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Henri Bergson's Haunted Epistemology: Consciousness Unframed

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Abstract: In his main work, *Matter and Memory*, Henri Bergson presents a panpsychist ontology which cuts through the Gordian knot of the mind vs. matter problem. Taking this age-old philosophical topic, Bergson pushes the dualism of mind and matter beyond breaking point. Matter is reconceived as the sum of all images. Bergson introduces the dual concepts of cosmic "perception" and cosmic "memory". Matter itself is reinterpreted as a continuum of all possible intensities of perception and memory. Bergson's ontology has important epistemological ramifications. There is no sharp dividing line between consciousness and matter. In light of these insights, I propose a reading of Bergson's relatively lesser-known lecture, "'Phantasms of the Living' and Psychical Research", presented at the Society for Psychical Research in 1913. Here, Bergson elaborates upon the implications of his image-ontology for the possible post mortem fate of consciousness. In my concluding remarks, I suggest that Bergson's observations may be of help in constructing an anti-reductionist and indeterministic epistemology.

Keywords: consciousness; corporeality; epistemology; anti-reductionism; materialism; memory; perception; pluralism

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1. The Survival of Images

While best known for having written an attempt at a vitalist theory of biology entitled *Creative Evolution*, Henri Bergson also elaborated a philosophy of mind. *Matter and Memory*, first published in 1896, is arguably Bergson's most ambitious work. Here, the philosopher attempts to cut the Gordian knot of mind vs. matter dualism. For our purposes, *Matter and Memory* is of great interest because it contains the most systematic account of what scholars have described as Bergson's "filter" or "radio perception theory of consciousness" (Barnard 2012, p. 239). Hence, I will limit my discussion of *Matter and Memory* to those points most salient to the filter theory of mind.[1] Matter, for Bergson, is "an aggregate of images" (Bergson [1896] 1991, p. 9). Far from being reducible to the brain, consciousness is fundamentally delocalized. The universe, for Bergson, is an infinite set of mediations. The individuated body itself is an image among images. There is no clear boundary between our body and the cosmos as a whole, but rather a difference of degree. As Bergson maintains, "every image is within certain images and without others; but of the aggregate of images we cannot say that it is within us or without us, since interiority and exteriority are only relations among images." (Bergson [1896] 1991, p. 25). Living beings are centers of action, which refer to themselves while preparing their actions in the world. Conventionally, we usually think of images as being mental representations of an underlying, physical reality. Bergson abandons this view in favor of what can only be described as a thoroughgoing panpsychism. While being aware of the multiple competing definitions in currency, in this article, I define "panpsychism" as any philosophy of consciousness which refrains from localizing consciousness in either the brain or the body. For Bergson, images can and do preexist their representations. As a matter of fact, the philosopher goes as far as to claim that representation constitutes a concentration, hence a relative impoverishment of the

scope of an image's being. To represent an entity is to virtualize, hence, to depotentialize it: "that which distinguishes it [the image] as a present image, as an objective reality, from a represented image is the necessity which obliges it to act through every one of its points upon all the points of all other images, to transmit the whole of what it receives, to oppose to every action an equal and contrary reaction, to be, in short, merely a road by which pass, in every direction, the modifications propagated throughout the immensity of the universe." (Bergson [1896] 1991, p. 36). This insight on the inherently mediational nature of matter has highly important ramifications when it comes to the way we ought to think about perception and mental life.

If we accept the panpsychist implications of a universe filled with pre-representational mediations, then it becomes impossible to situate consciousness within individuated bodies. Far from being inert, immobile or inanimate, matter is conceived of by Bergson as being filled with unbounded, frameless flows of consciousness. Individuated perception is more concentrated and attentive than this rudimentary form of mind I propose we call, for lack of a better term, 'the consciousness of matter', precisely because its scope is relatively more restricted. An individual organism is capable of concentrating its attention as a consequence of its ability to restrict its consciousness. With this move, Bergson upends the hierarchical idea that the degree of individual mental activity corresponds to the complexity of the nervous system; quite the reverse holds: mind is ever-present, and individuation constitutes a reduction of a diminution of the force of the conscious-matter-images, but not a reduction of intensity as a whole. The more advanced and "free" (i.e., spontaneous) an organism is, the more concentrated and selective its perceptive capabilities are. Degrees of freedom correspond to the selective capabilities of organisms (Bergson [1896] 1991, p. 37). Bergson associates matter with automatic mediation, while spontaneous action is reflexive and capable of hesitation.

As Joël Dolbeault emphasizes, in Bergson's *Matter and Memory* "automatic action is not the suppression of all consciousness; a perceptual consciousness remains. Even if it is difficult for us to imagine a consciousness that is only perceptual, such a consciousness is at least conceivable", on the level of both biological organisms and (seemingly) "inert matter" (Dolbeault 2017, p. 14). While certainly being a privileged center of action, the nervous system is not the exclusive seat of mental life. Differently put, mind is irreducible to brain. Rather, the nervous system is a conductor which transmits movements (Bergson [1896] 1991, pp. 44–45). According to the position advocated in *Matter and Memory* "the normal functions of the brain with its sensory and motor systems are (. . .) eliminative rather than productive." (Kelly et al. 2007, p. 549). Indeed, perception itself is but a preparation of new actions, the assembly of self-driven displacements within an environment. Perception is more than epistemological (Guerlac 2006, p. 111). At this stage, Bergson has not yet introduced the concept of memory; for the moment, we deal exclusively with perception, which is truly boundless: "my perception, in its pure state, isolated from memory, 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 a center." (Bergson [1896] 1991, p. 61). It seems that, in actual fact, a more apt title for this work would have been *Perception and Memory*, for the author equates perception with matter and actuality (as an unbounded and pre-individual consciousness), while memory is brought into adequation with life and virtuality (as more concentrated manifestations of consciousness). Of course, as Bergson makes clear further on, perception and memory cannot, in reality, be neatly separated from one another. Past images mingle with perception of the present (Bergson [1896] 1991, p. 66). An important corollary is that consciousness has an irreducibly impersonal basis in pure perception, the latter being all but synonymous with material externality.

While emphasizing that, normally, memory and perception never occur in a pure state, being to greater or lesser degrees mixed together with one another, Bergson does claim that pure memory would be immaterial: "the memory-image itself, if it remained pure memory, would be ineffectual. Virtual, this memory can only become actual by means of the perception which attracts it. Powerless, it borrows life and strength from the present

sensation in which it is materialized" (Bergson [1896] 1991, p. 127). If perception is materiality, then memory is immateriality. Were we to accept this admittedly speculative panpsychist cosmology, this would have important ramifications for thinking about the post mortem fate of the individual after death. The very status of destruction becomes just as problematic in such a framework as the status of individuality. Dolbeault is correct in observing that matter in Bergson's depiction, far from being inert or unalive, already contains centers of action. Materiality is actuality, hence perception. Even more interestingly, however, the opposite also holds: the absence of materiality would appear to correspond to virtuality and memory. A particularly spooky result is that, at least in theory, it is possible that "memory is a purely psychic reality, independent of the body" and, furthermore, "the disappearance of the body does not entail the disappearance of memory par excellence." (Dolbeault 2022, p. 164). One could object that, despite its non-dualistic intentions, Bergson is secretly reintroducing a form of Platonism or Spiritualism. On this reading, the philosopher would be a cryptospiritualist, smuggling in a new type of spiritualism under the guise of a purportedly monist metaphysics.[2] Be that as it may, it must also be emphasized that the past pervades the present image (Bergson [1896] 1991, p. 135). There is a trade-off between perception and memory; the more memory capacities an entity has, the more selective its perception becomes. On this view, matter would be infinite mediation, while life is a restriction or, at least, a filtration of this cosmic communication.

Everything important, at least on the plane of normal functioning, occurs within the present, which is inherently (and paradoxically) durational. Bergson's philosophical innovation is the recognition of the durational nature of the present moment: "the real, concrete live present" is that which "necessarily occupies a duration" (Bergson [1896] 1991, p. 137). While perception is materiality, memory is incorporeal, being inextensive and powerless in itself (Bergson [1896] 1991, pp. 139–40). The virtual nature of memory entails the unlimited nature of the past too. Corporeality plays at once a central and peripheral role in this drama. Being a center for the transmission of movements, the individuated body is important when it comes to the elaboration of free actions. But the individuated body is also nothing more than a "place of passage" of images (Bergson [1896] 1991, p. 151). As we have seen, images are already present prior to the advent of individuated bodies. Bergson asserts that the same insight applies to the memory of images too. In other words, memory-images can survive the demise and decomposition of the body. Death would be a becoming-infinite of perception, as the cognitive frames preventing attention from extending in all directions break down. Instead of constituting the definitive "end" of consciousness, the destruction of the body is its liberation from enframement and enclosure.

2. Bergson and the Possibility of Immortality

The problem of immortality therefore relates intimately to Bergson's broader philosophical concerns. This concept takes center stage in the lecture entitled, "'Phantasms of the Living' and Psychical Research", delivered before the Society for Psychical Research in 1913, a body devoted to parapsychological phenomena that had voted Bergson its honorary president earlier that year. Already in a previous 1911 lecture, "Life and Consciousness", Bergson cites a prominent figure among scientists striving to give the theological idea of immortality a scientific grounding, polymath and physicist Oliver Lodge (Bergson [1911] 1920, p. 34). Known in the scientific community for his pioneering work in electromagnetic radiation, Lodge was also a famed adherent of spiritualism and member of the Ghost Club, an organization for the investigation of paranormal phenomena which exists to this very day, president of the Society for Psychical Research between 1901 and 1903 and author of several widely read works on the persistence of the soul after death. Most famously, after the death of his son in World War One, Lodge would go on to write a book, *Raymond or Life and Death*, detailing his experiences with spirit mediums and posthumous communications with his deceased son. Interestingly, Lodge's speculations regarding psychic phenomena were not entirely without basis in the physical theories of the time. During the 1880s, ether was still regarded as a universal substrate, and Lodge's early reports on paranormal

phenomena originate from this period. Hence, I posit that in the late Victorian period there was a complex interrelationship between physics and what is today called "parascience" (Raia 2007, p. 21) In retrospect, we find practices such as seánces absurd, and dismiss the efforts of scientists such as William Crookes to measure ghosts as superstition. But many leading British physicists at the time expressed belief in such phenomena and engaged in such empirical investigations. As late as 1918, leading American psychologist James Leuba could write of parapsychology as a "dark opening" in scientific inquiry, heralding "discoveries which will dwarf into insignificance any of the previous achievements of science." (Leuba 1918, p. 423, quoted in: Kripal 2016, p. 10).

Founded in 1882, the Society for Psychical Research was from its commencement a prestigious body, including elite scientific figures such as "Lord Rayleigh (the third Baron), Balfour Stewart, William Crookes, J. J. Thomson, Henry and Eleanor Sidgwick, William F. Barrett, William James, A. R. Wallace, A. J. Balfour and, of course, Oliver Lodge" (Raia 2007, p. 23). Lodge's innovation was to adapt the theory of ether from contemporary physics and expand its scope. Ether was conceived of by Lodge and others as a description of the medial nature of being in general, describing the communicative potential of all things in their interrelatedness. This was not the work of Lodge alone of course. As Erhard Schuettpelz and Ehler Voss write, "Lodge's approach is not an individual accomplishment, but part of a collective enterprise of three generations of physicists." (Schuettpelz and Voss 2015, p. 9). Already we read in Balfour Stewart and Peter Guthrie Tait's 1875 bestseller, *The Unseen Universe*, of the universal applicability of ether. A physical concept generalizes or overflows into a theologico–ethico–onto–epistemologial idea: "may we not regard ether or the medium as not merely a bridge between one portion of the visible universe and another, but also as a bridge between one order of things and another, forming as it were a species of cement, in virtue of which the various orders of the universe are welded together and made one? In fine, what we generally call ether may not be a mere medium, but a medium plus the invisible order of things" (Stewart and Tait 1875, p. 147). Late Victorian optimism pinned its hopes upon the redemptive potential of the obscure and unseen. Building on his experiment results relating to the presence of electromagnetism, Lodge asserted adamantly in the preface to his 1909 work of popular science, *The Ether of Space*, that ether was "not only uniformly present and all-pervading, but also massive and substantial beyond conception. It is turning out to be by far the most substantial thing—perhaps the only substantial thing—in the material universe" (Lodge 1909, pp. xiv–v).

From a discursive standpoint, the performativity of this belief is fascinating to observe. Ether as concept lent itself, by the very structure of its meaning, to an indiscriminate usage. Competent researchers such as Lodge authentically expressed their adherence to the existence of a continuum or medium uniting the visible and invisible dimensions of the cosmos. Lodge was positively sure that he had encountered empirical evidence of ether's spiritual powers whilst visiting a sorceress of European acclaim, Eusapia Palladino, in Naples. (Raia 2007, pp. 37–38). Lodge became convinced that the immaterial, by way of ether, was capable of penetrating into our own, familiar, material realm. Over several decades, Lodge published several books that attempted to synthesize science with theology, in the context of a general theory of evolution. In Lodge's view, mind is the higher state of life, while the whole of evolution can be conceived of as the accentuation of complexity, accelerated by the becomings of the mind. Similarly to Bergson, Lodge too proposed going beyond the duality of spirit and matter. In an 1893 article, "The Interstellar Ether", Lodge describes kinetic and psychic levels of causality as interdependent (Raia 2007, p. 40). Without a body, the mind could never advance and expand toward new becomings. Do such commonalities mean that Bergson advocated for parascience and the validity of paranormal events? Raia's description of Lodge's views, which were demonstrably familiar to Bergson, as "a vaguely Christian meta-material evolutionism" would, after all, seem like a valid description of Bergson's own philosophical outlook (Raia 2007, p. 39).[3] But a careful reading of Bergson's 1913 address to the Society for Psychical Research reveals

a great deal more than an uncritical or dogmatic acceptance of the reality of paranormal psychical phenomena.

Bergson begins his address with a surprising admission, almost a disavowal of sorts: "it is only by reading that I know anything of the phenomena with which the Society deals; I have seen nothing myself, I have examined nothing myself" (Bergson [1913] 1920, p. 75). As a matter of fact, this statement is not entirely truthful, as Bergson did have some personal experience with mediums. The star medium Eusapia Palladino, whom Lodge had visited back in 1894, conducted a series of forty-three seances between 1905 and 1908 in France. These events were attended by the cream of the French scientific community, "including "Professors Richet, Ballet, Courtier and Madame Curie of the Sorbonne, and D'Arsonval, Perrin, and Bergson of the Collège de France. On several occasions Bergson and Madame Curie were the controllers: they held Eusapia's hands to insure against cheating." (Grogin 1988, p. 51).[4] Palladino produced phenomena such as levitation which made a tremendous impression on those present. Although leaning towards the skeptical side, when asked Bergson stated that "I believe that it is wise to reserve judgement and to say: there is doubt" (quoted in: Grogin 1988, p. 52). This healthy skepticism does not entail a rejection of such experiences. Rather, the intervention of the instant is an occasion for surprise and wonder.

Because of its inherently perceptual nature, reality can produce unpredictable events. Bergson rejects the priority of the critical imperative. For too long now, philosophy has been focused on manufacturing refutations. If we critique everything, where does that leave us in the end? It is immensely difficult to separate charlatanism from authentic practices. Bergson's problem with refutation is that it falls short of a positive explanation of things. Criticism will not get us any closer to the real; quite the reverse is the case: "in philosophy the time given up to refutation is generally time lost. Of the many objections raised by so many thinkers against one another, what remains? Nothing" (Bergson [1913] 1920, p. 77). For all his criticism of the previous western philosophical tradition, Bergson is a par excellence anti-critical or post-critical thinker. For him, the refutation of others is problematic because it ends in nothing but negativity. In and of itself, critique cannot furnish a positive ontological view. The truth of an idea should speak for itself. An authentic concept irradiates beyond all self-limitation by its expediency in rendering duration, illuminating that which was formerly invisible. It is an existence which is not periodical, a tension uniting an entire dimension of knowledge, a spiritual tree, blossoming. The true idea "proves to be, without our refuting anybody, the best of refutations" (ibid). It also follows from this that the authenticity of a new concept depends more on its own sovereign power of persuasion, rather than on the merits of the refutations it can supply. For the rationalist who believes in the redemptive power of scientific reason, intuition cannot refute anything. The skeptic position for which Bergson advocates involves keeping an open mind, and treating strange phenomena such as telepathy as real facts, at least provisionally.

There is no clear dividing line between applied science and investigations into the paranormal. Indeed, the technology of the present may often be traced back to mysticisms of the past. In 1913, the year of Bergson's presentation on psychic phenomena, the forces of magnetism at work in telepathy simply could not be measured. But this could very well change, for nobody can predict the direction of technological and social advancement. No doubt influenced by Lodge's electromagnetified spiritualism and Frederic Myers' evolutionist ideas about parapsychology, Bergson draws a parallel between telepathic powers and electricity. For most of its existence, humanity has known nothing about electricity, yet "we produce electricity at every moment, the atmosphere is continually electrified, we move among magnetic currents" (Bergson [1913] 1920, p. 80). It took until the 19th century for human beings to discover this invisible force pervading the world. While telepathy remains a parascientific discipline, unrecognized by mainstream science, some developments have borne out Bergson's prophetic remarks. For example, wireless technologies emerged during the 20th century, which serve to transmit information and currents through air. Lodge and his colleague Oliver Heaviside did pioneering work in the development of wireless telegraphy, and the latter "thought that an X-ray or some other physical theory of telepathy

would explain much in the 'bastard science' of spiritualism" (Noakes 2008, p. 327). It was a common hypothesis at the time that telepathy is merely a physical process of resonation and interference among brain waves connecting to each other through the ether.[5] For a long time, even during much of the 20th century, spiritualists[6] of many persuasions believed their experiments to be forms of wireless or "radio" communication at a distance. It is a little-known fact that the famed socialist American novelist, Upton Sinclair, was an adherent of spiritualism and purported to prove the reality of communication at a distance by means of telepathy or "mental radio". Einstein wrote a preface to Sinclair's book of the same title, which details the novelist's experiences with his second wife, who supposedly successfully duplicated many pictures drawn by her brother at another, hidden location by telepathic means (see Sinclair [1930] 1962).

Similarly, in the 1920s, progressive Protestant clergymen such as Frederick Du Vernet experimented with telepathy, describing it as a mode of accessing "radio mind". Influenced by experiences with mediums and First Nations shamanic practices, Du Vernet held that "the supposed barrier of space between two minds can be effectually annihilated by the power of the imagination working through the fundamental union of all souls." (Du Vernet 1925, pp. 27–28, quoted in Klassen 2018, p. 220).[7] It is not an exaggeration to claim that the data transfer technologies of our present were prefigured by such mystical techniques. Wireless was born in the atmosphere of the seance. Technology is always permeated by the spiritual dimension. Adherents of religious doctrines constantly search for new ways of integrating their theological beliefs with technology and, obversely, technological innovation itself is driven in large part by extra-rational spiritual influences. As Bergson states in *Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, "the mystical summons up the mechanical" (Bergson [1932] 1935, p. 267).[8] For whatever reason, be it the mental intensities, openness or intuitive pluripotentiality afforded by exposure to psychic phenomena and religious experience, many successful scientists and innovators such as Lodge and other esteemed members of the Society of Psychical Research seem to have gained much inspiration from concepts of mind energy, later rechanneled into the practical areas of social life. The technological gains its impetus from the sacred. Could not the most inspired inventors of the future be those mystical-minded, near-insane visionaries intent upon overcoming the menace of death, ecological destruction and entropy? At its greatest intensity, the scientific method is energized by the brilliantly radiant light of spirituality.

3. The Relativity of Facts

True skepticism means being open to evidence which presents itself, and not dismissing anything based on semantic or logical reasons. Bergson is not arguing that we accept telepathy as a fact; rather, Bergson is addressing the broader community of scientists and laypersons, skeptics included. An important methodological question is, if telepathy should indeed be considered a real phenomenon, how should such "psychical" events be examined? Bergson is clear that the method of inquiry differs greatly from that of other natural sciences. The unsettling issue is that some occurrences cannot be subordinated to any law. The qualitative cannot be made to depend upon the quantitative. As Bergson states, "I am led to 'believe' in telepathy, just as I 'believe' in the defeat of the Invincible Armada" (Bergson [1913] 1920, p. 81). What Bergson is saying is that in historical (as well as "judicial") matters, we have simply no way of quantitatively verifying facts. Indeterminacy characterizes our relationship to qualitative data. Belief here signifies a mode of belief which is independent of claims to truth or falsehood. We cannot travel back in time to 1588 and independently ascertain whether the Spanish Armada did in fact come to grief. Perhaps the Spanish Empire succeeded, but successfully hid its victory, having taken control of Britain through some machination. Maybe the fleet was a foil for secret agents who infiltrated the British court, installing a crypto-Catholic royal family. Or, on another, more plausible view, one could reinterpret the entire history of the 1585–1604 Anglo–Spanish War. After all, the very next year (1589), the English in turn sent an invasion fleet against Spain which proved similarly unsuccessful; neither of the invasions was able to gain a

foothold. Hence, a revisionist historian intent upon upending the dominant historiographic narrative could say that, far from being an unambiguous Spanish debacle, the conflict was a draw from which neither side emerged truly victorious.

Things here boil down to a choice among various beliefs and interpretations, which is shaped by one's sociocultural context. It is not a stretch of the imagination to imagine that Spanish history textbooks portray the story of the Spanish Armada in a different light to British textbooks. Although one can always strive for impartiality, true neutrality is difficult to maintain, even centuries after an event. How more so in the case of spiritual matters, which cut to the very core of our personalities. Interpretation matters. As Jeffrey J. Kripal maintains, "psychical and paranormal phenomena are hermeneutical realities." (Kripal 2016, p. 257). The spiritual relates to the very basis of who and what one is, and who we are is greatly determined by the stories we tell. How then should researchers of paranormal phenomena proceed? Firstly, the concrete nature of first-person experience should be at the forefront. We ought to reject the all too frequent "disdain for the concrete" which characterizes the attitudes of rationalist and determinist-minded scientists (Bergson [1913] 1920, p. 82). The investigation of psychic phenomena ought to privilege the experience itself. Even if we bracket the ontological validity of telepathy, neither affirming nor denying its physical reality, we can nevertheless admit that, for those who experience them, psychic phenomena have an experiential reality. We are informed of a woman who saw her husband killed in battle on the day it occurred. For the wife, the death of the husband was experienced and felt as real, an experience later borne out by the unfortunate developments (ibid.). Phantasms too have a type of derivative reality, not unlike dreams and memory in general. If memory is "laden with the whole of the past," then the present is also burdened with the haunted depth of its past. (Bergson [1896] 1991, p. 168) Bergson refers to the past as the "integral past" and as that which gives continuity to reality. While in my view the past is less real than the present, if we accept such a position, that presents us with a truly haunting possibility: the basis of the present is the absence of presence we call the "past". The present is always already spectral.

It would be deceptively simple to merely add up all cases when the intuitive vision proved to be true and divide this with the sum of all such visions. One would then find that most psychic experiences do not correspond to a physical reality. Most people who experience supposedly telepathic communications are merely imagining things. More often than not, an element of wishful thinking is present. But Bergson argues that a quantitative view will not get us very far. All these considerations would presuppose a dividing line between the self as interiority and the exteriority of physical processes. In truth, we must interrogate this division too. What is "essential" in the example of the wife who "envisioned" the death of her husband in combat is "the picture which the lady perceived, and which was found to reproduce a complicated scene very distant from her" (Bergson [1913] 1920, p. 84). Even if an association with a physical event cannot be discerned, the image persists. The absence of the reality of its matter cannot, in other words, disqualify the qualitative reality of the mental image. The mere paucity of measuring equipment and methods does not indicate that movement exhibits a merely quantitative dimension. Rather, what Bergson argues for is a revaluation of what counts as proof in the first place.

Empiricism can have a place for experience as well, without relegating feeling to some unfounded "epiphenomenon". Even more significant is the place of complexity in all this. Commenting on the case of the wife who felt the moment she became a widow, Bergson notes that "an infinite number of coincidences is needed in order that chance should make a fancied scene the reproduction of a real scene" (Bergson [1913] 1920, p. 84). This connects with the topic of memory; as we have described, in Bergsonian philosophy memory is never entirely separate or discrete from the perception of the present. This recognition can be extrapolated into a perception of a future as well. We could say that the wife had a premonition of her oncoming widowhood. Leszek Kolakowski describes an important consequence of the inseparability of memory from perception: "there can be no distinction

between the form of memory and its actual content, between the ego and the perceptions or recollections that are put 'into' or superimposed 'on' it. I am what I remember, consciously or otherwise" (Kolakowski 1985, p. 47). Building on this recognition, we could describe the wife who foresaw the death of her husband as having become a widow prior to her bereavement. Givenness can, in this sense, precede itself. Could the psychic experience be an example of the invasion of the future into a present?

The imagination too has a productive power, for it is capable of manufacturing images. Past and future protrude into the present. Bergson compares the wife who envisions her bereavement to the painter; "her imagination", just like that of the artist, "executed a picture" (Bergson [1913] 1920, p. 85). We can posit here a certain epistemological egalitarianism, for Bergson is definitely claiming that all images and modes of thought should be treated as equal. Each act of imagination contributes in some way to the diversity, performativity and heterogeneity of our shared world/s. Not even human beings have a monopoly upon the production or creative utilization of images.[9] In our age, western, quantified and rationalized forms of scientific knowledge are held to be valid, while alternative forms of medicine such as Chinese traditional healing are excluded because of their divergent methodologies. An authentically nonmodern philosophy of science would do away with all epistemological monopolies and would profit much from integrating a Bergsonian perspective. (Hui 2017, p. 337) Nobody has the right to consign some images to ignominy or discredit them by denying their foundation in rationality. Simply put, image-production is a broader process than anything scientism can account for. Against any monopolization of knowledge, Bergson advocates for a liberal and pluralist view of the experimental method.[10]

While science has contributed much to the betterment of human life, Bergson believes that institutionalized science can become overly regulative and injurious to freedom of inquiry when it attempts to restrict scientific method (Bergson [1913] 1920, p. 86). The western scientific tradition is, in large measure, built upon the primacy of vision. By contrast, in Bergson's work, none of the senses are primary. All ways of approaching the world are equal. Intuition, after all, is as much an internal "vision" as a "sounding" of the depths. Even in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, Eurocentric Science with a capital "S" believes that it holds the keys to all questions. The issue is not with scientists as such, but with an all too frequent simplistic mentality that elevates the "Scientific" claim to "Truth" by denigrating other registers of knowledge. Bergsonian philosophy is of great relevance to the 21st century, precisely because of its epistemological openness.[11] Positioning itself as the most plausible type of knowledge, the mainstream scientific outlook is reliant upon a quantification of all events and processes. The problem for Bergson is that, as opposed to physical occurrences, "it is of the essence of mental things that they do not lend themselves to measurement" (Bergson [1913] 1920, p. 87). Only qualitative methods can get a hold on spiritual experiences. Summarizing his previous research, Bergson reiterates his view that "the brain does not preserve the ideas or images of the past, it simply stores motor habits" (Bergson [1913] 1920, p. 90). If this is the case, memory must be supposed to constitute a far broader, more all-encompassing category than the brain. Perception and memory alike overflow the brain in all directions, drawing lines of facts all over the multiplicity of worlds. When we feel ourselves living, our vital forces extend into the atmosphere, while our desires are transmitted through ever more ethereal information technological networks.

Leszek Kolakowski connects Bergson's interest in parapsychological phenomena with an interest in the survival of the soul after biological death. It should be remembered that, in the Bergsonian teaching, the brain is not considered to be a storehouse of memory, but rather "a meeting-place of matter with mind" (Kolakowski 1985, p. 49). The qualification "a" is of fundamental importance, for in no way does Bergson assert that the human brain is the sole place where spirit intersects with matter. There is a whole range of such places. Taken to its most extreme conclusion, any place where changes of internal movement pertain can be interpreted as such a meeting-place of materiality and mind. Because he lacked direct experience regarding communication with the deceased, Bergson refrained

from directly engaging in speculations regarding the life of the soul after death. Indeed, important contemporary cultural research bears out Bergson's assertion that we ought not to dismiss the notion of an afterlife even in secularized cultural contexts. (see: Despret 2021) In the manner of a true skeptic, Bergson did not deny the possible posteriority of the soul. The most we can say, following Kolakowski, is that "perhaps dream perception comes closest to what perception liberated from the supervision of the brain might be like" (Kolakowski 1985, p. 49). As we have seen, for Bergson the brain is a selection mechanism which furnishes the organism with the power of choosing among a range of possible movements. In essence, the brain is an empty frame waiting for content to enrich it. Ordinarily, everyday channels of consciousness are "too restrictive to allow reality its full girth and complexity." (King 2015, p. 68). Nonetheless, this does not mean that immense quantities of as-yet-unperceived perception-images and memory-images are not present in and of themselves. The "cerebral organ prepares the frame; it does not furnish the recollection." (Bergson [1913] 1920, p. 91). Elsewhere, in a lecture on dreaming, Bergson asserts that knowledge itself is not all that different from dreaming, the former being a "kind of hallucination, inserted and fitted into a real frame, which we provide for ourselves when we perceive things." (Bergson [1901] 1920, p. 121). For philosopher C. D. Broad, dreams demonstrate that, at least in theory, "it is conceivable that, if a human person could and did survive the death of his present body, he might carry with him the mechanism and the materials for producing such internally coherent phantasmagoria, without needing external stimulation." (Broad 1962, p. 397). Again, disincarnated memory appears as a ghostly possibility haunting philosophy. Could spiritual or post mortem experience be a synonym for the act of stepping outside of our individuated mental frames, or even breaking them altogether, while the production of images continues unabated?

4. Experience versus Science

The import of Bergson's argument regarding psychic phenomena is that concrete experience enjoys precedence over the external, supposedly impartial "Scientific" viewpoint. Bergsonian philosophy demands a respect and acceptance of the experiences of others, however alien these may otherwise be to our preconceptions. Does this open the door to a limitless relativism? In a certain sense, it does, but only those who stand to lose their hierarchically ordained positions of power must be afraid of the abandonment of the illegitimate institution of privileged perspectives. Instead of mystifying the inner workings of the brain, Bergson likens it to a conductor, whose job is the coordination of bodily movements. Its role is "to play, in the full meaning of the term, the mental life." (Bergson [1913] 1920, p. 92). Being an organ of attention to life, the brain is the point where we intersect with other durations. If it is to remain open, science too must preserve a place for the qualitative besides the quantitative. While attachment is important, this does not reduce in any way the crucial importance of detachment. Freedom means not only the ability to keep ourselves chained to life; by channeling perceptions according to their practical worth for the organism, the brain also has a tendency to limit the mental life, where the latter is infinitely vaster than any skull. It is at this point that Bergson mentions the idea of "panoramic vision". In the case of those afflicted by a near-death experience, there can be discerned "a sudden disinterestedness in life born of the sudden conviction that the moment is the moment of death." (Bergson [1913] 1920, p. 95). According to Bergson's view, the near-death experience shows that memory, when detached from the need to live, can be extended into the cosmos.[12] None of us can know how it feels to have our memory extend until it becomes coincident with all worlds until we ourselves have occasion to experience this, either at the end of our lives or due to some other extraordinary event.

The structure of Bergson's argument is reminiscent of that of a later thinker, namely analytical philosopher of mind, Frank Jackson. In his famous 1986 piece, since much commented upon in the literature, "What Mary Didn't Know", Jackson imagines a young woman locked in a "black and white" room. The question is whether Mary can know anything about color before experiencing it. Jackson's contention is that even if Mary were

to watch countless black and white lectures concerning color, none of this information could ever possibly amount to an authentic experience of stepping out into a colorful outside world. As Jackson writes in his conclusion, "lectures about qualia over black-and-white television do not tell Mary all there is to know about qualia" (Jackson 1986, p. 295). The moral of the story is that actual experience of sensual qualities cannot be reproduced without a lived experience of such realities; as long as she remains situated within her colorless world, Mary will never really have an accurate knowledge pertaining to color sensation. The television transmission does not heal her separation from the world. We are not aware of any who have adapted Jackson's conclusion, applying it to spiritual matters and religious experience. Be that as it may, we regard such an adaptation as not unfounded. Applying the example of the Mary's Room thought experiment to spiritual phenomena such as telepathy and the survival of the soul after death, one could state that Bergson is communicating the same position, albeit in regard to phenomena a great deal less common than the perception of color. Without ourselves experiencing such phenomena, we do not have the right to dismiss the experiences of others out of hand without careful qualitative examination of such cases.

What is important is that all experiences be treated as equal. There is an equality of images, which is based in large measure upon the egalitarianism of durations. Without tasting something of the immortal, we mortals have no right to deny the immortality of those who have already passed. Those who ripen are the souls that have broken their frames. According to one view, consciousness can be likened to a condensation of information that cuts across the matter/mind divide (Tononi 2008). To be conscious means to be aware of one's thickness, as enacted in communion with a world. When it achieves a state of complete relaxation, consciousness stretches across all memories. This relaxed, released awareness, unshackled from its commitment to a life, "surveys its whole history" (Bergson [1913] 1920, p. 95). The envisioned scene of thickness, in its completion, is the instantaneous revelation of a planar feeling. If intercommunion pertains, as Bergson holds, then the survival of the soul too can be conceived of as describing not an individual perseverance, but a melting into a greater unity (Bergson [1913] 1920, p. 97). If consciousness overflows the organism, each duration can be said to also explode out of its confinement. Destruction could then be reconceived as a type of vacuity preliminary to creation. Instead of projecting annihilation into brokenness, we can learn to observe the vitality latent to destruction, the blackness within whiteness. The sunspots dotting the surface of our Sun are equally real components of the Sun's majesty as the hotter, brighter areas of our star.

The spiritual has thus been reconceived of in the mode of instantaneity. Instead of sacrificing feelings on the altar of rationality, the Bergsonian outlook uncovers the coherence within multiplicity. An integral philosophy requires a method of reintegration and reunification. It offers a re-evaluation of reality while not positing the existence of a universal medium or any all-encompassing entity. For too long, holism has been condemned as unconventional, even unscientific. Practitioners of holistic medicine such as Franz Anton Mesmer were roundly attacked and excluded from the respectable areas of the scientific community already in the 18th century (Lachapelle 2011, pp. 65–66). Without charlatans, there can be no doctors. The figure of the charlatan, as symbolized by Mesmer, served to construct the reliable, rational and evidence-based practitioner of professionalized modern medicine (although things were far from clear-cut even in Mesmer's case; see Stengers 2003). The idea of "animal magnetism" proposed by Mesmer nonetheless survived among French biologists well into the 19th century. By the early 20th century, the members of the psychical research movement were eager to differentiate themselves from pseudoscience, even though they adopted many earlier notions. Bergson himself argues against accepting an undue emphasis on precision and measurement in science. The idea of precision is culturally relative, dating from the culture of Ancient Greece. (Bergson [1913] 1920, p. 102). This priority of precision is grounded on other metaphysical and epistemological presuppositions. A commonly held view is that existence

may be revealed through procedures of truth. If we follow certain operations, things can be understood as they really are. Can access not be achieved through other means?

It is not so much a case of uncritically accepting psychic phenomena, but rather of keeping an open mind. Science, and medicine in particular, is open to contestation. Mechanism, reiteration and repetition, however practicable they may have proven for the development of the natural sciences, nonetheless represent a danger to the spontaneity of life. When applied to spiritual and psychological matters, mechanistic determinism faces its limit. The unpredictable cannot be quantified, except as a set of probabilities. Concepts such as "certitude" and "law" have no grasp upon reality in its becoming. The real is always in the making. In a striking section, Bergson proposes a speculative revaluation of the history of science in the form of a thought experiment. What if the history of science had evolved entirely differently? What if Kepler, Galileo and Newton had been psychologists? Conventional historiography teaches us that the question of "what if?" has no place and should not be asked. But Bergsonism rejects any such injunctions. No query is unqualified. Had the field of psychology undergone as thorough a revolution as the natural sciences (physics in particular), then our entire worldview would differ in highly important ways. Instead of a mistaken focus on "mind", psychology would dissolve into a spiritualized type of biology. Remember, for Bergson, the psychological, the spiritual and the vital are one. There is no absolute qualitative difference between these three territories, a source of much perplexity for subsequent interpretations of Bergson's work. Élan vital is Bergson's name for all three artificially separated dimensions. For Bergson, a dualistic concept such as "spirit" or "matter" is not all-encompassing enough to account for the non-dual nature of reality. If a thing is alive, it is equipped with a certain mentality, capable of movement, and connects to a larger vital force. While some organisms are immobile, the maximal intensity of indeterminate mobility seems, for Bergson, to be the primary criterion of life. Defined as "striving", élan vital is the core of the Bergsonian philosophy. While an asteroid can traverse several solar systems traveling upon a billion-year trajectory, it cannot choose this act. A biological psychology would transcend the mental dimension, uniting with the life sciences into a new type of holism. Instead of the outer level, psychology would be attentive to the vital force or striving underlying organisms. This has important ramifications for medicine as well.

Almost as if prophesying the integrative medicine movement, Bergson states that a vitalist bio-psychology would be conducive to the emergence of "a medical practice which would have sought to remedy directly the insufficiencies of the vital force; it would have aimed at the cause and not the effects, at the center instead of at the periphery; healing by suggestion or, more generally, by the influence of mind on mind might have taken forms and proportions of which it is impossible for us to form the least idea. So would have been founded, so would have been developed, the science of mind-energy" (Bergson [1913] 1920, pp. 99–100). All this talk of counterfactual alternative scientific disciplines undoubtedly resembles the realm of science fiction. A frequent staple of sci-fi narratives is the presence of individuals who have a superhuman degree of empathy, the ability to feel at a distance, so to speak. In our scientific worldview, this is an abnormality, a fantasy, but Bergson takes seriously the prospect that other dimensions could potentially function by way of an as yet entirely unknown and (for us) unconventional causal nexus. A science of mind-energy would undo the boundaries between organisms, while emphasizing an interrelatedness. That being said, Bergson himself is careful not to confuse reality with delusion: "We do not let go the prey to grasp what may be only a shadow." (Bergson [1913] 1920, p. 101).

A counterfactual, imaginary science is itself a phantasm. But why introduce a concept and then backtrack on it? One suspects that the employment of a specter is more complicated than a case of treating it as something which can easily be cast aside. The phantasm, once introduced into the text, cannot be excised. While disavowing the "science of mind-energy", Bergson still manages, by keeping options open, to prevent the re-enclosure of discourse, without the pincers of scientism on the one hand and dogmatic religion on the other crushing us. This epistemological openness points toward the concept

of the "irreducible mind", an in-between position we may describe as an anti-reductionist and even "nonmodern" or alternative modern genealogy of "transmission theories" of mind, including F. C. S. Schiller, William James, Frederic Myers and, of course, Henri Bergson. (Kelly et al. 2007, p. 606) The danger of both cognitive closure and regression to pre-scientific notions is avoided by a performative semantic of disavowal. Bergson, while publicly denying his experiences of the paranormal, privately asserted its reality and in general kept an open mind. Let us be very attentive indeed to the import of the philosopher's words. Do not release the prey to grasp what may be unreal; the immediate and the concrete, as well as all the achievements of science, should be kept intact, whilst we keep our minds open to the possibility that the formerly unreal could actualize into a novel reality. The reverse could also hold: heretofore widely accepted views could turn to dust. For Bergson, the past is always present in sometimes unpredictable and spooky ways, haunting the present.[13] For us, the enlightenments of the future are similarly obscure, but change there shall be, and our most fundamental cherished concepts are not immune to the powers of time.

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Notes

1 Throughout this paper, I shall treat mind and consciousness as being synonyms of one another. Metaphysically loaded dualistic concepts, however, such as "spirit" or "soul", shall be consciously avoided.

2 For one, Stéphane Madelrieux has argued for just such a view. Madelrieux claims that Bergson maintains the superiority of the spiritual line of evolution, as represented by human beings, as against other, more materialized forms of life. "Bergson considers the other lines to be waste or failures because, due to their materiality, they stray too far from the gradient of the spiritual vector." (Madelrieux 2021, p. 63). While the focus of the author's reading is mostly the description of life provided in *Creative Evolution*, to emphasize one element is methodologically misleading. By analogy, this would be equivalent to privileging the "memory" pole at the expense of "matter". In truth, memory is endowed with far less capabilities than matter, the former being virtual and the latter actual. Similarly, in the context of *Creative Evolution*, high intelligence is more concentrated but also less pervasive than the élan vital considered as a whole. Without seeking to downplay the affinity of Bergson with spiritualism, I nonetheless intuit that it would be erroneous to impute a dismissal of matter to Bergson as Madelrieux does. Doing so is to miss the complexity of the Bergsonian philosophy entirely. Admitting the ontological possibility of spiritual entities or spiritual evolutionary possibilities is not the same as devaluing non-spectral or material entities.

3 This was far from uncommon among researchers at the time. Indeed, co-founder of the SPR Frederic Myers proposed a remarkably similar view regarding evolution. For Myers, human individuals capable of paranormal experience were indicators of a future direction of human development. Such privileged persons heralded an as yet unknown "extraterrene" course of evolution. (Kripal 2016, p. 68) Intriguingly, elsewhere Bergson describes mystics as constituting "a new species" (Bergson [1932] 1935, p. 78).

4 Bergson's sister, Mina Bergson (Moina Mathers), was, incidentally, the wife of occultist and leader of the Order of the Golden Dawn, Samuel MacGregor Mathers, and later went on to found her own organization, the Rosicrucian Order of the Alpha et Omega. It is no exaggeration to suppose that Henri would have been familiar with some occult and magical doctrines, if only superficially and on a second-hand basis from conversations with his sister. (Grogin 1988, p. 40). John Ó Maoilearca explores this fascinating connection in a recent monograph (Ó Maoilearca 2022).

5 Today, in the age of 5G telecommunication, the transference of images and information via the atmosphere is becoming a reality, making everyday life a highly immaterial and ethereal reality.

6 I refer here to those who experimented with psychic methods, and not to adherents of the Spiritualist school of philosophy.

7 At this point, I would like to recount a queer occurrence. The night after having first read of Du Vernet's eccentric religious career in the spring of 2020, I fell asleep, and had a very lucid, exceedingly detailed dream. Observing a man lying on his side upon

a hill, a voice was heard to speak. The following sentence I can remember clearly: Sometimes he'd just space out, you know, listening to things. After this brief "narration," radio interference could be discerned, then the sound of a harmonious melody which I never recall having heard previously.

[8] To cite but one of these odd confluences between religious and technological concepts, the phrase for users of the largest social media platform in the world is "friend". Members of the Quaker denomination addressed one another in the same manner. Indeed, the name of the Quaker church is "Universal Community of Friends". This is a coincidence, yet curiously points toward an underlying commonality between the mystical and the communicative dimensions. Both the Quakersand social media alike strive for a universal, neutral form ofopen community. Social media is in a very real sense a "union of all souls", a spiritual commonwealth or collective intelligence platform.

[9] Recent research has proven that even supposedly mechanistically oriented, what we label "instinctive" animals such as bumblebees, are able to capture and retain images in their nervous systems. (Solvi et al. 2020). Complex activities such as play have also since been observed among these social insects (Galpayage et al. 2022).

[10] Indeed, the stress Bergson places upon epistemological pluralism places him in great philosophical proximity to the American Pragmatist philosopher and psychologist William James. The latter's "radical empiricism" explicitly recognizes the fundamental importance of lived experience in knowledge creation. As James notes, "To be radical, an empiricism must neither admit into its constructions any element that is not directly experienced, nor exclude from them any element that is directly experienced. For such a philosophy, the relations that connect experiences must themselves be experienced relations, and any kind of relation experienced must be accounted as 'real' as anything else in the system." (James 1912, p. 42). While close personal and philosophical allies, Bergson and James also had their differences. For an overview of the convergences and divergences between their approaches cf. (Brenner 2011) It is also worth noting that James took the phenomenon of telepathy seriously, and conducted psychical research. On the relationship between James' psychical research and James' philosophy see: (Ford 1998).

[11] Bergson's rejection of the monopoly of quantified natural science in psychic matters relates to feminist scholar Donna J. Haraway's observations regarding the objectifying scientific masculine gaze: "the eyes have been used to signify a perverse capacity (. . .) to distance the knowing subject from everybody and everything in the interests of unfettered power" (Haraway 1988, p. 581). That which Haraway calls the "god trick" consists in speaking from a position of apparent impartiality, thereby occluding the various types of privileges and power involved in constructing such privileged positionalities in the first place. This autopositionality monopolizes discourse, discrediting those who do not fit in by excluding them from this mythical impartiality.

[12] The "panoramic view" afforded by the relaxation of cognitive selectivity in the context near-death experiences is a recurrent theme in Bergson's work (Poulet 2011).

[13] In much Cultural Studies scholarship, there is a renewed emphasis on spectrality and haunting, deriving in large measure from Jacques Derrida's work on hauntology. However such discourses often remain on the metaphorical level, mobilizing the figure of the ghost as a figure of speech. To cite one example, "ghosts and various other forms of the past are often present during learning. It is possible that ghosts direct our learning and teaching in a manner similar to the ways in which those with flesh and material presence interact with us. Past learning (memories, senses, images, texts, etc.) shape the present, and absences (things unlearned and lives not lived) are always present." (Koro-Ljungberg 2016, p. 149). As I have suggested, following Bergson one could go further and assert the possibility of the actual survival of memory-images. C. D. Broad was another philosopher who, alongside Bergson, took the possibility of specters seriously. Broad asserts that unless a possible disincarnated consciousness "has a personal stream of experience associated with it during the periods when it is not combined with the body of a medium, no evidence would be supplied at any sitting of new experiences being had, of new plans being formed and initiated, or of any *post mortem* development of the *ante mortem* personality." (Broad 1962, p. 428). If perception is action, hence actuality, then memory would correspond to inaction and virtuality. A body is necessary for creative, spontaneous actions, yet memory-images can conceivably persist in an eerily disincarnate state.

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