of a process of subjectivity*.

Having shown that the analyses of *Matter and Memory* leave something to be desired, we can move on to consider this same centripetal theory of the genealogy of mind as developed in *Creative Evolution*. Unlike the first-person analyses carried out in *Matter and Memory*, the analyses of *Creative Evolution* are decidedly impersonal, as what is at stake is the general character of life and evolution in general. This text, Bergson's most explicitly biological work, begins by noting how developments in evolutionary biology require a fundamental epistemic shift in philosophy. As we understand the particular make up of our physical bodies to have been guided by the dynamics of evolution, so must we understand our experience of the real to have developed

in the same way. Our intellect may not be entirely neutral. Like everything else, it would make perfect sense for our intellect to function as a tool of evolutionary advantage. The real, that is, could be *prima facie* interpreted according to what is most evolutionary advantageous. Looking back to the issue of perception in *Matter and Memory*, this view of the intellect remains consistent with and provides support for why action understood as biological utility takes the place of disinterested representation. Experience of the world, be it purely perceptual or intellectual, is always to be understood as providing for the most evolutionarily advantageous action. While our access to the real, then, is not theoretically cut off here as it is with theories of representation, any philosophy that wishes to faithfully describe the world must nevertheless contend with and remedy this selective tendency of thought.

This particular tendency, guided as it is by the goal of survival, is marked by what Bergson calls spatial thinking. The intellect presents a world to be analysed mathematically, geometrically, guided by the principle of causation, a world of planned action and utility. The world of the intellect is essentially Platonic, Being has priority over becoming. And while this worldview brings with it practical, evolutionary advantages, it cannot properly comprehend *life*. In order to understand the world in its fullness, with processes of generation, evolution, and temporality, the intellect must thus be supplemented with ‘intuition,’ which is its opposite tendency.¹⁶ More specifically, Bergson here deploys intuition in the context of the debate between mechanism and teleology. As was the case in *Matter and Memory*, *Creative Evolution* maintains that the problem each of these sides tries to solve stems from a simple misunderstanding of the data in question. In

¹⁶ Much more can and has been said about the relation between intuition and spatial thinking in Bergson as well. As this is beyond the purview of this paper however, we simply mention it and move on. For more intricate discussion on the topic cf. Deleuze, *Bergsonism* and Worms, *Time Thinking: Bergson’s Philosophy of Mind* among many other examples.

noting that neither can account for duration, their common roots are laid bare. Mechanism and Teleology are but the logical outcomes of the full deployment of spatial thinking over the real. Thus, as Bergson puts it, when thinking of processes of generation such as that which is our concern, “we must do violence to the mind, go counter to the natural bent of the intellect.”¹⁷

This result of this violence is the much maligned *élan vital*, which is the basis of what Bergson will call ‘reverse finalism.’ Very briefly, Bergson here maintains that the best way to understand life is as a force, a common impetus, a tendency for expansion and development which encounters matter, its opposite, a tendency marked by detension. Life itself is understood as the interplay between these two tendencies. This is Bergson’s so-called ‘vitalism,’ the positing of a force driving life forward, a force with a general aim but one still subject to the vicissitudes of matter. Within this general striving, the vital impetus is individuated into various forms and configuration of matter, everywhere emphasizing different tendencies with the ultimate goal of achieving the maximum amount of freedom it can.¹⁸ Essentially, Bergson here provides the reader with an anti-Aristotelian view of life in two basic ways. First, and most obviously, teleology is denied in favour of its opposite, ‘reverse finalism’. More importantly however, plant, human, and animal species are no longer seen as further developments on the same line of evolution culminating with intelligence. Rather, the *élan vital* has at its disposal various tendencies which become actualized in various configurations of matter to differing degrees. Just as human beings rely on the intellect, so other living beings rely on instinct. Although everywhere the goal is the

¹⁷ Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, 30. Hereafter cited as CE

¹⁸ “the role of life is to insert *indetermination* into matter. Indeterminate, *i.e.* unforeseeable, are the forms it creates in the course of its evolution. More and more indeterminate also, more and more free, is the activities to which these forms serve as the vehicle.” CE, 126

same, avenues vary widely (Yet another reason for not limiting our understanding of life to that revealed by the intellect alone).

It is within this framework that *Creative Evolution* develops the same centripetal theory of the mind discussed above. Individuation is achieved through various instances of life taking up matter. Everywhere life seeks freedom, here with instinct there with the intellect. Automatism, however, is never fully broken with until human beings. The brain, as discussed above, seems the organ of freedom *par excellence* and what makes the human brain in particular different, seems to be *the amount of choice it allows*. Everywhere else, life can only slacken the cords of automatism to various degrees, but with human beings, automatism is broken with altogether. Freedom is finally achieved.

With man consciousness breaks [its] chain. In man, and in man alone, it sets itself free. The whole history of life until man has been that of the effort of consciousness to raise matter, and of the more or less complete overwhelming of consciousness by the matter which has fallen back on it. The enterprise... was to create with matter, which is necessity itself, an instrument of freedom, to make a machine that should triumph over mechanism... From our point of view, life appears in its entirety as an immense wave which, starting from a centre, spreads outwards, and which on almost the whole of its circumference is stopped and converted into oscillation: at one single point the obstacle has been forced, the impulsion has passed freely. It is this freedom that the human form registers. Everywhere but in man consciousness has had to come to a stand; in man alone it has kept on its way... [CE 264-266]

Compared to the rest of the natural world, human beings thus embody, “a difference in kind, and not only of degree.” [CE 265]

And yet, this difference in kind is again problematic for Bergson’s project. Specifically, the issue lay with the unexamined and unwarranted equivalence made between action considered according to biological utility and action understood as the total functional capacity of the organism. If a qualitative shift has occurred in human beings, then a qualitatively different analysis of perception is also required. That is to say, placing human beings along a particularly successful line of evolution seems undeniable, but, if a difference in kind is posited here *precisely in the realm*

of action, it now being infinite and free, then a fundamentally different analysis of perception is required. It no longer makes sense to say that our perception of things results from our cutting them up according to action based on the principle of biological utility, for it is precisely in the realm of action that human beings represent a qualitative shift. If, then, our perception of the world is predicated upon action, and biological analyses reveal that the realm of human action is “infinitely free,” then human action at its most fundamental level cannot itself be understood as primarily ‘useful.’²¹ A human being’s total functional capacity radically exceeds the limited realm of ‘useful actions’. Although perhaps a truism, it is important to keep in mind that human beings often engage in biologically useless activities. Not everything we do or see is based on need, “...we must be able to withdraw ourselves from the action of the moment,” Bergson himself reminds us, “*we must have the power to value the useless*, we must have the will to dream. Man alone is capable of such an effort.” [MM 82-83]

Thus, although Bergson went to great lengths to emphasize the ineluctable experience of freedom, the analyses of *Creative Evolution* remain problematic. For, although there is talk here of a ‘machine that is free,’ a qualitative change where possible actions become infinite, need based deliberation still presents the reader with a mere machine. This peculiar machine, infinitely more complex than plants or animals, is indeed free to satisfy its needs by *x* or *y*, and yet, *in these analyses* there remains no way to account for any difference between these options. Foreshadowing Lévinas we might say that in its quest for food, Bergson’s ‘free machine’ is indeed somehow free to choose between freshly cooked soup and stale bread. However, according to what has been laid out above, there is no way to account for any preference between the two choices. Subjective deliberations essentially go no further than determining whether or not something can

²¹ Bergson says for instance, “Man not only maintains his machine, he succeeds in using it as he pleases.” CE, 264.

fulfil the needs required for the species to be preserved. So understood, there is very little individuality in the Bergsonian subject, there is merely indetermination.

What then to make of Bergson's theory of mind? As Lévinas will point out, the main problem here lay with the fact that these analyses remain impersonal. In both *Matter and Memory* and *Creative Evolution* the individual is analysed and understood biologically, living in a world cut up according to its needs, as an expression of the general effort made by the *élan vital* to achieve freedom, to stop matter and to spread life. The individual is seen as a *means* through which consciousness is to set itself free. The analyses remain impersonal throughout, they offer a kind of emergent theory which, in spite of itself, leaves the subject empty, as it were. By shifting between levels of analysis, by assuming action to be the opposite of knowledge, and by problematically equating biological needs with functional capacity, we are left with no way to fully account for a difference between organisms other than simply saying that there is a difference. The very thing which the analysis seeks to provide—experience, consciousness—is in the end sacrificed to the injunctions of the species.

Affect & The Centripetal Theory of Consciousness in Lévinas

*The upsurge of the self beginning in enjoyment, where the substantiality of the I is apperceived not as a subject of the verb to be but as implicated in happiness is the exaltation of the existent as such.*²³

—Lévinas

It is clear that Lévinas was an admirer and careful reader of Bergson. “Bergson is the source of an entire complex of interrelated contemporary philosophical ideas,” Lévinas said, “it is to him,

²³ Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 119. Hereafter cited as TI

no doubt, that I owe my modest speculative initiatives.”²⁴ That there is a philosophical relationship between the two thinkers is thus beyond doubt, but the precise nature of this relation is in many ways undetermined. As De Warren recounts in his essay *Miracles of Creation: Bergson and Lévinas*, the latter “claims for *Totality and Infinity*, ‘a faithfulness to the innovative work of Henri Bergson, who made many of the essential positions of the masters of phenomenology possible.’”²⁵ And yet, in spite of this and several other attributions of fundamental influence, Bergson is rarely spoken of explicitly. Discussing what he will call a ‘Bergsonian murmur’ in the works and even scholarship of Lévinas, De Warren points out that in Lévinas’ work, “Although substantial in presence, Bergson only receives mention in passing.”²⁶

Perhaps the most revealing of these passing mentions, however, occurs in Lévinas’ *Time and The Other*, where Bergsonian thought is explicitly indicted. Lévinas’ main issue with the ideas explored above is that,

Bergson’s notion of *élan vital*, which merges artistic creation and generation in the same movement—what I call ‘fecundity’—does not take account of death, but above all it tends towards an impersonal pantheism, in the sense that it does not sufficiently note the crispation of and isolation of subjectivity, which is the ineluctable moment of my dialectic.²⁷

As Lévinas doesn’t elaborate on the precise meaning of this critique, the best avenue for analysis requires turning to *Totality and Infinity*, where this ‘ineluctable moment of the dialectic’ is explained in depth, as well as to a basic discussion of Lévinas’ philosophical controversy with Heideggerian thought, a controversy that shares much with this all too brief critique of Bergson’s ‘impersonal pantheism.’²⁸

²⁴ Levinas, *Entre Nous: Thinking of the Other*, 194

²⁵ De Warren, “Miracles of Creation: Bergson and Lévinas.” 174

²⁶ *ibid.*, 175

²⁷ Lévinas, *Time and The Other*, 92

²⁸ In exploring this Bergsonian critique we take a markedly different approach from De Warren, who discusses this very same issue in his *Miracles of Creation* essay. There, De Warren attempts to clarify this issue by breaking down

Starting with the latter, we can immediately note the similarity between the problems with Bergson raised above regarding the issue of utility and those raised by Lévinas against Heidegger. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger's ontological investigation determines the tri-partite structure of *Dasein as care*. *Dasein* is a being which is in-the-world, alongside-others, and ahead-of-itself. As Lévinas notes however, "in order to describe being-in-the-world, [Heidegger] has appealed to an ontological finality, to which he subordinates objects in the world. Seeing objects as 'material'... he includes them in the care for existing, which is the very putting of the ontological problem."²⁹ Objects, that is, are for Heidegger tools, themselves part and revealing of a larger referential system, all of which ultimately refer to the concern for Being just laid out. As explained in *Totality and Infinity* several consequences follow from this approach. Put simply, *Dasein*'s determination as care here relegates all particular desire as itself somehow partial or instrumental. If one can speak of particular desire at all, say, a hungry man's desire for soup, in Heidegger's ontology such

and carefully analyzing the two terms of the critique, 'impersonal' and 'pantheism.' Similarly to what we will do in what follows, De Warren explores Lévinas' critique of Heidegger as a way to understand how Bergson's thought might remain 'impersonal.' De Warren does this by looking at Lévinas' general critique of ontology as fundamental philosophy, specifically focusing on the inescapable anonymity that results from trying to understand beings as Heidegger does, i.e. through the general horizon of Being itself. This anonymity is the very problematic which Lévinas seeks to counteract through the development of an ethics of the Other. The equivalence between the charge against Bergson and that against ontology being made, De Warren then goes on to easily defend Bergson against providing an impersonal philosophy of the kind, for Bergson himself developed a critique against ontology in various of his later works, most notably *Creative Evolution* and *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*. However, although it is true that the word 'impersonal' usually takes such a meaning in Levinasian terminology, there is no reason why we should limit its critical significance solely to ontological thinking in the sense specified above. In fact, it is somewhat odd that De Warren's work finds the charge of 'impersonality,' "lacking the requisite robustness which to capture and indict Bergson's thinking," and so moves on to considerations the meaning of 'pantheism,' which he then proceeds to clarify mainly by discussing Bergson's *The two Sources of Morality and Religion*. This is puzzling because in his very indictment of Bergson, Lévinas specified the thematic development where the issue of impersonality appears. For Lévinas, Bergson's impersonal pantheism results from the latter's flawed analysis of the genealogy of mind, "Bergson's *élan vital*... tends towards an impersonal pantheism in the *sense that it does not sufficiently note the crispation of subjectivity...*" Thus, while De Warren is nevertheless correct in pointing out that Bergson's thought cannot be labeled impersonal in the exact same sense as is ontology, discussing *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* here—on which most of the discussion in the paper is based—leaves Lévinas' critique standing, for this work has an entirely different concern than that of the rise of subjectivity and its relation to exteriority.

²⁹ Lévinas, *Existence and Existents*, 34

a desire would be merely the contingent instantiation of the broader concern for Being; an expression of the fundamental structure of care.

As Lévinas maintains however, this structure drastically misunderstands how fundamental the phenomenon of *enjoyment* really is.³⁰ And this is both Heidegger and Bergson's key oversight. *Being and Time* stipulates that something like enjoyment is merely, "the mode of my implantation—my *disposition*—in being, the tonus of my bearing." [TI 113] Desire is therefore completely disconnected from enjoyment in Heideggerian ontology. Rather than the consummation of desire, enjoyment becomes merely one of many moods that colour experience. As such, Heideggerian philosophy assumes a peculiar "utilitarian schematism" wherein the things we are concerned with take the character of mere "tools and implements." [TI 110]

As above we argued that Bergsonian analysis ran into trouble because of the analytical priority given to species being over the experience of the free individual, so Lévinas is here leveling a similar critique against Heidegger. The main issue with Heideggerian ontology is its impersonality; the determination of *Dasein* as *care*, understood as the general concern for Being, functions as does the Bergsonian determination of individuals as primarily members of a species in the struggle for subsistence. In both, every act becomes a task, ultimately referring beyond itself. Desire is everywhere generalized, everywhere understood as guided by utility, here evolutionary and there as part of the care for Being in general. As such, desire becomes disconnected from *enjoyment*, its intended satisfaction always separated from the immediate goal sought. So understood, we can easily hear that Bergsonian murmur accompanying Lévinas' critique of

³⁰ "The handling and utilization of tools, the recourse to all the instrumental gear of life... concludes in enjoyment... Enjoyment... embraces all things. The enjoyment of a thing, be it a tool, does not consist simply in bringing this thing to the usage for which it is fabricated—the pen to the writing, the hammer to the nail to be driven in—but also in suffering or rejoicing over this operation... This enjoyment accompanies every utilization of things, even in a complex enterprise where the end of labor alone absorbs the research." TI 133.

Heidegger. “In Heidegger, *Dasein* is never hungry [...and neither is Bergson!]” [TI 134] Seen this way, we can also understand Lévinas’ early metaphysics, particularly that of *Totality and Infinity* and *Existence and Existents*, as an effort to bring these two terms—desire and enjoyment—back together. For, although theoretically one can indeed find a utilitarian lens through which to understand the use of all objects, as they do indeed refer to others, all of which often combine for various purposes, direct experience finds the satisfaction of desire immediately upon the use or consumption of the things engaged with. “Not everything in the world is a tool.” [EE 43] Or, as more directly explained in *Totality and Infinity*,

The bare fact of life is never bare. Life is not the naked will to be, a naked *Sorge* for this life. Life’s relation with the very conditions of its life becomes the nourishment and content of that life. Life is *Love of life*, a relation with contents that are not my being, but more dear than my being: thinking, eating, sleeping, reading, working, warming oneself in the sun. [TI 112]

This is Levinas’ problem with Heideggerian ontology. Although *Being and Time* did emphasize the centrality of affect, the latter remains understood very generally, as a ‘disposition’ rather than as the specific, individual character which first makes experience ‘mine.’ For Lévinas, affect and desire neither refer nor result from a care for being as such.

Unlike Heidegger’s more sober, ontological analysis, Levinas’ treatment of these is marked by an immediacy more characteristic of hedonistic philosophy. The role of affect in the economy of individuation is thus more fundamental than that which the structure of *care* allows it. Affect does not have *being* as its goal for Lévinas. Affect’s only concern is with its immediate satisfaction. In providing a theory of individuation and subjectivity then, *Totality and Infinity* contrasts *Being and Time*’s utilitarianism with its own kind of ‘hedonism.’

[This absence of finality in all acts displays] the permanent truth of hedonistic moralities: to not seek, behind the satisfaction of need, an order relative to which alone satisfaction would acquire a value; to take satisfaction, which is the very meaning of pleasure, as a term. The need for food does not have existence as its goal, but food. Biology teaches the prolongation of nourishment into existence; need is naïve. In enjoyment I am absolutely for myself. [TI 134]

It is through this reconnection of desire and enjoyment, always so strongly marked within experience, that the individual can break free from impersonal anonymity and reclaim her standing as an individual in the first place. For this reason, Lévinas' claims that *Totality and Infinity* is a book that “presents itself as a defense of subjectivity.”[TI 26]

How does Lévinas go about this task? Precisely by going back to Bergson and radicalizing his original but never fully developed centripetal theory of the genealogy of the mind i.e. by fully developing an *affective* theory of the genealogy of subjectivity. The task begins by a structural comparison of two modes of intentionality: that of representation and enjoyment. Representative intentionality is marked by intelligibility, clarity, and spontaneity. In Levinasian terminology, representation is that intentional relation where the Other is determined by the Same without itself determining the Same. “In the intelligibility of representation the distinction between me and the object, between interior and exterior, is effaced... The I that constitutes dissolves into the work it comprehends and enters into the eternal. The idealist creation is representation.” These are the characteristics of an “I detached from the conditions of its latent birth,” the I achieved through the Husserlian epoché.³⁸ The intentionality of enjoyment however is radically different. The relation of enjoyment is marked by exteriority, corporeality, and, most importantly, affect. It is a relation where the Other conditions the same, thereby firmly positing the same corporeally, in the world. “The body naked and indigent identifies the *centre* of the world it perceives, but, *conditioned* by its own representation of the world, it is thereby torn up from the centre from which it proceeded, as water gushing forth from rock washed away the rock.” [TI 127] Note the striking Bergsonian

³⁸ TI., section B, *Enjoyment & Representation*, part 1, 122-127

echo here: everything from the centripetal motif to the very same water metaphor is used to clarify and advance on this theory of the genealogy of mind.

Thus, while both Bergson and Lévinas then do acknowledge *need* as a fundamental structural component in the creation of subjectivity, Lévinas aims to show that Bergson—like Husserl and Heidegger after him—failed to see in this moment a novel form of intentionality. In effect, one of the staunchest critics of intellectualism is himself charged with over-intellectualizing this basic, constitutive relation of life. Failing to note ‘the crispation of subjectivity’ means to understand need as primarily the biological mechanism of species-being⁴⁰, overlooking the fundamental characteristic marking the body's appearance in the world as originally ‘naked and indigent’. But the latter is precisely what should have been expected from a theory such as Bergson's, where *affect is to be the basis of my personality*. If affect is truly at the seat of the creation of subjectivity, then desire and satisfaction can be reunited. If the organizing principle of subjectivity is to follow an affective logic, then the goal of desire can never be species or impersonal being, it must simply be satisfaction itself. What is interesting about human beings, Lévinas maintains, again echoing Bergson, is that we have the power to value the useless, *that we enjoy our needs*.

Nowhere in the phenomenal order does the object of an action refer to the concern for existing; it itself makes up our existence. We breathe for the sake of breathing, eat and drink for the sake of eating and drinking, we take shelter for the sake of taking shelter, we study to satisfy our curiosity, we take a walk for the walk. All that is not for the sake of living; it is living... To be in the world is precisely to be freed from the last implication of the instinct to exist. [EE 44]

Life is not the naked will to be, a naked *Sorge* for this life. Life's relation with the very conditions of its life becomes the nourishment and content of that life. Life is *Love of life*, a relation with contents that are not my being, but more dear than my being. [TI 112]

⁴⁰ “In the exaltation of biological life the person arises as a product of the species or of impersonal life, which has recourse to the individual so as to ensure its impersonal triumph.” [TI 120]

Apart from playing an important role in the economy of Lévinas' further metaphysics then, in the ethical as he develops it, these descriptions are meant to counteract the problems found in Heideggerian and Bergsonian thought. By radicalizing the role of affect in this process, Lévinas provides the metaphysics that should have been Bergson's own. For, as Lévinas shows, taking this Bergsonian moment seriously would entail a theory which remains centripetal but that now also understands that centripetal, coordinating function as not simply the image of a body or its particular sensation, but rather satisfaction and enjoyment—affective processes necessarily reintroduced as basic features of the self in an effort to avoid the contradictions resulting from impersonal analyses.

Developing a theory of mind centred on the notion of affect thus provides a way for us to explain consciousness as a process that remains firmly rooted in the world without, however, sacrificing the very experience of individuality that such an enquiry is meant to explain. Particular desire need not be subsumed under any other more general, unfelt impulse. Likewise, the theoretical injunctions stemming from biological insights can remain valid without causing contradiction. The inescapable evolutionary needs of organisms discussed by Bergson remain standing, now, however, without limiting the breadth of human freedom to what is useful. If subjectivity stems from affect—from enjoyment in particular—then theory need not separate desire from its goal or freedom from its indeterminacy.

Although not there alone, Bergson is surely in Lévinas' mind when he repeatedly and explicitly affirms enjoyment itself as the principle of subjectivity and individuation, explicitly noting how such a structure avoids the pitfalls of anonymity and impersonality while still understanding the genealogy of the self as a centripetal gathering concerned with eventual action upon the world—

action now understood not as that demanded by the injunction to survive but rather as the possibility for enjoyment.

Enjoyment is a withdrawal into oneself, an involution. What is termed an affective state does not have the dull monotony of a state, but is a vibrant exaltation in which dawns the self. For the I is not the *support* of enjoyment. The 'intentional' structure here is wholly different; the I is the very contraction of sentiment, the pole of a spiral whose coiling and involution is drawn by enjoyment: the focus of the curve is a part of the curve. It is precisely as a 'coiling,' as a movement toward oneself, that enjoyment comes into play. [TI 118]

Action implies being to be sure, but it marks a beginning and an end in an anonymous being--where end and beginning have no meaning. But within this continuity enjoyment realizes independence with regard to continuity: each happiness comes for the first time. Subjectivity originates in the independence and sovereignty of enjoyment. [TI 113]

Happiness is the principle of individuation, but individuation in itself is conceivable only from within, through interiority. In the happiness of enjoyment is enacted the individuation, the auto-personification, the substantialization, and the independence of the self... [TI 147]

The upsurge of the self beginning in enjoyment, where the substantiality of the I is apperceived not as a subject of the verb to be but as implicated in happiness is the exaltation of the existent as such. [TI 119]

Filled out by its affects, Bergson's 'free machine' is provided a mind, becomes an individual, enjoys and recoils from a world in which it doesn't simply survive but *lives*.

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