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Life and Freedom

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The Evolution of the Problem of Freedom is the first course Bergson taught as the chair in the "History of Modern Philosophy" at the Collège de France. He replaced the philosopher and sociologist Gabriel Tarde, to whom Bergson pays homage in the opening part of the first lecture. Bergson had previously taught for four years at the Collège de France as the chair in the "History of Ancient Philosophy."

For this first course, Bergson chose a theme that he placed at the very center of his first book, *Time and Free Will* (*Essai sur les donnée immédiates de la conscience*): freedom. Therefore, it's not surprising that we find in the 1904–1905 course a certain number of analyses which had been developed in 1888, such as the constitutive but positive indefinability of freedom,[1] and the partial character—"conventional" or rather "symbolic"[2]—of the principle of the conservation of energy.[3]

But, these developments are, on the one hand, enriched and reconfigured from the inside by what Bergson had learned in the time since the publication of *Time and Free Will* (in particular, as developed in "Introduction to Metaphysics" in 1903, the oppositions between analysis and intuition, simplicity from the interior viewpoint and complexity from the external viewpoint). On the other hand, these developments are supported by new theoretical advances often called upon with great success in the later directions of this philosophy.

First of all, one thinks of the analyses which fill the pages of *Creative Evolution*. Bergson's conception of this book is already far along and the

courses from this period (from the first courses in 1900 up to those of 1906–1907 on the question of the will) are something like a laboratory for *Creative Evolution*. Of course, Bergson presents reflections on the question of life—life increasingly constitutes a viewpoint that has to be occupied in order to appreciate the philosophical issues laid out earlier, such as time or consciousness. There is thus, as one of the last lectures will say in a magnificent way, an intermediary term between the absolute knowledge we have of our interior life and the relative knowledge we have of exteriority: this is the knowledge we have of life since it is, literally, knowledge of an "internal relation."[4] The same thing holds for the interpretations and readings of past philosophies he presentsreadings which, as the background for a "philosophy of the history of philosophy" (both as becoming and as method) which itself is in the process of being developed here[5]—since, after all, a course called "The Evolution of the Problem of Freedom" studies essentially (but not exclusively) prior doctrines.[6] We inevitable notice this each time we examine a course by Bergson at the Collège de France, during this period of his career, concerning a theme in the history of philosophy. The extremely condensed comments, condensed so much that they might look random or hasty, in the section of the fourth chapter of *Creative Evolution*, which casts "a glance at the history of systems,"[7] are actually the ultimate condensation— whose details therefore have received thorough reflection—of the coherent and substantial developments presented to this audience at the Collège de France.

However, a surprise awaits the reader of the 1904–1905 course at the Collège de France. We are surprised to see, in certain investigations which Bergson engaged in very early, a great proximity—indicating a tremendous creative consistency, and sometimes as far as stating the same formulas themselves—between "The Evolution of the Problem of Freedom" and *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, which was published in 1932. For example, you will read a long and magnificent philosophical portrait of Socrates, seen as the first of all the philosophers to have had the intuition (Bergson does not hesitate to say this), the intuition of freedom. And already here, as he will be twenty-five years later, Socrates is considered to be the bearer of a kind of mystical emotion, which in him would come to double philosophical rationality.[8]

In the study initiated in the second lecture on the affective roots of the human belief in destiny, you will also find the first elements of what will constitute an important part, by its length and by its significance, of the second chapter of *The Two Sources*. In the second chapter, we find the critical debate with Lucien Lévy-Bruhl and the theoreticians of the notion of "primitive mentality."[9] In the last lectures, you will read developments devoted to Rousseau (understood through the *Social Contract* and especially *Emile*). Rousseau is an author whom we have every reason to believe has general similarities to Bergson, but whom Bergson hardly mentions throughout his published works. The one exception is a beautiful page on

Rousseau near the end of *The Two Sources*, which seems to be directly inspired by what Bergson says while he is standing in front of his audience in 1905.[10]

Like every publication of this kind, we also discover analyses—and this is perhaps the main interest in this Bergson course—which are found nowhere else in his works such as they are known to us to this day. The illuminating power that these analyses have in regard to his work and likewise their philosophical power of suggestion is considerable. For example, there's the historical thesis which claims that, to the extent that the intellectual conception of necessity becomes consolidated and rigid by means of scientific and metaphysical evolutions, our intuitive belief in freedom comes to be unwavering and intensified. Here are some other examples of analyses not found in his published works: the original way he poses the problem of contingent futures (presented through a study of Aristotle's treatise, *On Interpretation*) and the illustration (which is, so to speak, being actualized here) of the way that the intuition of duration leads us inevitably to reconsider logical principles (and in particular that of the excluded middle); a reconsideration, which strictly has to follow, of the relation affirmation and negation maintain in philosophy—a philosophical thesis being able to be positive in its grammatical aspect, and yet negative in its argumentative intention; conversely,[11] a radical and consistent reading of Descartes's "I think," thereby allowing the Cartesian priority of the will over the understanding in God as in humanity to achieve its full potential; and a Plotinian reading of Spinozism somewhat out of sync with the one finally proposed in *Creative Evolution* in 1907. In this course on the problem of freedom, Spinoza will be less a follower of Plotinus than of Aristotle.

Each time we read one of these courses (reproduced word by word by the Corcos brothers, who were legal stenographers for Charles Péguy who was unable to be at the courses),[12] we think we hear Bergson's own *voice* at times, still endowed with all the characteristics of a sonority coming from someone alive and therefore capable of moving us. Near the end of the first lecture, Bergson declares, "They are nearly the same formulas but there is something else. It's—how to express this—it's something like the feeling of freedom taking on a greater and greater importance." Here he brings into focus for us, by extending it, the exact formula in regard to a Kantian moral intuition which would differ profoundly from that of Rousseau. In editing this course, our aim has been to allow us to hear Bergson's intonations, about which he says himself that they are, in philosophy, inseparable from the content.[13]

[1] Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will* (*Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience*, 1889), trans. F. L. Pogson (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1910), 219.

[2] See lecture of March 24, 1905.

[3] Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, 141–54.

[4] This consideration will be summarized very briefly in *Creative Evolution*, 360.

[5] Beyond even the fruitful tension, always sharpened at each period of his career, between a "natural tendency of our mind" and the "impulses of intuition" (which escape from the natural tendency), Bergson sees, starting at the end of the first lecture, a conflictual interrelation, within the history of philosophical thought, between what he calls the "forces of eruption" and the "forces of sedimentation." He observes that only the forces of sedimentation are what the historians of philosophy take stock of and record in their works.

[6] During what ends up being the totality of this course, Bergson indicates that there will be "a second dogmatic part." This dogmatic part finally will never appear, due to the restrictions of the calendar Bergson had to obey. But we have to notice that, each time he makes this kind of announcement, he anticipates what these dogmatic considerations would have been in a more or less developed way (see the February 3, 1905 lecture). Thereby, he shows us rather definitively what they are.

[7] Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, trans. A. Mitchell (London: Macmillan, 1911), 272.

[8] Henri Bergson, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, trans. R. Ashley Audra and C. Brereton (New York: Henry Holt, 1935), 59–63. Recall that the first manifestations of Bergson's interest in mystics date from 1901, in the discussion following his presentation of "Le parallélisme psycho-physique et la métaphysique positive," in *Ecrits Philosophiques* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2011), 264.

[9] Bergson, *The Two Sources*, 140–75.

[10] Bergson, *The Two Sources*, 282.

[11] On this particular point, see the February 24 and May 12, 1905 lectures.

[12] These courses (1901–1905), being published by Presses Universitaires de France, are stored at Bibliothèque littéraire Jacques Doucet. Thanks to Bibliothèque littéraire Jacques Doucet, an online complete catalogue of Bergson's book (at least for those which have been collected) is available: www.bljd.opac.sudocs.abes.fr.

[13] Henri Bergson, *The Creative Mind*, trans. M. L. Andison (New York: Philosophical Library, 1946), 86.