Vital Intuitions: Henri Bergson and Mystical Ethics

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To those with a passing familiarity with the work of Henri Bergson, a turn of the century French philosopher, it might seem that an essay dealing with the relationship between mysticism, ethics, and religion would focus primarily on Bergson's last major publication, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion.* It is in this text that he articulates his provocative vision of the mystical and sociological origins of morality and religion. However, while much of the material explored in *The Two Sources* was new territory for Bergson, the striking originality of this work did not signal an abrupt change of position. Instead, *The Two Sources* emerged organically from the richness of his prior philosophical investigations, acting, in essence, as the final fruit of years of concerted, diligent inquiry into the nature of consciousness, the relationship between mind and matter, and the evolution of life. Therefore, in order to better understand Bergson's exploration of mysticism and ethics in *The Two Sources*, it is necessary first to explore the rich and fertile soil of his previous works.

The original seed of Bergson's entire corpus can be found in his first publication, *Time and Free Will.* Rooted in a profound introspective examination of the nature of consciousness (hence its original title in French: *Essai Sur Les Données Immédiates de la Conscience* -- i.e., An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness) this deliciously subversive text asks: What do we discover when we become conscious of our own consciousness?

According to Bergson, what we will find when we reflect on the nature of our consciousness is an inner life that is ceaselessly changing -- an inner world in which one state of consciousness seamlessly flows into the next. For instance, at this moment, let's say that I am aware of feeling sad. But, whether or not I am conscious of it, in the very next moment that

feeling will have changed ever so subtlely into something else. Perhaps I have shifted the position of my body, or have shifted what I am seeing or hearing or thinking. All of these new experiences in this new moment combine with the memory of the original feeling of sadness; they come together to produce a different "note" in the ongoing melody of my consciousness. As time passes, these changes in my consciousness continue to multiply. In fact, for Bergson, the passage of time *is itself* the changing of our consciousness. Ultimately, these changes, reverberating throughout my being, become so evident that I have to acknowledge that I am no longer feeling the way I once was; I am no longer "sad"; now I am, let's say, "content."

However, as Bergson points out, the need to label inner experience, to give it a clearcut name (e.g., "sadness" and "contentment") comes with a heavy cost. Because we tacitly experience everything through language, he would say that, beneath the surface of our awareness, the prism of our linguistic structure fragments our experience, splitting the dynamic flux of our consciousness into unchanging, self-contained parts (i.e., "states" of consciousness such as "sadness" or "contentment"). Since words are separate, unchanging units ("contentment," as a word, always stays the same and is always a different word than "sadness"), we tend to assume that as time passes within us one "nugget" of consciousness (e.g., "sadness") is replaced by another "nugget" of consciousness (e.g., "contentment"), almost as if these moments of consciousness were beads of different colors lined up next to each other. This type of tacit spatial symbolism (each bead is solid, separate, measurable) makes it extremely difficult to recognize that, in reality, our feelings are continually in flux, and that while it is possible to distinguish different "tones" to our inner experience, there are, in actuality, no distinct boundaries within consciousness.

In a later text (*The Creative Mind* -- a collection of Bergson's essays published in 1934), Bergson uses another metaphorical image to explain that we tend to think of our inner experience as if it were captured on a roll of movie film -- essentially, turning the undivided flux of our

consciousness into a linear series of static snapshots, one frozen "moment" followed by another. In this "cinematographic" perspective on life, each thought, each memory, each feeling, is tacitly understood to exist separately within us, each having its own discrete identity, each taking up just so much "space" within our psyche, each static snapshot lined up and unrolling on the underlying homogenous substance of the film of time.

But as Bergson points out, if we look more carefully within us, we will discover that each of the "moments" of our consciousness are not separate from each other. Instead, within the flux of our consciousness, there is nothing static, there are no snapshots cut off from the rest, there is simply the continuous flow of our awareness, each state of consciousness interpenetrating the others -- "a spectrum of a thousand shades, with imperceptible gradations leading from one shade to another" (CM 193, *1398*).[1]

This indivisible fusion of manyness and oneness, this ongoing, dynamic, temporal flux of our consciousness, this flowing that is ever new and always unpredictable, this continual, seamless, interconnected, immeasurable, movement of our awareness is what Bergson calls "durée," or in English, "duration." In the English language, the term "duration" is inevitably linked with notions of "endurance" and has connotations of grimly and stoically "enduring" something painful or difficult. But the term as Bergson uses it is intended to represent the temporal flux of our consciousness -- a lived awareness which is "durable," i.e., it persists (while always changing), it is always present (and always moving), it endures, in time, as time.[2] This duration, for Bergson, is that which we experience within ourselves through an intuitive introspective awareness -- not as something that exists separate from us, but instead, as the dynamic essence of who we really are.

Unfortunately, as Bergson is so fond of pointing out, experiencing ourselves as a continuous, dynamic, interconnected, conscious flux is extremely difficult. In order to do so, we have to battle against deeply ingrained ways of understanding ourselves and our relationship to

life. One of the most fundamental obstacles to introspective clarity is that we typically do not pay any attention to what takes place within us. As Bergson puts it, "we have no interest in listening to the uninterrupted humming of life's depths" (CM 176, *1384*). Instead, what matters to us is the external world that seems to surround us, a world populated with material objects (e.g., cars, trees, chairs, dogs, other humans, etc.) that seem to exist separate from each other, that seem to possess well-defined boundaries, that seem to remain relatively stable.[3]

Bergson claims that in order to survive as a species most of our attention has focused on manipulating the external objects that seem to surround us. Inevitably, however, this practical, pragmatic mode of interaction with the external world (a mode of interaction that is greatly assisted by the structure of our language with its distinct and sharply defined words and concepts) affects the quality of our inner experience as well. Our need to portion out, measure, and dominate the external world, our tendency to see ourselves surrounded by objects that are static and external to ourselves and each other, objects that exist in a neutral, homogenous space, creates a predisposition to view our inner temporal experience through a corresponding type of spatial template. Seeing ourselves through this distorting lens we lose touch with the "indivisible and indestructible continuity " of the "melody of our experience"; we divide this melody into distinct notes that can be set out, side by side to each other in a two-dimensional, paper thin existence (CM 83, *1312*). Whereas in actuality our inner world is a "melody where the past enters into the present and forms with it an undivided whole which remains undivided and even indivisible in spite of what is added at every instant," instead we experience an inner life that is tightly controlled, where every feeling has a label, and every idea is carefully weighed and considered (CM 83, *1312*). Whereas in actuality there is the seamless, dynamic onrush of our awareness in time, instead we live in a time that is measured and parceled out, split up into seconds, minutes, hours -- the efflorescence of ceaseless novelty and inner continuity pulverized into units of sameness, each counted and accounted for.

Bergson stresses that understanding ourselves through the distorting funhouse mirror of our interactions with the external world leads, almost inevitably, to a specific philosophical stance: determinism. Physical determinism is a set of beliefs which argues that "the external world yields to mathematical laws"; physical determinism claims that "a superhuman intelligence which would know the position, the direction, and the speed of all the atoms and electrons of the material universe at a given moment could calculate any future state of the universe as we do in the case of an eclipse of the sun or the moon" (CM 108, *1332*).

Bergson emphasizes that if we believe that the activities of the external world are completely predetermined and if we see our inner reality as a reflection of the outer world in which our consciousness, like matter, is split up into tiny self-contained atoms, then it only makes sense to believe that our inner experience is also predetermined (especially if we think that our consciousness is reducible to the actions of physical atoms in the human organism). From this perspective, our current state of consciousness is said to be the inevitable, predictable, result of the actions of prior "atoms" of consciousness (e.g., my anger is the direct and predetermined result of my prior conviction that my friend insulted me). This type of psychical determinism, in a manner similar to physical determinism, claims that a "mathematician who knew the position of the molecules or atoms of a human organism at a given moment, as well as the position and motion of all the atoms in the universe capable of influencing it, could calculate with unfailing certainty the past, present and future actions of the person to whom this organism belongs, just as one predicts an astronomical phenomenon."[4] Clearly, if consciousness is understood in this way, free will is non-existent.

In *Time and Free Will*, Bergson is willing, at least temporarily, to grant that the external world is governed by natural laws and that the behavior of inert matter may well be predetermined and predictable. But one of the primary thrusts of his analysis of the nature of our consciousness in this text is to demonstrate that philosophical attacks on free will are based on a

mistaken understanding of the nature of the human psyche. If Bergson's conception of duration is an accurate account of our human consciousness, then the notion of the atomistic self (which is assumed by those who attack free will and, ironically, by many of those who support it) is undercut at its very roots. Bergson presents a number of persuasive arguments supporting the reality of free will, but each of these arguments is, in the final analysis, grounded in his claim that the nature of consciousness is fundamentally different than the nature of external reality. The external world (at least inert matter) is, to all appearances, a collection of separate, self-contained objects external to each other, which interact with each other in pre-determined, mechanical ways. Consciousness, however, is a dynamic, ever-new, ceaselessly changing, flowing temporal reality, an interconnected whole in which each "element" permeates and interpenetrates all the rest. Bergson concedes that advocates of philosophical determinism are, therefore, perhaps correct about the activities of inert matter, but they are radically mistaken when it comes to the nature of our psyche in that its very essence is freedom and unforeseeable creativity. He does not mince words; for him, "freedom is . . . a fact, and among the facts which we observe there is none clearer" (TFW 221, *145*).

To Bergson's credit, however, while he strenuously argues for the reality of free will, he also realizes that this freedom "is not absolute . . . [rather], it admits of degrees" (TFW 166, *109*). Bergson acknowledges that a sizable amount of our behavior does seem to have a striking resemblance to the mechanical, non-conscious, repetitive activity of inert matter. In fact, according to Bergson, most of our actions are little more than automatic reactions to outer stimuli, reactions which "though conscious and even intelligent, have many points of resemblance with reflex acts" (TFW 168, *111*). When we act on the instigation of solidified and encrusted habits and ideas that have remained on the surface of our psyches, we often behave in many ways like a type of "conscious automaton" (TFW 168, *111*). As Bergson puts it, when we identify with our "superficial ego," with its clearly defined social roles, its rigidly held dogmas,

its tightly controlled postures, "we live outside ourselves, hardly perceiving anything of ourselves but our own ghost . . . we live for the external world rather than for ourselves; we speak rather than think; we 'are acted' rather than act ourselves" (TFW 125, 231; *83*, *151*).

Nonetheless, according to Bergson, we do have the capacity to act differently. We can push aside the "independent growths" which "form and float" on the surface of our psyche "like dead leaves on the water of a pond" (TFW 166, 135; *110*, *90*); we can turn within ourselves and melt the "clear-cut crystals" of the "ideas which we receive ready made, and which remain in us without ever being properly assimilated" (CM 192, *1397*; TFW 135-36, *90*). If we accomplish this task through an intensive introspective effort, it then becomes possible to discover deep within our psyche that aspect of our being which is "the most uniformly, the most constantly and durably" ourselves, that "continuity of flow comparable to no flowing" we have ever seen; we can once again "get back into pure duration" and thereby "recover possession" of ourselves (CM 192, *1397*; TFW 232, *151*).

According to Bergson, actions that spring forth from this fluid, ever creative "deep-seated self" are indeed truly free; unfortunately, we rarely act from our depths in such a way that our whole personality vibrates (TFW 125, *83*). Instead, we prefer to relinquish our freedom, even in moments of crisis. We listen to the advice of others, we consult the rulebooks, we write down lists of pros and cons, we seek the approval of others, we cling to old patterns of behavior that worked in the past, we struggle to stay safely within our comfort zone. Much of the time this strategy works. We have learned how to live our lives on automatic pilot, how to avoid our depths. Fortunately, however, there are also moments in our lives in which something different takes place -- moments where, in the struggle to make a decision, just when we think we have made up our minds, something unexpected occurs:

> At the very minute when the act is going to be performed, *something* may revolt against it. It is the deep-seated self rushing up to the surface. It is the outer crust bursting, suddenly giving way to an irresistible thrust. Hence in the depths of the self, below this most reasonable pondering over most reasonable pieces of advice, something else was going on -- a gradual heating and a sudden boiling over of feelings and ideas, not unperceived, but rather unnoticed. If we turn back to them and carefully scrutinize our memory, we shall see that we had ourselves shaped these ideas, ourselves lived these feelings, but that, through some strange reluctance to exercise our will, we had thrust them back into the darkest depths of our soul whenever they came up to the surface (TFW 169-170, *112*).

At moments such as these, it may appear as if we are acting irrationally. But Bergson claims that this is not actually the case. When this sort of unexpected decision surges up within us, when we act spontaneously, seemingly without thought (a type of action that is very different from impulsive action, which is rooted in habitual emotional/motor reactions), we may not be able to give a precise, easily articulated, and justified reason for our actions, but we are actually acting out of the depths of who we are at that moment -- the dynamic sum total of our most profound convictions, feelings, and aspirations.[5] Our decision could not have been worked out in advance; it could not have been made by anyone but ourselves, by anyone except who we were in that very moment.

Bergson claims that most of us implicitly want an algorithm or formula that will automatically give us the answer as to how we should act, especially in moments of difficult decisions. We want life to be predictable; we want it to obey the comforting logic of

mathematics, where if we start with an initial set of premises, then certain conclusions inevitably follow -- no matter who we are or when we work on the problem. But as Bergson points out, unfortunately (or fortunately!), our personal life does not follow mathematical rules. Because human beings are constantly changing, learning, and growing, "the same reasons may dictate to different persons, or to the same person at different moments, acts profoundly different, although equally reasonable. The truth is that they are not quite the same reasons, since they are not those of the same person, nor of the same moment" (CE 7, *500*). Since life is constantly in flux, Bergson advises that we learn to know and to trust our depths, to attune ourselves to what is most deeply and fundamentally real within us: the ever flowing, ever new, yet ever connected, stream of our own consciousness.

Unfortunately, in *Time and Free Will*, Bergson is less helpful than he might be as to how we can learn to act more frequently and easily from our deep-seated self and not from the superficial ego. He is clear that genuinely free actions that are attuned to the depths of our being are possible as the result of rigorous introspective work, but he does not really give us any clues as to what factors might block access to the depths of our being, how we might overcome these inner barriers, or (at least in any detail or depth) how these mental and/or emotional obstacles might distort our decision making process. Bergson also does not explore in *Time and Free Will* the nature of the relationship between our deeper self and reality as a whole, or the ways in which it might be possible to be attuned to levels of inspiration and guidance that transcend the boundaries of our personality. But as we will see further on in this essay, in several later works, Bergson does attempt to address some of these issues -- especially when he examines the connection between morality, intuitive knowing, and mystical awareness.

A Matter of Spirit

In *Time and Free Will* Bergson offers a forceful defense of the freedom and creativity of human consciousness. In many ways, this text is his sustained argument against those thinkers who claim that our actions are, in the end, simply the predetermined result of a complicated, yet predictable, dance of electro-chemical interactions. However, in his attempts to underscore the reality of free will, Bergson ends up creating a yawning chasm between matter and consciousness. According to *Time and Free Will*, matter is a collection of discrete, relatively stable objects, each of which can be measured and counted, objects that interact with each other automatically, in ways that are utterly predictable (a type of interaction that causes chemistry experiments to produce the same results every time they are performed). Consciousness, however, in Bergson's analysis, is a dynamic flux of interconnected and interpenetrating states of awareness that never repeat themselves; our consciousness is always new, always creative. The problem is, given this radical distinction between matter and consciousness, how could they possibly interact? Yet this interaction appears to be a basic and ongoing fact of experience. For instance, I make a decision (e.g., to sit down on a chair) and my body responds by sitting down. How is this decision communicated if my mind is utterly different from my physical body? Bergson's next book, *Matter and Memory*, delves into this dilemma.[6]

In *Matter and Memory*, Bergson argues that we are continually juggling two basic levels of experience. On the one hand, we seem to live in a stable, objective world, a world that is shared by everyone, a world in which objects interact with each other in determined, invariable ways, according to fixed natural laws, a world that does not seem to depend upon anyone's conscious perceptions (e.g., the furniture in my study exists, regardless of whether anyone is present in the room to perceive this furniture). On the other hand, according to Bergson, another world of experience also demands our attention. Equally present, equally real, is the world of our conscious perceptions, a level of experience in which the outer world does seem to vary, moment to moment, depending upon the subjective perspective of the individual (e.g., if I shut

my eyes, the furniture in the room disappears; if I spin around, it seems to move; if I like oak furniture, then my perception comes suffused with subtle feelings of fondness, and so on). In *Matter and Memory*, Bergson attempts to reconcile these two seemingly estranged realities.

Our normal, commonsense understanding of how we come to know the objective world around us is that physical stimuli from this external world impacts our sense organs, and these organs then send signals to our brain via the nervous system. Our brain, receiving these signals, promptly translates them into our conscious perceptions. This understanding of the process of perception leads us to assume that we are, in a sense, taking photographs of the universe, using our sense organs as the camera, and developing a picture of the external world by an elaborate chemical process in the brain. The problem with this commonsense understanding, however, is that there still remains a big chasm between the world of matter and consciousness itself. Our consciousness is nothing like a photograph; it is not a physical piece of paper coated with chemicals. Our consciousness is not made of matter, so how can it be the product of purely physical interactions? Bergson's solution is ingenious, if perhaps difficult at first to grasp.

Bergson begins by positing a universe that is, below the level of appearances, a pulsating, interconnected field of "images."[7] These images, according to Bergson, possess qualities that are similar to both matter and consciousness. Like matter, these images are dynamic patterns of energy, vortices of vibrations that radiate outward, contacting and affecting other complexly patterned vortices of energy. This transmission of energy-information is, moment to moment, passed on to other images, automatically, fully, without hesitation. This measurable, predictable, lawful interaction is the basis for the stable, objective world of matter, a world rooted in the dependable, repeatable patterns of cause and effect studied by the natural sciences.

Understood in this way, the universe of images acts identically to the way matter is typically thought to behave. However, the universe of images posited by Bergson is dissimilar to our typical understanding of matter in two ways. First, this universe of images is not inherently

divided into a collection of separate objects possessing clearcut boundaries. The world of separate objects that we normally perceive is not the true nature of matter. Instead, according to Bergson, it is, like our consciousness, an interconnected, dynamic continuum of becoming, in which "numberless vibrations, all linked together in uninterrupted continuity" travel "in every direction like shivers through an immense body" (MM 208, *343*).

The second way in which the universe of images posited by Bergson is different than our usual understanding of matter is that we normally think of matter (e.g., a stone) as inert, or non-aware. However, Bergson's universe of images is essentially a type of virtual consciousness.[8] He would argue that consciousness, in a latent form, is already present in the universe of images. The job of the sense organs, nervous system, and the brain (which are themselves images) is not to create our conscious perceptions. Instead, perception occurs when our bodies (as well as the bodies of other organisms) receive the pulses of virtually-conscious vibrations from the other images of the universe. From this infinitely complex, interpenetrating field of latent consciousness, we then select out and actualize only those vibrations which serve the needs of the particular organism, letting the rest of the information from the universe pass through unimpeded.

According to Bergson, our "pure perceptions" (i.e., the raw data of perception -- perceptions minus most of the influence of memory) are a filtrate from the totality of the universal flux of potential consciousness in which we find ourselves. Our pure perceptions are, therefore, the result of a radical truncation, a culling process by which we ignore most of what we might potentially know. As a result, we perceive only the "external crust" or the "superficial skin" of what actually surrounds us (MM 36, *186*).[9]

However, while our pure perceptions, in relation to the universe of images, are in this way simply a small part of the greater whole, Bergson claims that they are also neither relative, nor illusory. While our pure perceptions may not reveal to us all that there is to know in the

world around us, this "raw data" of perception is, nonetheless, not subjective. (As we will see below, the subjectivity of our concrete perceptions comes from the superimposition of memory onto our pure perceptions.) Our pure perceptions, according to Bergson, are not "in our heads"; they are not created by our brains. Instead, this "raw data" of our perceptions is a part and parcel of the world around us. When we see a tree, we are actually there with that tree as an objective reality in our pure perceptions. Bergson does not shy away from the implications of this unique epistemology. As he puts it, "we are really present in everything we perceive."[10] In reality, therefore, our body is not limited to the small physical organism we typically identify with (although that body always remains the vital center of our world). We also possess a massive body made up of the totality of our conscious perceptions, a body that, in a very real sense, "reaches to the stars" (TS 258, *1194*).

However, while we might, unknown to us, be part of this huge, quasi-universal body, our smaller body, the "inner and central body" remains vitally important (TS 258, *1194-5*). Without our physical body we would have no pure perceptions. Bergson stresses that our senses, nervous system, and brain do not somehow magically change inert material vibrations into consciousness. Instead, acting as a type of dynamic filter, they continually screen out the vast majority of the information we receive from the mass of potential consciousness that surrounds us in order that we might act effectively and flourish as a physical organism.

Bergson goes on to point out that it is crucial for our physical body to play this role. If we were to perceive, and consequently act upon, the world as it exists at its most basic, subatomic vibratory level, if, for example, we no longer saw an oak table as a solid structure of wood, but instead consciously perceived and responded to the flux of almost infinite energetic patterns that underlie the table, we would become incapacitated, lost in the "moving immensity" of what previously had been a motionless, rectangular solid object (CM 69, *1301*). One of the most basic functions of our physicality is, therefore, to carve out manageable islands of stability

in the onrush of universal becoming by choosing to focus only on that level of experience that best serves our needs. In essence, we create our experience of the world moment by moment through the power of our choices.[11] Consequently, as Bergson notes:

> [N]othing would prevent other worlds, corresponding to another choice, from existing with [our world], in the same place and the same time: in this way twenty different broadcasting stations throw out simultaneously twenty different concerts which coexist without any one of them mingling its sounds with the music of another, each one being heard, complete and alone, in the apparatus which has chosen for its reception the wave-length of that particular station (CM 69-70, *1301-2*).

Bergson's fascinating theory of how different worlds might well exist that correspond to different levels of perception was not explicitly developed with mystical traditions in mind. Instead, Bergson was primarily interested in providing a viable explanation for psychical phenomena such as clairvoyance and telepathy. Nonetheless, this theory does have crucial implications for the genesis of mystical experience. If, as Bergson speculated, the "mechanisms" which are "expressly designed to screen" the enormous flood of information we receive from the universal flux of potentially conscious images were to "get out of order," then the "door which they kept shut" would be partially opened, thereby letting in levels of information that would normally be excluded from our more mundane awareness (TS 315, *1243*).[12]

If Bergson is correct, then this explanation of the origin of telepathic and clairvoyant knowledge might well also account for certain types of mystical experiences. If we are continually connected with the entire universe, if the apparent clearcut separation between objects is not real, but instead, is created by the filtering mechanisms of the brain, perhaps

different spiritual disciplines work to open up the floodgates. Perhaps they prepare us to absorb and respond effectively to more of the universal information than we are typically capable of receiving. From this perspective, if a mystic experiences a loss of egoic boundaries and the consequent sense of merger with the surrounding universe world, this experience would not be the deluded hallucinations of madness, but rather would be the result of a profound contact with a deeper, but usually unperceived, level of reality.

In addition, Bergson's claim that we filter out the vast majority of the information we receive from the universe might well account for a wide range of more prosaic levels of intuitive awareness as well. Perhaps we really do know, on some level, that someone is sexually attracted to us; perhaps we really can get an accurate sense of danger or "wrongness" from someone; perhaps our empathetic awareness of the feelings of another is not a subjective projection of our feelings onto someone else, but instead is rooted in something real, in the flow of subliminal information that we constantly receive from the universe around us, but which we, for a variety of reasons, choose to ignore.

Further, Bergson speculates that there might well be another source for intuitive, non-ordinary experiences. Our brain does not just filter out the mass of information we continually receive from the universe of images around us. It also screens out the vast majority of the memories that we possess -- an equally valuable function, since, according to Bergson, we have within us, on a subconscious level, memories of every moment of our life. If this enormous fund of recollections from the past were actively present in our consciousness, we would be overwhelmed and unable to function effectively. But Bergson claims that, fortunately for us, most of our memories are kept from our consciousness by the body's insistent need to give attention only to that which helps it respond to the requirements of the present. Most of our memories -- at least the specific recollections we have of definite events in our past -- are of no use to us and so are relegated to subconscious levels of our being.

Bergson theorizes that non-ordinary experiences may take place not only when the floodgates of our personal past are opened, but also when we open ourselves to other types of mental phenomena which are also blocked from our consciousness, such as telepathic information received from others. From Bergson's perspective, the sharp divisions that seem to separate physical objects do not necessarily apply to the mind. If this is the case, then there is a good possibility that our minds extend beyond the boundaries of our physical bodies (in fact, he quite explicitly argues that our memories are not stored in our brains), and that our minds are continually blending with other minds in a reciprocal flow of mental information below the surface of our awareness. Bergson notes that "if such intercommunication exists, nature will have taken precautions to render it harmless, and most likely certain mechanisms are specially charged with the duty of throwing back, into the unconscious, images so introduced" (ME 97, *874*). However, Bergson goes on to suggest that it is possible that certain thoughts, memories, images, or feelings from other minds might occasionally manage, for various reasons, to slip past this mechanism. If so, then these incursions might well be another, equally viable, source of telepathic and clairvoyant knowledge.

It must be noted, however, that given Bergson's understanding of the relationship between matter and consciousness, it is perhaps artificial, when we consider phenomena such as telepathy, clairvoyance, flashes of intuition, and mystical insights, to think that they emerge out of two completely separate sources of non-ordinary experiences. In reality, the "matter-like" source of subliminal information from the universe of images as well as the more explicitly "mental" source -- i.e., memories, thoughts, and images from other streams of consciousness -- are simply two ends of a single spectrum of universal becoming. While in *Matter and Memory*, Bergson maintains a strong functional dualism between matter and consciousness, the sharp edges of that dualism increasingly soften and blur as he notes the variety of ways in which matter

and consciousness (especially its primary instantiation -- memory) interact and interpenetrate during every concrete moment of perception.

For Bergson, memory in its most basic form -- memory which is operative in, and interwoven with, perception -- is not memory as we normally understand the term. Instead, memory at its most fundamental level is simply the continuity of our consciousness; it is the automatic and ongoing connection of our past to the present. It is this type of memory that, according to Bergson, ties together the enormous quantity and range of the vibrations of matter and condenses them into the perceived moments of our consciousness. (For example, drawing upon information from the science of his time, Bergson explains that, if we perceive a pulse of red light for a single second, during that time our consciousness has condensed 400 billion vibrations of that spectrum of light.)

Bergson suggests that this most basic modality of memory is operative even below the level of our conscious sense perceptions. He points out that this level of memory, in which the past is automatically carried into the present, is present even at the vibratory level of matter itself. These vibrations are not, according to Bergson, flashes of inert, utterly pre-determined energy taking place in a discrete, ceaselessly repeated present. Instead, these vibrations are, even at the atomic and molecular level, bound together by an impersonal substratum of memory, a type of proto-consciousness; they are simply a different degree or "frequency" of duration -- the duration of matter.

According to Bergson, the universe as a whole consists of a wide spectrum of different levels of duration, ranging from the quasi-necessity of the duration of matter, through the largely instinctive duration of various rudimentary organisms, up to the highly conscious, flexible (if at times habitual) duration of human consciousness. Bergson even speculates that it is possible, and is indeed likely, that there exists a duration of consciousness with a "higher degree" of "tension" (or perhaps "at-tention"?) than our own -- one that is able to condense the entire history of

humanity into a very short period of its own duration in the same way that we condense the "history" of the vibrations of matter into the ongoing flux of the perceptions of our conscious experience in any moment (MM 207, *342*).[13]

Bergson's own focus of attention is not always quite so speculative and cosmic in scope. His explorations of memory are often extremely prosaic and down to earth. He recognizes that the task of memory is not just to bind one moment of experience to the next by connecting the past to the present or to condense the potentially conscious vibrations of matter into our everyday conscious perceptions. Memory is also operative within us either in the form of specific recollections of past events (e.g., remembering one's first time riding a bicycle) or more frequently in the form of impersonal, bodily-based distillations of past events (e.g., the set of internalized motor skills it takes to ride a bicycle well). According to Bergson, these more personal forms of memory help to create the fullness of our concrete, lived experience by interweaving themselves into each "pure perception" so seamlessly that "we are no longer able to discern what is perception and what is memory" (MM 103, *248-9*).[14] For Bergson, every moment of our experience is a fusion of perception and memory. Indeed, as he notes, it is only because memory is added to perception that the objective, externalized moments of pure perception (which actually take place "outside of us," among the objects themselves) are converted into experiences that seem to be subjective and internal; i.e., it is memory that makes it appear that our experience takes place "inside our heads."

In fact, although Bergson never explicitly argues this point, even the process of pure perception itself, which theoretically takes place without the activity of memory, could never occur without the help of a highly condensed form of personal memory. As was pointed out above, a pure perception occurs when, out of a universe of potentially conscious images, only a fraction -- those which interest us -- are selected. Could this variety of interests exist without memory? Without memory, would we be able to choose from a wide range of responses, instead

of reacting automatically, as matter would, to the universal influx of information? It is memory that is the source of these choices and hence of our freedom. It is this form of memory -- the digest of our past, embodied in the present, and concerned with our future, that shapes our perception of the world at its most basic level.[15]

Clearly, memory serves a far more important role in the actual moments of our experience than we often realize. According to Bergson, in the final analysis, perception is simply "an occasion for remembering" (MM 66, *213*). A pure perception by itself is rather thin -- it is simply a type of schematic outline, or sketch, which in order to be most effective, needs to be filled in with a wide range of memories. These memories, which are typically not specific memory images of past events, but rather, are pre-conscious, highly distilled, internalizations of cultural and psychological patterns of belief, merge with the raw perceptual data, and by doing so, shape these perceptions, giving them order, structure, and meaning. This interpretive overlay from memory is so extensive that we end up "constantly creating or reconstructing" our present experience based on the sum total of our past (MM 103, *249*).

To illustrate the role that memory plays in our perceptions, Bergson notes that if we are in a room with someone speaking a language we do not know (e.g., Italian) our ears hear the same sounds as native speakers from Italy who are also in the room. Nonetheless, our experience is quite different than that of the Italians. This is so because their past experiences of learning Italian have been condensed within their consciousness, have been compressed into a highly fluid and useful distillation of memory that can superimpose itself upon the sounds of the language being spoken, thereby enabling them to hear meaningful words and sentences, while we hear nothing but a confused mass of noise.

The memory that enables individuals who know a language to make sense of various sounds is itself a fusion of different types of memory. For instance, I have numerous specific memories of times in which I went to Spanish class in high school and did grammar and

pronunciation drills. However, most of my somewhat rudimentary Spanish language skills are not rooted in my concrete recollections of specific times spent learning this or that Spanish phrase. Instead, when I hear certain words or sentences in that language, I simply comprehend them, almost literally in my flesh and bones. Each language drill session instilled learned patterns of behavior that have become ingrained in my bodily tone, stance, breathing, and so on. This type of memory -- a highly embodied, quasi-automatic, habitual reaction to the promptings of the present moment -- is very different from my mental recollections of specific moments of my past.

Bergson argues that these two types of memory (recollections and habit memory) are always actively present within us, fusing with each moment of perception. However, different individuals will typically respond to life's demands drawing upon different "percentages" of these two types of memory. On the one extreme, there are those people who react habitually and quasi-automatically to the perceived needs of the present instant. These individuals rarely reflect on their actions, preferring instead to parrot catch phrases and to mimic the behavior of others in their group. They act on impulse, driven by ingrained, reactive patterns of behavior that are rarely, if ever, questioned. On the other extreme, there are those individuals who are almost completely cut off from the demands of daily life and from the promptings of their body. Overly intellectual, obsessively ruminating about their past mistakes or anxiously rehearsing their future actions, they live in their "heads," trapped in a mental world, out of touch with their feelings, their bodily sensations, and the world around them.[16]

Bergson points out, however, that there are people who have been able to harmonize these two types of memories, individuals who are "well-balanced," or "nicely adapted to life" (MM 153, *294*). Reflective and self-aware, they are neither mired in habitual, rigid, unreflective patterns of behavior, nor attached to beliefs that they have not made their own. Instead, they are

able to draw freely upon the wisdom of past experience and can remain fluidly responsive to the changing needs of the present.

Bergson's description of these types of quasi-ideal individuals in *Matter and Memory* are, at best, rudimentary sketches; they are skeletal outlines that are fleshed out in later works. On the whole, Bergson's focus in *Matter and Memory* is not normative -- instead, it is a rigorous, densely textured, closely reasoned, complex analysis of the mind/body interaction. However, in much of the work that followed *Matter and Memory* (and indeed, in parts of *Time and Free Will* as well), the threads of Bergson's abstract philosophical analyses of the nature of consciousness and the world around us are increasingly interwoven with lyrical allusions to the transformative possibilities of human life.[17]

For example, in "The Perception of Change" (an essay published originally in 1911, now found in *Creative Mind*), we can see hints of Bergson's normative vision of humanity. In this essay, Bergson suggests that we are most completely ourselves when we recognize and joyously give ourselves to the ceaseless change that is going on both within us and around us. He claims that if we can cultivate within ourselves an ongoing experience of the flux of universal becoming, then our rigid and frozen perception of life can be melted, and in doing so, "everything comes to life around us, everything is revivified in us. A great impulse carries beings and things along. We feel ourselves uplifted, carried away, borne along by it" (CM 186, *1392*). He points out that if we can let go of our fears that we will "drown in the torrent-like flow" of the movement of life; if we can release our anxiety that the world we have so carefully constructed will disintegrate if we give up our continual, and often desperate, attempts to keep things the same; if we can soften the rigid walls of our habitual patterns of reactivity and melt the frozen labels that we superimpose upon others and ourselves; we will discover, perhaps to our surprise, that we have gained a "feeling of greater joy and strength" than we might have imagined possible (CM 177, 124; *1385*, *1344*). Bergson claims that we will feel increased joy

"because the reality invented before our eyes will give each one of us, unceasingly," the joy that seemingly only privileged artists possess -- the joy of seeing, beneath the apparent "fixity and monotony" of our everyday lives the "ever-recurring novelty, the moving originality of things" (CM 124, *1344-5*) We will feel greater strength because, by attuning ourselves to the ceaseless dance of creative energy that is life itself, "we shall feel we are participating, creators of ourselves, in the great work of creation which is the origin of all things and which goes on before our eyes," becoming, therefore, conscious co-creators of our world (CM 124, *1345*).

Evolutions and Transformations

In *Creative Evolution*, Bergson's best known work, which followed *Matter and Memory*, Bergson echoes this transformative understanding of our creative potential. In this text, he emphasizes that each of us are "the artisans" of our lives, in that each moment of our life "is a kind of creation," a creation that is guided and inspired by our intentions, our choices, and our actions (CE 7, *500*). Like sculptors working with clay, we are given the raw material of heredity and the environment into which we are born, and it is our responsibility to shape what we are given into the beauty or ugliness of our character. Bergson claims that this *response-ability* [my term], this ability to respond creatively to life, is not primarily the result of conscious efforts of our will. Instead, our creative ability to shape our own character is most powerfully engendered by an intuitive alignment with the cosmic life force or *élan vital* -- that vital principle "in which we participate and whose eternity is not to be an eternity of immutability, but an eternity of life" (CM 186, *1392*).

Bergson suggests that if we plunge into "the depths of our experience" and discover within ourselves the place where we feel the most fully alive, if we dive into this surging river of our conscious duration, then it is possible to align ourselves with the *élan vital*, a force that he claims is ceaselessly active within us (CE 199, *664*). For Bergson, the same vital impetus that

expresses itself in the blossoms of spring, in the flight of a bird over a pond, and in the brilliant light of the sun, also courses within us, in the pumping of our blood, in the flexing of our muscles, and in the ever changing dynamic flux of our consciousness. It is via an inner alignment with this force of life itself, and not via rigid moral rectitude, that we become most fully ourselves, and consequently, are able to create an ongoing experience of joy, vitality, and creativity.[18]

Bergson emphasizes that it is not coincidental that plunging into the depths of our consciousness is a potent doorway to an ongoing contact with the cosmic force of life. For Bergson, our personal consciousness is one of the clearest mirrors of the *élan vital*[19] He points out that both our consciousness and the *élan vital* are continually growing, both are ceaselessly changing forms, both are constantly taking on shapes that are ever new (CM 21, *1262*). This continual evolution of both the *élan vital* and our personal consciousness, this shared ability to effortlessly reshape the past into forms which could not have been predicted, this mutual temporal dynamism, indicates to Bergson that life and consciousness are not two separate substances. Instead, as he puts it, "life is connected either with consciousness or with something that resembles it" (CE 179, *647*).

The consciousness that Bergson claims is connected to the energy of life is not simply human consciousness (although that is the only consciousness of which we can be directly and immediately aware). Nor is it just the consciousness that seems to be present in different degrees within all organisms (although that is one of its primary manifestations). Instead, Bergson suggests that the level of consciousness which is connected to the *élan vital* is an "enormous field" of creative awareness that is expressed in and through all organisms, to a greater or lesser degree, depending upon the level of development of their respective nervous systems (CE 179, *647*). In the more rudimentary organisms, this creative cosmic consciousness is squeezed tightly

"in a kind of vise"; but in more advanced creatures, especially in human beings, it is expressed increasingly freely and completely (CE 179, *647*).

Bergson speculates that this "consciousness, or rather supra-consciousness" is itself the ceaseless pulsation of life which surges through matter; it is the creative cosmic vitality that continuously shoots out new worlds from a dynamic center of being "like rockets in a fire-works display" (CE 261, 248; *716*, *706*). This divine center of cosmic creativity (which Bergson, in a rare use of theological language, explicitly labels as "God") is not a separate object, nor is it a being who is "already made" (CE 248, *706*). Instead, "God," seen in this light, is a "continuity of shooting out"; "God" is "unceasing life, action, freedom," and as such, is the dynamic source of continual creative activity -- the same creative activity that takes the form of the ongoing flux of our consciousness, the same creative activity which can be experienced "in ourselves when we act freely" (CE 248, *706*).

However, according to Bergson, this supra-consciousness, this creative urge, has certain limitations. Not only is its creative impetus finite, but it also "cannot create absolutely, because it is confronted with matter" (CE 251, *708*). The creative freedom of life is counterbalanced, at least in our physical reality, by "matter, which is necessity itself" (CE 251, *708*). Matter and life are understood by Bergson as two inverse phases of one movement. While it is life's nature to ascend, to grow, to create, it is matter's nature to descend, to dissipate, to fragment. Life cannot evade the laws of matter, "but everything happens as if it were doing its utmost to set itself free from these laws" (CE 245, *703*). If life cannot stop matter from running down, it can at least slow down the seemingly inevitable process of dissolution brought on by matter.

Bergson depicts this dynamic creative interaction between life and matter through a vivid metaphor:

> Let us imagine a vessel full of steam at a high pressure, and here and there in its sides a crack through which the steam is escaping in a jet. The steam thrown into the air is nearly all condensed into little drops which fall back, and this condensation and this fall represent simply the loss of something, an interruption, a deficit. But a small part of the jet of steam subsists, uncondensed, for some seconds; it is making an effort to raise the drops which are falling; it succeeds at most in retarding their fall. So, from an immense reservoir of life, jets must be gushing out unceasingly, of which each, falling back, is a world. The evolution of living species within this world represents what subsists of the primitive direction of the original jet, and of an impulsion which continues itself in a direction the inverse of materiality. But let us not carry too far this comparison. It gives us but a feeble and even deceptive image of reality, for the crack, the jet of steam, the forming of the drops, are determined necessarily, whereas the creation of a world is a free act, and the life within the material world participates in this liberty. Let us think rather of an action like that of raising the arm; then let us suppose that the arm, left to itself, falls back, and yet there subsists in it, striving to raise it up again, something of the will that animates it (CE 247, *705*).

Although it often appears as if Bergson believes that matter is simply a negative counterweight to the dynamism of life, in reality Bergson stresses that matter does have a positive role to play in creation. In itself, life is a dynamic mass of potential, containing a multitude of tendencies. But these tendencies can only become individuated, they can only take on definite form, through the contact of life with matter. Just as a poetic inspiration can only

take a concrete form via the "materiality" of specific words and phrases, the multitude of tendencies in life can only be expressed in form (at least in our level of reality) via its contact with matter. Specifically, Bergson suggests that the current of life, in and through its interaction with matter, becomes the force that propels the evolution of all organisms, in that the ceaseless outpouring of its creative dynamism is channeled and divided into the specific concrete forms of various species.

Bergson never disputes the validity of the scientific evidence for evolution. He believes that not only is the data from paleontology very persuasive, but embryology also demonstrates how a single cell, as it develops, passes through stages that are strikingly similar to the stages postulated by the theory of evolution (e.g. the embryo of a bird at one point is almost identical to that of a reptile) (CE 23-24, *514*).[20] In a more general context, Bergson also notes that embryology shows us how complex forms are able to arise from the simplest forms. So, he concludes, why should it not be the same for the evolution of life in general?

Bergson's quarrel is not with the notion of evolution itself. Instead, Bergson opposes those "scientific" notions of evolution that would negate the creative activity of life, that would reduce evolution to a mechanistic re-arrangement of material parts. *Creative Evolution* offers a sustained attack on the mechanism of neo-Darwinians (who claim that evolution is the result of the natural selection -- "survival of the fittest" -- of accidental variations in an organism's genetic material). *Creative Evolution* also argues against the more subtle mechanism of neo-Lamarckians (who claim that evolution takes place when the experiences of one generation are passed on genetically to later generations). His arguments are complex and intriguing, but an adequate presentation of them goes beyond the scope of this essay. Suffice it to say that Bergson presents a very strong philosophical alternative to the usual scientific understanding that the evolutionary development of life is driven by a complex series of accidents.

In *Creative Evolution*, Bergson does not simply argue against mechanistic reductionism. He also opposes those more "spiritual" advocates of evolution who claim that evolution is the pre-ordained unfolding of a master plan. (Although Bergson himself is somewhat sketchy about who falls into this category, Teilhard de Chardin and Sri Aurobindo are two notable twentieth century representatives of this perspective.) Bergson claims that seeing the world as a vast machine (mechanism) or as the result of a master plan (radical finalism) are, in actuality, very similar perspectives, in that both mechanism and radical finalism have difficulty envisioning the creation of something unforeseeable, something novel. Bergson offers an alternative: evolution is "not the realization of a plan," but rather, it is an act of creation which is "unceasingly renewed," a creation which, like the flux of our consciousness itself, can never be predicted, a creation that creates itself as it progresses, a creation in which something new is ceaselessly springing forth (CE 103, *582*).

Bergson proposes that the fundamental catalyst of this ongoing evolutionary change is not physical, but instead, is psychological in nature. For Bergson, evolutionary development is linked to conscious effort -- not the conscious will of the isolated individual, but the supra-conscious dynamism that pervades and permeates the universe. It is this "*original impetus* of life" that, according to Bergson, is passed from generation to generation through the genetic structure (CE 87, *569*). It is this vital impetus which, in a single, unified, and continuous movement, creates and sustains the countless different species of living beings.

Bergson asks us to envision the continuity of the movement of life via the metaphor of a person moving his or her hand from one point to another. From the perspective of an outside observer, this movement from point A to point B may seem to be infinitely divisible into potential static stopping places. However, Bergson argues that if we look closely at this movement from point A to point B, as it is experienced by the person who is actually moving his or her hand, that movement is not split up into parts. Instead, it is experienced from within as an

indivisible, dynamic, interconnected unity of motion. In the same way, Bergson notes that life itself, if examined from the outside, may well appear to be made up of an infinitely complex collection of static, material parts, each separate from the other. However, seen from within, life is actually an ongoing, interconnected, and simple action.

Extending the comparison of the creative activity of life to the process of moving a hand, Bergson asks us to envision this hand as invisible and moving through iron filings. As the hand progresses through the filings, they take on a variety of complex patterns. Mechanists would claim that these patterns are nothing more than the actions and reactions of the filings themselves, behaving according to predictable laws of matter. The finalists would claim that the order of the filings -- the way that they are disrupted when the hand passes through them -- was intelligently constructed following some sort of preordained master plan. But, as Bergson notes, "the truth is that there has been merely one indivisible act, that of the hand passing through the filings: the inexhaustible detail of the movement of the grains [i.e., the iron filings], as well as the order of their final arrangement, expresses negatively, in a way, this undivided movement" (CE 94, *576*).

Bergson claims that while the impetus of life is ceaselessly creative, it does not express the multiple potentials inherent within itself all at once. Instead, its creativity takes place over a prolonged period of time via the evolutionary development of numerous divergent species of living beings. However, Bergson goes on to suggest that each of these species, as a relatively stable and static creation, cannot fully express the dynamism of life. As he points out, "life in general is mobility itself; particular manifestations of life accept this mobility reluctantly, and constantly lag behind. It is always going ahead; they want to mark time" (CE 128, *603*). For Bergson, life, like a powerful gust of wind, raises species like eddies of dust which circle in upon themselves. The less these various species are able to change and progress, the less they are able to successfully embody the dynamic impetus of life.[21]

Nonetheless, according to Bergson, some species have been more successful in expressing the various potentials that life carries within itself. He argues that life, in effect, has split into three major, divergent, directions in its evolutionary development: it has either retrogressed into the "torpor" of plant life or it has moved into two distinct forms within the animal kingdom -- either as instinct or as intelligence. Instinct, in its turn, reaches its culmination in insects, especially in the social life of ants and bees, whereas intelligence is most fully expressed in vertebrates, especially in human beings.

Bergson notes that, since the time of Aristotle, it is often assumed that the intellect is superior to instinct, that it is a later stage in a single evolutionary line of development. Not surprisingly, Bergson vehemently disagrees with this unilinear evolutionary understanding, in which intelligence is understood as a higher, purified version of instinct. What he suggests, instead, is that instinct and intelligence are both equally important and complimentary manifestations of the unified impulse of life.

For the purpose of analysis, Bergson creates a clearcut distinction between instinct and intelligence, even though he also insists that "there is no intelligence in which some traces of instinct are not to be discovered," and there is "no instinct that is not surrounded with a fringe of intelligence" (CE 136, *610*). Bergson claims that instinct, pared down to its essentials, is the ability of an animal to use parts of its body as organic tools (e.g., an unborn chick using the tip of its beak as an organic "can opener" to break out of its shell). Similarly, intelligence, at least as it is manifested in human beings, is connected essentially with the invention, fabrication, and use of artificial tools.

Bergson insists that instinct is not inferior to intelligence; in fact, it has many advantages. For instance, he notes that the organic "instrument" used by instinct "makes and repairs itself"; it combines "an infinite complexity of detail . . . with a marvelous simplicity of function"; it "does at once, when required, what it is called upon to do, without difficulty and

with a perfection that is often wonderful" (CE 140, *614*). However, there are also limitations to instinct. Not only are the "instruments" of instinct highly specialized and only appropriate for specific tasks, they are also relatively invariable. In order to modify them, the species as a whole has to be modified.

Bergson points out, in contrast, that while the tools made by the intellect are usually imperfect and are, especially in the beginning, difficult to construct and handle, they nonetheless can be adapted and modified to respond to different situations. Consequently, intelligence is much more flexible to the demands of life than instinct, in effect opening the intelligent organism to potentially unlimited growth. However, according to Bergson, the numerous advantages of intelligence over instinct only come at a later stage of evolutionary development. Initially the cumbersome artificial tools created by the intellect do not answer the needs of the moment as perfectly as the instinctive reactions of the body. Therefore, the contrast between instinct and intelligence is between two complementary phenomena: the "tools" utilized by instinct, which are amazingly and effortlessly effective but which are limited in scope and rigidly inflexible in application, as opposed to the tools created by the intellect, which are risky to use, but which can be adapted to differing circumstances and, theoretically, can be extended without limit.

In Bergson's specific discussions about instinct, he points out that it is at times difficult to tell where instinct begins and where the work of nature ends. At first glance, it might well seem as if the cells in the body, working for the good of the whole, feeding and preserving and reproducing themselves, are acting on instinct -- but these actions are simply the natural functions of the life of a cell. Conversely, bees in a hive, working together for the good of the whole, make it appear that "the hive is really, and not metaphorically, a single organism, of which each bee is a cell united to the others by invisible bonds" (CE 166, *636*). The bees' instincts, in this way, can be understood as either identical to the life force that is operative in a

cell or as an extension of that force. Bergson therefore is willing to conclude that "the most essential of the primary instincts are really . . . vital processes" (CE 166, *635*).

According to Bergson, the life force that is operative in instinctual behavior appears to carry with it a unique type of knowledge. He offers several fascinating examples of different species of insects which seem to possess startling, non-sensory knowledge of how to interact with the world around them. Bergson suggests since this knowledge has not been gained from the insect's prior experience, it is perhaps best understood as the result of a profound connection of the insect to the movement of life that is present within and around it. One of the most striking examples is that of the Sitaris beetle:

> This insect lays its eggs at the entrance of the underground passages dug by a kind of bee, the Anthophora. Its larva, after long waiting, springs upon the male Anthophora as it goes out of the passage, clings to it, and remains attached until the 'nuptial flight,' when it seizes the opportunity to pass from the male to the female, and quietly waits until [the female bee] lays its eggs. It then leaps on the egg, which serves as a support for it in the honey, devours the egg in a few days, and, resting on the shell [of the egg], undergoes its first metamorphosis . . . [in which it changes shape so as to be able to float on the honey and eat it for food, which in turn fuels further changes in the Sitaris, turning into a nymph, and then its final insect form.] Everything happens *as if* the larva of the Sitaris, from the moment it was hatched, knew that the male Anthophora would first emerge from the passage; that the nuptial flight would give it the means of conveying itself to the female, who would take it to a store of honey sufficient to feed it after its transformation; that, until this transformation,

> it could gradually eat the egg of the Anthophora, in such a way that it could at the same time feed itself, maintain itself at the surface of the honey, and also suppress the rival that otherwise would have come out of the egg. And equally all this happens *as if* the Sitaris itself knew that its larva would know all these things CE 146-47, *619*).

As Bergson points out, all of this instinctive activity is guided by a form of implicit knowledge. This type of knowledge does not seem to take the form of definite ideas in consciousness. Nonetheless, because the insect is able to give an immediate, visceral, and appropriate response to the necessities of the situation, the actions of the insect do imply that it has a sort of knowledge of definite things in space, without this knowledge having ever been explicitly learned.

Bergson gives several other examples of how instinctive knowledge manifests in different species of insects. For instance, certain wasps know how to paralyze their prey (spiders, beetles, caterpillars) in such a way that the victim does not die, but rather goes on living, motionless, sometimes for weeks, providing food for the wasp larvae hatched from the eggs the wasp has laid on the victim. Each type of prey has to be stung at different nerve centers, and only there, in order that the prey does not die and rot, making it inedible. As Bergson notes, "when a paralyzing wasp stings its victim on just those points where the nervous centres lie, so as to render it motionless without killing it, it acts like a learned entomologist and a skilful surgeon rolled into one" (CE 146, *619*).

However, as Bergson goes on to point out, our tendency to picture the wasp as if it were a type of primitive entomologist and surgeon is simply a reflection of our tendency to superimpose our way of knowing (intelligence) on other, more instinctive, forms of knowing. We cannot help thinking that the wasp "knows the caterpillar as [we know] everything else --

from the outside" (CE 173, *642*). Bergson suggests, instead, that there is an immediate experiential connection between the wasp and its victim, a connection that teaches the wasp, directly, from within, where its victim is most vulnerable. According to Bergson, this information most likely does not come from the sensory perceptions of the wasp, but rather, arises from the underlying "togetherness" of the wasp and the caterpillar, a togetherness in which these two insects have an immediate, visceral connection, a connection which is rooted, not only in their common evolutionary ancestry, but also in their ongoing participation in the underlying unity of life that is flowing in and through them.

As was pointed out earlier, Bergson goes out of his way to emphasize the complementary nature of instinct and intelligence. On the one hand, the intellect seems to have few, if any limits to its knowledge of the external world, but it cannot know something directly from within. Further, the intellect seems to have evolved in order to help us deal effectively with inert and immobile matter and, consequently, has great difficulty understanding the fluid, ever changing, inner-connected nature of life. The instinct, on the other hand, seems to have an innate knowledge of the interior of an object, but the focus of its knowledge is extremely narrow. In addition, as Bergson notes:

> [I]nstinct . . . is molded on the very form of life. While intelligence treats everything mechanically, instinct proceeds, so to speak, organically. If the consciousness that slumbers in it should awake, if it were wound up into knowledge instead of being wound off into action, if we could ask and it could reply, it would give up to us the most intimate secrets of life (CE 165, *635*).

Bergson claims that if the inner, experiential connection to life given by instinct could be expanded beyond the narrow parameters of the immediate, circumscribed needs of the present; if the slumbering consciousness present in instinct could awaken and become self-reflective; if that potential consciousness could only "expand more widely, and then dive into its own depth completely, " then, according to Bergson, it would become consciously "one with the generative force of life" (CE 166, *636*). When instinctive knowledge "has become disinterested, self-conscious, capable of reflecting upon its object and of enlarging it indefinitely" it is no longer simply instinct nor is it a form of intelligence (CE 176, *645*). Instead, something new has emerged as a result of this dialectical union of instinct and intelligence: intuition.[22]

Bergson refuses to offer a simple definition of intuition, claiming that any definition, because it is framed in language, inevitably distorts our understanding of the true nature of intuition.[23] Intuitive knowing is a direct, concrete, experiential mode of knowing, and as such, cannot be captured by language, with its tendency to fragment and solidify the interconnected, fluid nature of life. Accordingly, Bergson claims that, if language must still be used (as it must in any definition), it is best to describe intuition by coming at it indirectly, by offering multiple, metaphorical, complementary perspectives.

One of Bergson's favorite ways to approach intuition is to suggest that it is a direct manifestation of the original unity of life -- a unity that became sundered when, eons ago, it split into instinct and intelligence. Therefore, intuition can do what neither instinct nor intelligence can do; it can take us back, with full awareness, "to the very inwardness of life" (CE 176, *645*). Understood in this way, intuition is a direct, natural, conscious experience of communion with other living beings. This communion occurs when our awareness is opened to receiving the interpenetrating, ever creative, dynamic fields of life energy that surround us -- the same life energy which is present in the flowing interior of our consciousness itself. Therefore, the entryway into intuitive awareness is via the ongoing, and often arduous, attempt to become

aware of the dynamism of our own consciousness; i.e., it arises via a conscious immersion in the ceaseless flux of duration. Our intuitive knowledge is nurtured when we stop using our intellect to carve the flux of becoming into static objects, when we see all of life as a process of continuous change and unforseeable novelty, when we turn our awareness inward to its source -- the fountain of life itself -- and open ourselves to its creative energy.

Bergson's advocacy of the importance of intuitive knowing does not imply that he is anti-intellectual. He insists that in order to access intuition, we need the help of intelligence as well, since without intelligence, instinct would not have been able to expand its parameters and become self-aware. According to Bergson, although the intellect has become disconnected from the wider reality of life which is its origin, this disconnection is never complete; surrounding the intellect is a vague, nebulous, fluid awareness -- our inchoate intuitive awareness of life itself (CE 193, *659*). This intuitive awareness forms an indistinct fringe around the intellectual concepts and the sensory perceptions which have been cut out from the dynamism of life. Because of the practical necessities of life, Bergson stresses that we tend to focus primarily on the "bright nucleus shining in the center" of our experience -- the solid object, the clear idea; unfortunately, in doing so, we "forget that this nucleus has been formed out of the rest by condensation" (CE 46, *534*). We overlook the fact that our intellect (as well as our sensory perceptions) are simply a contracted form "of a more extensive power" (CE 46, *534*). If we hope to grasp the inner movement of life, then we must, ideally, use both forms of knowledge -- our fluid intuitive sense, as well as the condensed, practical focus of our intellect.

Bergson believes that we can only come to recognize the illusory nature of our ordinary perceptions and understandings via moments of deep intuitive knowing. However, these intuitive insights by themselves are not sufficient -- they then need the conceptual verification and linguistic modes of expression furnished by the intellect. As Bergson points out, just "as the diver feels out the wreck on the sea floor that the aviator has pointed out from the air,

so the intellect immersed in the conceptual environment verifies from point to point, by contact, analytically, what had been the object of a synthetic and super-intellectual vision. If it had not been for a warning from without, [i.e., from the intuition] the thought of a possible illusion would never even have occurred to it, for its illusion was a part of its nature" (CM 74, *1305*).

Bergson argues that as consciousness has evolved in human beings over the course of history, it has gradually divorced itself from its natural awareness of the interconnectedness of life, and has, out of necessity, become more and more intellectual in nature. He claims that our intellect, with its ability to function effectively in a world of material objects, has been crucial for our survival as a species. But, Bergson adds, we are also bathed in the "beneficent fluid" of our tacit intuitive awareness; from our connection to this "ocean of life," we continually draw the energy and vitality we need to continue to live in this world (CE 191, *657*).[24] Our intuition, unlike the intellect, gives us direct insight into the nature of our psyche, into the reality of our free will, into our unseen connection to nature, and grants us tantalizing glimpses of the enormous potentials of development we have hidden deep within us. Therefore, according to Bergson, we need both our intellect and our intuitive knowing, but we have tended, on the whole, to neglect our intuition.

Bergson believes that in order for human beings to become "complete and perfect" we need to encourage the full unfolding of both of "these two forms of conscious activity" -- noting that between this ideal humanity and our present stage of development, "we may conceive any number of possible stages, corresponding to all the degrees imaginable of intelligence and intuition" (CE 267, *721*). (We will see, later in Bergson's thought, how he explicitly claims that the mystics, saints, seers, and sages of various traditions embody these various forms of our potential conscious development.)

Bergson argues that philosophy can help us to unfold the latent potentials of our consciousness. Philosophy's task, according to Bergson, is not only intellectual. Philosophy is

also called on to nurture our intuitive awareness in order to help us to "dissolve again into the Whole" (CE 191, *658*). Philosophy ideally should seize the "vague" and "discontinuous" glimmers of light shining feebly in the fringes of our inchoate intuitive awareness, in order to "sustain them, then to expand them and so unite them together" (CE 267, 268; *722*). He believes that if philosophy can help us to successfully access and generalize intuitive knowledge, then not only will we have a deeper, more accurate understanding of the nature of reality and of ourselves, but everyday life will benefit as well, "for the world into which our senses and consciousness habitually introduce us is no more than the shadow of itself: and it is as cold as death" (CM 151, *1364*). Although everything in our world "is arranged for our maximum convenience," we live artificially in a "no less artificial universe," a world in which we are cut off from the depths of ourselves and the world that surrounds us (CM 151-2, *1364-5*). Bergson thinks that his philosophical perspective can help us to throw off the culturally imposed shackles that keep us hobbled; it can allow us to "grasp ourselves afresh as we are" and grant us a "galvanized perception" that sees the world as it really is -- a dynamic, interconnected, ever new reality (CM 152, *1365*). With this new vision of ourselves and reality, "what is dormant awakens, what is dead comes to life again"; with this new vision, we can live life fully and joyfully, no longer content with the meager scraps of stale pleasures which we were previously fed, but instead, draw vitality and sustenance directly from the source of life itself within our own being (CM 152, *1365*).

However, while Bergson is optimistic about the enormous potential value of obtaining this new vision of ourselves and life, he seems to have difficulty recognizing that nurturing our intuitive awareness has rarely been the *primary* task of philosophy as it has unfolded in the West.[25] If Bergson wants philosophy to go beyond its more traditional intellectual and analytical task, then he needs to be more specific as to how it can actually help us to directly access, more less sustain and expand, our intuitive knowledge. At best, Bergson advises us to

thrust aside our intellect with an act of will, or notes that moments of intuition can be catalyzed by an intense philosophical effort to swim upstream against the current of our habitual ways of understanding the world in order to experience directly the fluid dynamism of our consciousness. But his discussion of intuition in *Creative Evolution* (as well as in several later essays in *Creative Mind*) leave us wondering exactly how philosophy can enable us to transcend intelligence in order to contact and cultivate deeper levels of intuitive knowledge.

It is only with the publication of *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* that Bergson gives us alternate possibilities as to how intuitive knowledge may be deepened. Even before writing *The Two Sources*, Bergson had been intrigued with the connection between intuition and mystical awareness. He noted in an essay in *Creative Mind* that, while it is difficult to say with any certainty just how far intuition goes, to tell for sure whether it "goes as far up as heaven or stops at some distance from the earth," Bergson's own conclusion was that the "metaphysical experience" engendered by intuitive knowing is "bound up with that of the great mystics" (CM 57, *1292*). It is in *The Two Sources*, that Bergson describes how various mystical traditions have historically advocated ways to transcend the intellect and access direct intuitive knowledge (even if, as we shall see, he is still very spartan with the specific details as to how these mystical traditions accomplish this valuable task).[26]

Social Morality

Bergson does not begin *The Two Sources* with an exploration of the relationship between *mysticism* and morality. Instead, he begins his final book with an insightful investigation into the relationship between *society* and morality.[27] Like his famous academic counterpart (and schoolboy companion), the sociologist Emile Durkheim, Bergson was convinced that a person's moral life is deeply effected by his or her social relationships.[28] For Bergson, human beings are inescapably social. Without the institutional structures of society we would have no language,

no culture, no art, and no laws. Our social life binds us to others, in a way similar to, but not identical with, the interconnection of cells in an organism or the instinctive communal interaction of ants in an ant-hill. Society gives us a shared set of unspoken, taken-for-granted assumptions of how we should move through life -- how we should speak, how our bodies should move, and what goals should inspire us. Society seeps through our cells to such an extent that we carry it within us as an important aspect of our selfhood: what Bergson calls our "social ego" (TS 15, *986*).

According to Bergson, in a way that is strikingly similar to Freud's notion of the super-ego, the social ego is the pre-conscious, ever-present, internalization of social rules and norms within us. It often manifests as a vague, yet insistent, sense that our behavior is being closely monitored, that our actions are being assessed by an unseen judge who encourages us to live up to our ideals, and who threatens us with punishing guilt if and when we do not toe the line.

Bergson stresses that we all carry within ourselves a tacit awareness of society's requirements. Without thinking about it, we automatically go through our daily routines: we shop, we interact with others at work, we play with our children -- and every moment we submit to a multitude of social rules, simply out of habit. Conforming to this mass of internalized habits, this vast matrix of social custom, is easy. It is only when we feel compelled, for various reasons, to deviate from one of these habits that an internal resistance arises -- a "voice" saying "no." According to Bergson, if we should still choose to go against this "voice" from our social ego, if we should choose to resist this resistance, what we experience is enormous inner strain and tension as we vacillate between doing what we want and what we think society would want us to do. Only at this moment does doing our duty seem difficult.

Bergson emphasizes that, although we may like to believe that our moral decisions are based on intelligent principles that have been rationally deduced and formulated, in actuality this assumption is highly questionable. He notes:

> If desire and passion join in the discussion, if temptation is strong, if we are on the point of falling, if suddenly we recover ourselves, what was it that pulled us up? A force asserts itself which we have called the 'totality of obligation': the concentrated extract, the quintessence of innumerable specific habits of obedience to the countless particular requirements of social life. This force is no one particular thing and, if it could speak (whereas it prefers to act), it would say: 'You must because you must.' Hence the work done by intelligence in weighing reasons, comparing maxims, going back to first principles, was to introduce more logical consistency into a line of conduct [that is actually driven by social obligation] . . . . Never, in our hours of temptation, should we sacrifice to the mere need of logical consistency our interest, our passion, our vanity (TS 23, *993-4*).

Bergson argues that while each separate social obligation can be freely obeyed or disobeyed, social obligation as a whole is strikingly similar to instinctive necessity. According to Bergson, nature "intended" human beings to be social. However, nature also, over a long period of evolutionary history, gave human beings intelligence. If we did not have intelligence, then we might indeed live together like ants in an anthill or like cells in an organism -- i.e., we would instinctively and automatically perform whatever actions which were most conducive to the healthy operation of the group. However, because we do possess intelligence, and because as individuals we are given the power of choice, we will often choose actions based on our selfish desires and not perform those actions that would benefit society.

Bergson points out that from an evolutionary standpoint, nature has a problem: how can the necessary cohesion of human social life be maintained, without undermining the valuable, and intrinsically human, contributions of intelligence and free will? He suggests that nature overcomes this problem by replacing the social glue of instinctive necessity with the complex system of social habits or obligations that have been internalized by each member of different human societies. No one obligation is instinctive -- but the totality of obligation does act as a type of substitute for the imperative force of instinct; it is, in effect, a virtual instinct. He goes on to add that, just as the need to speak is an instinctive, natural endowment, even though there are numerous different vocabularies, in the same way, the tacit system of social obligations is a requirement of nature, even if the specifics of each moral code vary from one society to the next.

Bergson claims that this quasi-instinctive matrix of social obligations operates most powerfully in the close knit, tightly bounded world of what he terms "closed societies." Closed societies define themselves by their difference from others -- their fundamental mind set is "us" against "them." Whether they are Grecian city states or African tribal communities, closed societies have a strong sense of internal cohesion and a clearly defined sense of what actions and beliefs are appropriate to those who are part of their community. These social values are typically unquestioned, especially since they are frequently understood to have been bestowed and upheld by various divine mandates.

Bergson notes that if our social life had remained frozen at the level of closed societies, then it would have been impossible for any notion of a universal code of ethics, a code that applies to all of humanity and not just to those within one's social group, to have been created. As long as we remain in the "us" versus "them" mentality, there is no possibility of ever coming, by stages, to a vision of the innate dignity of each individual. Bergson claims that the love of humanity as a whole is qualitatively different than the love of members of one's group; as such, this shift in vision has to come about in a single leap, not by degrees. Fortunately, however, time

and again, various individuals in different cultures have broken free from the limitations imposed upon them by their identification with their group and have dared to proclaim their solidarity with, and love for, humanity as a whole. Swept up by a profound insight into their connection with all of life, these ethical geniuses (inevitably "mystics" for Bergson) proclaimed a new vision -- a vision of an open society that embraces all of humanity.[29]

Mystical Morality

Bergson makes the audacious suggestion that the appearance of these mystically inspired ethical geniuses can be understood as nothing less than "the creation of a new species, composed of one single individual" (TS 95, *1056*). Each of these mystics (the various prophets, sages, and seers of different religious traditions) represents a new stage of development in the evolution of life that was not possible for humanity as a whole. From this perspective, each mystic can be seen as a unique manifestation of the evolutionary dynamism of the *élan vital*.

It is important to note that in *The Two Sources* something new has emerged: love. In this text, the *élan vital* is no longer simply a quasi-biological, supra-conscious, cosmic creative energy as it is in *Creative Evolution*. Instead, without argument or explanation, Bergson simply asserts that the "very essence of the creative effort" is love (TS 95, *1056*). In *The Two Sources*, the *élan vital*. suddenly becomes profoundly personal: it is not just the ceaseless creative dynamism of the cosmos, but is now also a supreme, divine love, a cosmic love that cares for each of us.[30]

According to Bergson, the mystics of different traditions, "the saints of Christianity . . . the sages of Greece, the prophets of Israel, the Arahants of Buddhism, and others besides," are individuals who broke through the taken-for-granted habits, obligations, and assumptions of their society, and instead, to varying degrees, managed to connect directly with the surging stream of divine love and creative power that is the *élan vital* (TS 34, *1003*). Enlivened and inspired by

their mystical oneness with this universal life force, these exceptional human beings brought something new into the world, a higher type of morality, a "complete" morality (TS 33, *1003*). Through the power of their charismatic example, these prophets, saints, and seers became catalysts for social change, inspiring others with their passionate appeals for social justice and love for all.[31]

Bergson admits that "true mysticism is rare" (TS 213, *1156*). But he also insists that when true mysticism "does call, there is in the innermost being of most men the whisper of an echo" (TS 214, *1157*).[32] Because mystics are directly and powerfully connected with the source of life that flows through all things, when they share their experiences with others, those who are willing to open themselves to the mystic's message will often feel a very deep sympathetic resonance due to their own underlying connection with that same life force. According to Bergson, mystical testimonies can in this way at times shake us free from our complacency; they can reveal the astonishing potentials for joy, love, power, and wisdom that are slumbering within us -- potentials that most of us will never actually realize, at least in their fullness. But, as Bergson notes, "the spell has worked; and just as when an artist of genius has produced a work which is beyond us, the spirit of which we cannot grasp, but which makes us feel how commonplace were the things we used to admire, in the same way" once we have acknowledge the new vision of life's possibilities given to us by the mystics, our world "is no longer what it was" (TS 214, *1157*).

Bergson emphasizes that there is a difference in kind, not in degree, between mystical morality, with its vision of universal love as well as its insistence on the innate dignity of each individual, and social morality, with its insistence on loyalty to group norms.[33] For instance, mystical morality is inevitably incarnated in a specific person, who, by the example of his or her radiant and loving presence, inspires others to transform themselves and the world they live in. Social obligation, by contrast, is almost inevitably impersonal, and operates most effectively

when its dictates are not questioned, when they are the taken- for-granted "way things are." Furthermore, mystical morality, in its essence, "is a forward thrust, a demand for movement; it is the very essence of mobility" (TS 58, *1024*). According to Bergson, connection with the dynamism of life leads to transformation, both individually and socially. Social morality, however, is deeply rooted in tradition and is intimately linked to a society's urge for self preservation; it is a highly conservative pressure that vehemently resists movement and change.

Finally, there is a difference in feeling-tone between these two types of morality. Bergson acknowledges that fulfilling one's social obligations can bring on a feeling of contentment, well-being, or pleasure. But he insists, in contrast, that the feeling that comes from being swept up in the enthusiastic affirmation of mystical morality is one of pure joy -- the joy that comes from aligning oneself "with the generative effort of life," the joy that comes from casting off the chains of a "morality enclosed and materialized in ready-made rules," the joy that comes from a life of freedom, where the old moral code is not abandoned, but rather, is superceded and transformed "as in the case when the dynamic absorbs the static" (TS 54, 59; *1020*, *1025*).[34]

Bergson notes that, in reality, neither of these two moralities is found in a pure state. Mystical morality is always, to one degree or another, intertwined with social obligations. However, according to Bergson, it is crucial to recognize that morality, as it is lived, emerges from two distinct sources, and neither of these sources is intellectual. From Bergson's perspective, the static, quasi-instinctual, morality of social obligation is infra-intellectual, whereas the dynamic, inspired, and creative morality of mystical insight is supra-intellectual. Bergson argues that intellectual systems of ethics, in which moral problems are rationally analyzed, compared, and methodically solved, are not totally without value; but he goes on to claim that they are worthwhile only because they are the result of a blending of traditional, socially-based moral understandings and creative, mystically inspired, moral insights.[35]

Bergson stresses that it is not necessary for each of us, when making a moral decision, to start from scratch. Instead, we can, and should, draw upon the past work done by social tradition and adhere to the rules that have been laid down by society, while also benefiting from the new perspectives and the ideal patterns of life that have been revealed by mystically inspired moral geniuses. By combining these two sources of moral insight, it is possible for most of us to live a rational, self-consistent, ethical life.

The problem is that many scholars have come to believe that morality can, and should, be founded solely in logic and rational consistency, when in reality, according to Bergson, reason simply anoints the social customs (and mystical insights) that already exist.[36] Bergson points out (and you can almost hear his chuckle) that while he greatly admires the power and value of intellectual speculation, nonetheless, "when philosophers maintain that [logic alone] should be sufficient to silence selfishness and passion, they prove to us -- and this is a matter for congratulation -- that they have never heard the voice of the one or the other very loud within themselves" (TS 87, *1048-9*).

Therefore, according to Bergson, while at first glance it might appear that morality comes from the intellect, upon closer inspection, it is clear that morality is actually rooted in two very different sources: the pressure of social obligation and the inspired, and inspiring, appeal of mystical insights. However, in the end, even this moral dualism is undercut by Bergson, when he points out that "all morality . . . is in essence biological"; ultimately, both of these sources of morality emerge from the activity of the life force itself (TS 101, *1061*). He claims that originally the *élan vital*, as the force behind evolution, created the system of social obligations as a way to counteract the socially corrosive effects of egoism and the intellect. However, later on, in order to "drive humanity forward" out of the stasis of closed societies, this cosmic power manifested itself once again, but this time indirectly, "through the medium of privileged persons" (i.e., the mystics) (TS 51, *1017*).[37] Working in and through these mystics, the power of life no

longer had to circle around itself as in closed societies, but could once again express its creative dynamism relatively unimpeded.

According to Bergson, the moral vision which mystics receive is the result of a direct and powerful connection to the source of life itself, in which cosmic creative energy pours into them like "a stream flowing down," washing through them as they "simply open their souls to the oncoming wave" (TS 99, *1059*). Bergson claims that, while mystics are initially transported by the "visions, and raptures and ecstasies," that come with this powerful experiential alignment with the supra-conscious energy of life, eventually they emerge from these transforming experiences as an active agent of the "onslaught of love" that surges through them from that divine source (TS 99, *1059*). In Bergson's eyes, each of the mystics, having "felt truth flowing into his [or her] soul from its fountainhead like an active force . . . can no more help spreading it abroad than the sun can help diffusing its light" (TS 233, *1173*). Empowered and illumined by their alignment with this divine source, the mystics effortlessly, and joyfully, offer to others a love that is "capable of transposing human life into another tone," a "mystic love of humanity" that transcends the instinctual love that individuals possess for their family, their community, or their nation (TS 99, 234; *1059*, *1174*).[38]

Bergson, waxing lyrical, proclaims that this "love which consumes" the mystic "is no longer simply the love of man for God, it is the love of God for all men. Through God, in the strength of God," the mystic "loves all mankind with a divine love" (TS 233, *1173*) According to Bergson, this divine love for all beings has been given in its entirety to exceptional human beings, who, in turn, communicate its transforming power to others. He concludes that this cosmic dynamism, this divine love, in and through the mystics, desires nothing less than "to complete the creation of the human species"; it wishes nothing less than to take humanity onto the next step of its evolutionary journey (TS 234, *1174*).[39]

Static Religion

The rhapsodic rhetoric that is characteristic of Bergson's depictions of mysticism vanishes rather suddenly when he switches his attention from mystical morality to the social roots of religious life. Once he begins his analysis of "static religion" in the latter half of *The Two Sources*, the impassioned, evocative prose that he seems to think goes hand in hand with an adequate description of mysticism is replaced, somewhat abruptly, with the muted, carefully reasoned arguments of the social scientist and philosopher.

At this point in the text, Bergson attempts, once again, to unveil a previously unseen duality. As was the case with his investigation of the two sources of morality, Bergson is convinced that religion as well has two separate, if interrelated sources: social necessity and mystical intuitions. His investigation of "static religion," therefore, is in many ways simply a reflective double of his previous analysis of social morality.

At times, Bergson even explicitly connects static religion and social morality. For instance, at one point he claims that static religion is that form of religious life which legitimates and underscores existing social norms with the threats of divine punishments and the enticements of divine rewards (TS 98, *1058*). He argues that, as such, static religion arose hand-in-hand with social morality. In the same way that the nexus of social obligations acts as a type of virtual or substitute instinct to maintain the integrity of human societies, an integrity that is disturbed by the intelligent, free activity of individuals, static religion also seeks to guard the social status quo with its religious rituals and beliefs, both of which are seemingly given divine sanction via powerful religious experiences.

Bergson insists, however, that the religious experiences which are at the heart of static religion do not emerge out of any authentic contact with a transnatural reality. Instead, he claims that these experiences are the result of the biologically-based "myth-making function" [fonction fabulatrice] of the human mind (TS 109, *1067*). According to Bergson, this myth-making ability of the human mind, like the nexus of social obligations, evolved, in the lieu of instinct, as a way

to address the pressing human need for social cohesion. This myth-making function "conjur[es] up . . . vivid and insistent" images which "masquerade as perception" -- i.e., it produces hallucinatory experiences which appear as if they are the result of genuine contact with spiritual levels of existence, but in actuality, are not (TS 109, *1067*). Via these unreal, yet convincing, altered states of consciousness, the myth-making function legitimates and authorizes religious rituals and beliefs, and these beliefs and rituals, in turn, uphold existing social norms.

Bergson argues that the illusory, yet vivid, experiences produced by the myth-making ability of the human mind not only give a potent seal of approval to existing religious ideas and thus undergird the unseen, yet powerful, network of social obligations, but they also mollify the existential anxieties that inevitably arise in human beings as the result of their intellectual awareness. As Bergson notes, "man is the only animal whose actions are uncertain, who hesitates, gropes about and lays plans in the hope of success and the fear of failure. He is alone in realizing that he is subject to illness, alone in knowing that he must die" (TS 204, *1149*). Therefore, the insistent, and persuasive, hallucinatory experiences produced by the myth-making function of the mind act to reassure human beings that their activities, especially in times of crisis, are aided by spiritual beings who care for their welfare (or by magical powers that can be directly felt within themselves). These quasi-religious experiences also give meaning to sickness and suffering, by making it seem as though these negative events are the direct result of the actions of spiritual forces. Finally, these hallucinatory encounters soothe the apprehensions that arise with the awareness of impending death by engendering experiences of a spiritual level of existence that appears to transcend physical reality. In summation, according to Bergson, static religion, rooted in the biologically evolved myth-making function of the mind, "*is a defensive reaction of nature against what might be depressing for the individual, and dissolvent for society, in the exercise of intelligence* [author's italics]" (TS 205, *1150*).[40]

Bergson's analysis of static religion, so strikingly similar to the functionalism of Bronislaw Malinowski, is illustrated profusely with examples taken from the anthropological literature of his time.[41] It is peppered with discussions on magic, taboo, mana -- all drawn from his readings of accounts of "primitive" tribal religious life that were published during this time. Bergson's primary examples of static religion are drawn from accounts of oral cultures, i.e., those "less advanced societies" where "the whole of morality is custom" (TS 123, *1079*). In contrast, Bergson seems to think that the religious traditions of more "advanced" cultures, especially Christianity, are at worst, "mixed" religions, i.e., he seems to think that they are a confused combination of static religion and mystical religion.

Nonetheless, even if it can be inferred from *The Two Sources* that Bergson considered Christianity as an example of a "mixed" religion (a claim he seems loath to make directly), we are never left with any doubt that Bergson believes that Christian religious experiences, unlike those of primal traditions, are genuine contacts with divinity. For example, at one point Bergson goes out of his way to assure his Christian readers that the visions and religious insights that offer hope to Christians about the survival of the soul after death can be trusted, unlike the illusory experiences of "primitive cultures"; he blithely comments in a footnote that "it goes without saying that the image [generated by the myth-making function] is hallucinatory only in the shape it assumes in the eyes of primitive man" (TS 131, *1086*).

But it is not at all clear why Christianity is exempt from Bergson's critical analysis of how the myth-making function operates in religious life. Are we simply to take on faith Bergson's assumption that the profound religious experiences of Christianity (and to a certain extent, other revealed traditions) are genuine contacts with the cosmic dynamism of the universe, while the visions and beliefs of so called "primitive religions" are illusory defensive reactions? By what criteria do we make this assessment? Why are shamanic journeys and visionary encounters with spirits and ancestors not equally genuine and profound mystical insights into the

hidden depths of reality? Even though Bergson stresses (unlike his friend Lucien Lévy-Bruhl) that "primitive" mentality is not different in structure from that of "civilized" people (although it deals with different materials), it seems that Bergson was very much a product of his time and simply could not imagine that so called "primitive" peoples might have a religious life that is as authentic, rich, and powerful as that of "more advanced" cultures (TS 103, *1062*).[42]

Bergson's attempts to apply his evolutionary understandings to cultural development are also somewhat problematic. For instance, Bergson theorizes that long ago human beings automatically tended to personify powerful natural forces, e.g., floods, earthquakes, tornadoes, and so on, as a way to feel that the world was not impersonal and capricious (in much the same way as, even today, a child who has bumped up against a table will get angry and shout at the table as if it were a person who had mistreated him or her).[43] According to Bergson, these somewhat rudimentary personifications of natural forces either developed over time into the full fledged gods of ancient mythology, or becoming increasingly "impoverished," became the basis for that "impersonal force which primitive man, we are told, sees underlying all things" (TS 153, *1105*). (Again, Bergson makes it clear that apprehensions of this impersonal force, e.g., mana or wakan, by "primitive" human beings are products of the myth-making function of the mind and are not valid intuitions of the *élan vital.*)

Bergson argues that over time the gods of ancient cultures evolved into increasingly complex personalities; then, gradually, as human civilization advanced, these separate gods merged into the one god of monotheism. He notes that this process of religious development "went on until the day when the religious spirit turned from the outer to the inner, from the static to the dynamic" (TS 178-79, *1127*). Bergson stresses that this shift from a static, social religion to a dynamic, mystically-based religion was a crucial moment in history. Now, at last, our ancestors could free themselves from the "imaginative representations" of static religion which had temporarily halted the forward movement of the *élan vital* (TS 179, *1127*). Now, prompted

by the mystical insights of this "entirely inward" religion, humanity was able once again to "continue the vital movement" of human evolution by entering into "the stream of the creative impetus" and could at last move forward instead of ceaselessly circling in one spot as it had when it was embedded in the stagnant quagmire of static religion (TS 179, *1127*).

Mystical Religion

The implication is clear: dynamic religion, due to its mystical inspiration, is nothing less than "the very essence of religion," and did not exist, in any real way, until the advent of monotheism (TS 186, *1133*). In one fell swoop, the veracity and value of all of the countless shamanic journeys, visionary encounters, and transformative insights into the realm of the spirit that are at the heart of the oral traditions of Africa, Australia, North and South America, and Asia are automatically, and without argument, discounted by Bergson. Ironically, this is the case, even if, as I would argue, it is in these cultures, perhaps more than anywhere, that mystical awareness has been actively cultivated and highly prized. Here are cultures in which one's intuitive abilities are not negated, cultures in which one's connection to the cosmic life force is actively nurtured and developed. Here are religious traditions that would be "natural" exemplars of the very types of awareness that Bergson so prized.[44]

But Bergson simply could not see this. Either from ignorance of the spiritual depths of these traditions or from lingering unexamined racial and cultural prejudices, he could not envision the possibility that the religion of these "primitives" might be anything more than a mass of stagnant, illusory superstitions and falsehoods. Of course, tribal religions did value social stability as well as visionary dynamism. But this combination of stability and dynamism, as Bergson well knows, is present in every religious tradition, including Christianity. (For example, it would not be difficult to make a case that few religious cultures were more obsessed with social stability and more suspicious of mystical innovations than medieval Christendom.)

Bergson's perspective on the two sources of religion would have been better served if he, from the beginning, acknowledged that *all* religious traditions are a mixture of these two elements.

To be fair, Bergson does emphasize that "pure mysticism is a rare essence," which is "generally found in a diluted form" -- i.e., he does point out that mysticism is almost inevitably found mixed with static religion, and as such it has to be regarded "as practically inseparable" from the social and institutional underpinnings of religion (TS 213, *1156*). Furthermore, as he points out, it is not accidental that the two types of religious life come together. Mystical varieties of religion actually need static religion for their "expression and diffusion" and static religion needs the dynamism and new directions brought to it by mystical levels of awareness (TS 179, *1127*). In this way, as he notes, "mysticism and religion are mutually cause and effect, and continue to interact on one another" (TS 239, *1178*). Bergson even goes so far as to say that dynamic religion is only possible if it uses the "images and symbols supplied by the myth-making function" (TS 268, *1203*). (Bergson argues, for instance, that Christian mystics will inevitably operate within Christian institutions, such as churches or monasteries, and use standard Christian terminology, even as these mystics simultaneously enliven and transform these institutions and theological perspectives.)

At other moments, Bergson also seeks to convince his readers that it is possible, and valuable, for philosophy to examine mysticism "unalloyed, apart from the visions, the allegories, the theological language which express it" (TS 250, *1188*).[45] It is clear that in *The Two Sources*, Bergson often attempts to do just this. For example, at times he does put to one side the Christianity of the Christian mystics, so that he can study their mysticism in and of itself, free from the particularities of that tradition. Nonetheless, he admits that when he utilized this methodology in *The Two Sources*, he often "simplified a great deal"; he recognizes that when he depicted Christian mysticism in this way he acted as if "the Christian mystic, the bearer of an

inner revelation, had made his appearance in a humanity utterly ignorant of such a thing" (TS 237, *1176*). In reality, as he notes, no Christian mystic operates in a cultural vacuum:

> If he had visions, these visions showed him . . . what his religion had impressed upon him in the form of ideas. His ecstasies, when they occurred, united him to a God probably greater than anything he had ever conceived, but who did nevertheless correspond to the abstract descriptions with which religion had supplied him. The question may even be asked if these abstract teachings are not at the root of mysticism, and if the latter has ever done more than go over the letter of the dogma, in order to retrace it in characters of flame. The business of the mystics would in this case be nothing but bringing to religion, in order to restore its vital heat, something of the ardour with which they were fired (TS 237, *1176*).[46]

Bergson goes on to ask: is mysticism really just "a more fervent faith," is it nothing more than a passionate version of traditional religion, or is it the case that while mysticism assimilates what is useful from traditional religion, borrowing its theological insights, speaking its language, looking to it for support, that it also "possess an original content, drawn straight from the very well-spring of religion, independent of all that religion owes to tradition, to theology, to the Churches" (TS 250, *1188*)? Not surprisingly, Bergson chooses the latter option, claiming that doctrines alone could not "give birth to the glowing enthusiasm, the illumination, the faith that moves mountains" (TS 238, *1177*). However, once a religious tradition does possess "this fierce glow," then the "molten matter" of mystical intuitions can "easily run into the mould of a doctrine, or even become that doctrine as it solidifies" (TS 238, *1177*). Therefore, according to Bergson, the typical "mixed" religion to which most people give their allegiance is simply a

"crystallization . . . of what mysticism had poured, white hot, into the soul of man. Through religion all men get a little of what a few privileged souls possessed in full" (TS 238, *1177*).

Bergson insists that, even though mysticism is almost always found intermixed with static religion, even though the differences between the two might seem to be "a series of transitions, and as it were, differences in degree," in reality, "there is a radical difference in nature" between the two (TS 213, *1156*). Up to a point, it would seem that Bergson's observation is valid. There does seem to be a striking difference between a religious life that is rooted in security, that is fixed in tradition, that reinforces tribalism and hatred, that is set in dogmatic certainty, and a religious life that emerges from a genuine contact with the source of life, that nurtures transformation on personal and social levels, that deepens our connection to ourselves, to others, and to the world around us. However, the difficulty with Bergson's point of view is not only that he argues that tribal traditions are utterly static and based on defensive hallucinatory experiences, but also that he uses exclusively Christian terminology to define the ideal of "complete" or "pure" mysticism. Bergson is not coy; he openly asserts that "complete mysticism is that of the great Christian mystics" (TS 227, *1168*).[47] Any mysticism other than Christian mysticism is, by definition for Bergson, a lower stage of evolutionary development. While in *Creative Evolution*, he had vehemently argued that the *élan vital* is the dynamic force behind a multitude of viable and complementary evolutionary directions, in *The Two Sources* it seems that the *élan vital* has, in some ways, become much more constricted, at least when it comes to religious evolution. Here, and only here, does Bergson posit a single line of evolution, that which leads to Christian mysticism.

Bergson does give an approving, if somewhat condescending, nod in the direction of those mystical traditions that are not as "complete" as Christianity. He claims that it is not correct to disparage those less evolved religions which have not been able to embody fully the spiritual depth and power of the mystical insights they have received. He also points out that just

because there are mythical or magical elements in these non-Christian mystically-based religions, this does not mean that their mystical insights are thereby made irrelevant or unimportant (TS 215, *1158*).

However, this gesture in the direction of religious openness cannot mask Bergson's facile and two-dimensional accounts of mystical traditions other than Christianity.[48] Bergson's superficial and patronizing descriptions of Greek, Hindu, and Buddhist mysticism are embarrassing to read in the late twentieth century. For instance, when Bergson asks if Greek philosophy attained "complete mysticism" his assessment of Plotinus leaves no doubt (TS 220, *1162*). Plotinus, like the Moses of Bergson's own Jewish tradition, was allowed "to look upon the promised land, but not to set foot upon its soil" (TS 221, *1162*). Bergson further notes that Plotinus "went as far as ecstasy, a state in which the soul feels itself, or thinks it feels itself, in the presence of God, being irradiated with His light; he did not get beyond this last stage, he did not reach the point where, as contemplation is engulfed in action, the human will becomes one with the divine will" (TS 221, *1162-3*).

Plotinus actually does fairly well in Bergson's idiosyncratic rating system, at least compared to his depiction of Hindu and Buddhist mysticism, which is replete with the standard early twentieth century European critiques of the "hypnotic states" of yoga in which mysticism "is no more than outlined" and the depiction of nirvana as a failed attempt to reach oneness, in which a soul stops "half-way, dangling all dizzy in the void" (TS 223, 225; *1165*, *1166*).[49] The only Eastern mysticism that meets with Bergson's approval is that which is practiced by two Hindu mystics -- Ramakrishna and Vikekananda -- and only then because, in Bergson's mind, their mysticism had already been beneficially influenced by Christianity and the industrialization of the West. The advent of Western modes of social organization and the contact with Christianity meant that the mysticism of Ramakrishna and Vikekananda was no longer trapped in "doctrines of renunciation or the systematic practice of ecstasy; instead of turning inwards and

closing, the soul could open wide its gates to a universal love," thereby enabling their mysticism at least "to develop to its fullest extent and reach its goal" (TS 227, *1167-8*).[50]

According to Bergson, the primary distinction between Christian mysticism and the less "complete" mystical traditions of Greek philosophy, Hinduism, and Buddhism is that mystics of other traditions were satisfied with ecstasy and contemplative absorption, whereas Christian mystics (e.g., St. Paul, St. Theresa, St. Catherine of Sienna, St. Francis, Joan of Arc, and others) took the next step and became active agents of transformative love. [51] Bergson admits that most Christian mystics seem to have gone through stages of mystical development that are very similar to the stages described by mystics of other traditions; but, as he puts it, "they merely passed through them" (TS 227, *1168*). Other mystics might be content with "boundless joy" or "all-absorbing ecstasy" or "enthralling rapture"; other mystics might believe that they should rest in an awareness which is "flooded with light," but not the Christian mystics (TS 230, *1170*). Bergson claims that these mystics do pass through a stage in which they rest in a contemplative absorption in God's love and presence; however, this resting is merely momentary. As Bergson notes, the Christian mystics are like a train, vibrating at the station, ready to move forward. Something within them is not yet complete. He adds that the Christian mystic is aware that there is something beyond even the most intimate union with God, a union in which the separation between the mystic and God is overcome and the soul is filled with joy, absorbed in God's presence. On some level these Christian mystics are aware that their will is still not completely united with God's will. He goes on to note that, due to this recognition, their ecstasy vanishes and is replaced by anxiety and agitation. Ultimately, this anxiety turn into despair and these mystics feel alone, desolate, suffering the "darkest night" of the soul (TS 231, *1171*).

However, Bergson claims that in this darkest night, a "profound metamorphosis" is "going on obscurely within" the mystics' consciousness (TS 231, *1171*). Seemingly thrown away from God, it is here, ironically, that these mystics discover the final and true union, the union in

which God acts in and through them. It is at this moment, Bergson states, that the consciousness of these mystics is plunged into "a superabundance of life" (TS 232, *1172*). From now on, "there is a boundless impetus," as the mystics give themselves to "an irresistible impulse which hurls" them "into vast enterprises" and which enables them, in spite of their apparent outer weakness, to accomplish amazing feats (TS 232, *1172*). At this point in their spiritual development, these mystics are swept forward by the impetus of life, they are guided from within by "an innate knowledge, or rather an acquired ignorance," which suggests to them "the step to be taken, the decisive act, the unanswerable word" (TS 232, *1172*). These mystics, according to Bergson, put forth personal effort, but their "endurance and perseverance . . . come of themselves" (TS 232, *1172*). Within them the distinction between acting and being acted upon has disappeared; within them freedom of choice perfectly coincides with the divine will. Bergson claims that they may put forth "a vast expenditure of energy, but this energy is supplied as it is required, for the superabundance of vitality which it demands flows from a spring which is the very source of life" (TS 232, *1172*).

In Bergson's eyes, these mystics succeeded, where others did not, in establishing "a contact," a "partial coincidence, with the creative effort [of life]," an effort that is "of God, if it is not God himself" (TS 220, *1162*). He claims that Christian mystics, even while remaining individuals, have transcended the "limitations imposed on the species by its material nature," and in this way, they continue and extend the creative divine activity (TS 220, *1162*). According to Bergson, "if all men, if any large number of men, could have soared as high as [these mystics], nature would not have stopped at the human species," for such individuals are more than human (TS 213, *1156*). Through their example, these mystics have "blazed a trail along which other men may pass" and as such, have shown us all the potentials that lie dormant within (TS 258, *1194*). Bergson claims that, through their love and their insights, these mystics have done what others could not do -- i.e., they have helped to catalyze "a radical transformation of humanity"

(TS 239, *1178*). By assisting in the evolutionary process, in which the divine seeks "to create creators," these mystics have helped, in their own way, to create "a divine humanity" (TS 255, 239; *1192*, *1178*). By doing so, as the final sentence of *The Two Sources* notes, they have helped to fulfill "the essential function of the universe" which is nothing less than "the making of gods" (TS 317, *1245*).[52]

What are we to make of these claims? To begin with, I think that it is important to emphasize that Bergson's work in *The Two Sources* is not the best lens available for understanding the historical or cultural specificities of various mystical traditions. It is perhaps best understood as a type of mystical humanism -- a modern, Western, normative philosophical contribution to our understanding of human psychological and sociological potentials. As such, I would argue that Bergson offers a needed corrective to much of the current literature on mysticism, in that for him, mysticism is not an individualistic, narcissistic, or solipsistic task, but rather, is a channel of divine activity in the world. In his eyes, mysticism is not associated with isolation from the world, but rather, is understood as an evolutionary catalyst, as a dynamic influx of creative potential which can literally transform, not only the world in which we live, but even the very constitution of the human species itself.

Nonetheless, as I mentioned, there are several problems with Bergson's understanding of mysticism. To begin with, it suffers from a lack of hardheaded scholarship into the specificity of various mystical traditions, and a seeming blindness to the potential for abuse and pathology in the mystical life. His utopian pronouncements on mystical life tend to look rather naive and simplistic when juxtaposed to the indepth investigations of recent scholars with their thick descriptions of the mystic's cultural context and their probing, theoretically nuanced examinations of the complexities of the mystic's personality structure.[53]

Furthermore, in the light of contemporary scholarship in comparative mysticism, Bergson's claim that Christian mystics stand at the pinnacle of human evolution, since they alone

have been able to incarnate divine love in the world, seems appallingly parochial. If Bergson had written *The Two Sources* today, there is no doubt that most scholars would have decisively dismissed his conclusions. Not only is it clear that there have been many activist mystics in traditions other than Christianity, but Christian mystics themselves have often been wary, at best, of social engagement. Therefore, when examined closely, Bergson's clearcut hierarchical assessment of the transformative scope of different mystical traditions dissolves into a fluid, ever shifting spectrum of ways in which various traditions have negotiated some workable compromise between hermitic isolation and political activism.

Nonetheless, if we can penetrate past the closed walls of Bergson's exclusive claims for the priority of Christian mysticism and open his philosophy to the equally important social and personal transformative value of a broad range of mystical (and shamanic) traditions, it is possible that his examination of the complex interrelationship between mysticism and ethics can still offer us much that is worthwhile.

For instance, Bergson's claim that mystical experiences are the result of a profound intuitive merger with the cosmic force of life, grounds mysticism in a substantive, and empirically evident, reality -- the creative force of life itself, the *élan vital*. The strength of Bergson's perspective on mystical experience is that it posits the activity of a transcultural, yet empirically accessible, source of mystical experience that can legitimately account for the numerous similarities found in various mystical narratives, while it simultaneously does not deny the impact and importance of cultural and religious backgrounds in shaping the experiences of the mystic.

However, there is an important problem that needs to be resolved before we conclude that the *élan vital* is indeed the transnatural source of mystical experiences. Bergson stresses that the *élan vital* is ever new, constantly changing; it is the ceaseless flux of becoming. Admittedly, some mystical narratives are congruent with this understanding of the *élan vital*, e.g., perceptions

that all of life is interconnected; sensations of joy and energy rushing through the body; experiences of one's ongoing connection to the depths of cosmic love. But the accounts of many other mystical experiences describe something that, on the face of it, seems quite different: profound peace, supreme stillness, skylike spacious openness, changeless presence.[54] Since Bergson's theoretical connection between the *élan vital* and mystical experience is based, at least in part, on the evidence provided by the mystical experiences themselves, how do we reconcile this apparent incongruity?

I would argue that Bergson's metaphysics would have to be modified and amplified in order to account for mystical experiences of peace, openness, changelessness, and presence. There needs to be a place in his metaphysics for being as well as becoming; a place for the oceanic stillness of Siva as well as the dynamic vitality of Sakti; a place for the empty circle of the Tao as well as the constant pulsating interaction of yin and yang; a place for the abysmal depths of the godhead as well as the creative fecundity of the Trinity.[55]

It might seem that such a theoretical addition would alter Bergson's perspective beyond recognition, or that there would be insurmountable philosophical difficulties in making such a change, but I disagree. Without going into the rigorous arguments that would be needed to support this contention, I will simply point out that it could well be merely a matter of levels: accurate descriptions of life from the perspective of duality will always include change, motion, flux. But that same reality, seen from the perspective of non-duality, need not have these qualities. Change is only relative to the differences between separate objects. Seen from the unimaginable viewpoint of complete wholeness, where are objects? Where is change? I would argue that stillness can, and does, underlie motion. Being is always implied in becoming.

Nonetheless, if our focus remains on Bergson's philosophy itself, before any creative additions, it is important to acknowledge his attempts to use empirical evidence to justify his claims about the *élan vital* and its connection to mysticism. His argument that mystical

experiences are the result of a profound immersion of an individual's consciousness with the dynamic source of life is not, at least to a large extent, based on the revelatory pronouncements or faith claims of any particular religious tradition.[56] Instead, his willingness to connect mystical experiences with the *élan vital* emerges out of four empirically grounded sources: a subtle introspective examination of the nature of our consciousness; a strikingly original and clearly reasoned explanation of the mind-body relationship; a detailed, theoretically profound understanding of the nature of matter, life, and evolution; and an original, if flawed, interpretation of various mystical narratives. Bergson's conclusions are not dictates that have been handed down from on high. Instead, they are open-ended, yet philosophically sophisticated, proposals based on the best evidence we have available in the fields of psychology, biology, neurology, and even physics -- as well as his own, rather limited, acquaintance with mystical narratives.[57]

Organic Additions

Due to the paucity of Bergson's knowledge about different historical mystical traditions, I think it should be frankly acknowledged that his perspective on mysticism (at least until it has been updated and revised) is often not a helpful interpretive key to concrete, historically situated, mystical traditions. However, I would also claim that his perspective on mysticism does make a valuable contribution to the contemporary normative philosophy of mysticism. What follows are my own, admittedly schematic, suggestions as to how Bergson's understandings might be utilized (and amplified), to address some of the key questions raised by this mode of discourse.

For instance, Bergson's work on mysticism and ethics articulates a provocative (if at times rough-hewn) vision of what it means to be fully human. Even in his earliest work, we are given a normative understanding of human beings -- one that prizes fluidity, flexibility, openness, and awareness, in all areas of one's life. To be fully human for Bergson is to be

aligned with, and flowing with, the dynamic flux of our consciousness. To be fully human is to be open to, and responsive to, the pulsations of the universal life force streaming through us. From a Bergsonian perspective, it is not metaphorical to say, "she is more alive than before" or "there is a deadness about him." For Bergson, there are degrees of aliveness. The more we are connected with our depths, the more awareness that we can bring to each moment, the more that the force of life which animates all things can move freely within us -- to that extent, and that extent alone, we are fully alive, fully human.

According to Bergson, what blocks our aliveness is our entrenched tendency towards rigidity, tightness, stasis, and unconsciousness. Intellectually, we want life to be compartmentalized, we want it split up into tidy, manageable sections. Emotionally, we want our feelings and our relationships with others to be predictable and under our control. Morally, we want the rulebook; we want the recipe that tells us how to live the good life. Spiritually, we want to be given the answers by someone else; we want our path securely preordained and our beliefs set in stone.

However, from a Bergsonian perspective, there is a price we pay for this intellectual clarity, emotional control, moral righteousness, and spiritual certainty. If we continue to live our life in deeply etched ruts; if we always stay with what is safe, predictable, and manageable; if we consistently repeat familiar patterns of behavior; if we don't allow ourselves to take the risk to open ourselves to the creative vitality of life; if we remain grimly attached to habitual reactive behavior; if we don't allow ourselves to be deeply moved, then we shrivel up, we fester, we die while still living, we turn into zombies lashing out at the living or robots controlled by codes that are not our own creation.

Amplifying Bergson's argument somewhat, I would claim that we all experience this stasis, this frozenness, not only intellectually, emotionally, morally, and spiritually, but also physically. Many recent body-based, neo-Reichian (and unknowingly, neo-Bergsonian)

therapists have argued, and I think plausibly, that to a greater or lesser degree our own musculature is a mirror of our psyches; it is a densely encoded record of deeply rooted patterns of resistance to change, one that offers us tangible evidence of our prior calcified and habitual patterns of reacting to the dynamic, evernew flux of life.[58] These theorists claim that, as very young children, our life force was channeled and structured; we were taught to stay put, to know our place. We learned to squash our exuberance, to set up walls between ourselves and others. As adults, this deep-seated resistance to life remains, under the surface, expressing itself as an unconscious cellular tightness, as a body gripped by fear.

Fortunately, however, these theorists also claim that we possess another type of cellular memory -- the echoes of an earlier time, a time of fluidity, of connectedness, a time when we joyously responded to the life energy flowing through us relatively unimpeded. While watching infants -- their aliveness, their openness, their fascination with what each new moment brings -- we can perhaps remember, on some level of our being, this undefended state of awareness, this place of wide open possibilities.

Nonetheless, these theorists stress that there is a deep resistance within us to this open, undefended state of awareness. The process in which our numbness comes back to life can be painful, and very frightening. Our sense of separation from our depths, from others, from life, is deeply embedded. We cling to what we think we are, we clutch at the calcified remnants of ancient anger, we cling to the pain of buried wounds, and we shield ourselves in layer upon layer of rigid emotional scar tissue and armoring.

But this neo-Bergsonian way of understanding ourselves does not leave us simply with descriptions of our defenses against life. It also offers hope. If we can learn how to get out of the way; if we can open ourselves to the influx of a loving, gentle, healing awareness; if we can take the risk to give ourselves fully to life, then real change is possible. Bergson claims that the natural direction of life energy is towards evolution and transformation, so we don't have to force

ourselves to change. Instead, we simply have to figure out how to stop resisting, how to choose differently, in order to free up the energy of life so that it can evolve naturally and relatively effortlessly. Then, giving ourselves fully to the flowering of this universal life force within us, we can reintegrate the fragments of our selfhood back into a greater whole. Through this process of letting go into the larger life within us, we can "re-member" ourselves, we can rejoin all aspects of our self into a fluid unity, we can melt the artificial walls within us that separate ourselves from others and the rest of life.

Nonetheless, practical questions remain: How do we actually get out of the way? How can we learn to deepen our connection to life? How can we facilitate this transformative process? Bergson's work gives us a hint. If we want to increase self awareness, if we want to nurture and amplify our intuitive sense of the movement of life, then perhaps we need to look in the direction of the mystics. Bergson himself does not go into the specifics of how we can cultivate mystical awareness within ourselves, but in the late twentieth century, any educated Westerner has access to a vast repertoire of different spiritual disciplines: meditation and visualization techniques, chanting, fasting, prayer, mindfulness training, martial arts, dance, etc. There are seemingly endless possibilities from which to choose and practice.[59]

However, I would argue that it is naive to think that simply practicing spiritual disciplines will automatically engender a deeper connection to life. Some of the most rigid, shut down people on the planet are people who have been meditating, rigorously, rigidly, for years.[60] Becoming free from habitual ways of seeing the world and experiencing life is not an easy task -- and if we are not careful, practicing spiritual disciplines can itself become a more subtle form of enslavement. Often something else is needed as well -- a willingness to do the hard, yet vital, work of healing ourselves emotionally; the willingness to uncover deeply rooted, unconscious defense systems; the willingness to peel away the masks we wear in order that we might lovingly release the decades of buried hurt, rage, and fear we carry within ourselves; the willingness to

transmute those traumas from our past which continually distort our experience of ourselves and our relationship to others.

Fortunately, at least from a neo-Bergsonian perspective, this sort of indepth emotional work is itself nurtured and facilitated by those deep moments of spiritual remembering that can come via mystical awareness. As we begin to have profound experiences of our egoic boundaries melting and merging joyously into a greater wholeness; as we begin to identify increasingly with this space of expansion, freedom, and creative aliveness, then little by little, or perhaps even via a dramatic, thoroughgoing, and longlasting shift in awareness, we can begin to create a context in which genuine positive transformations can occur, on all levels of our being. Then increasingly, we can respond, creatively and spontaneously, to what each moment of life offers us. As we are more and more connected to the free flowing power of life, and hence to others and the depths of ourselves, we can allow ourselves to be propelled by the ongoing momentum of the cosmic ocean of becoming. Like a surfer riding a wave, our movement forward in life can then be relatively effortless -- and we can discover that we do not have to work as hard as we often think to live a life that is fulfilling and joyous. Like the surfer, our forward momentum does not have to come solely from our own effort. Instead, we can be propelled through life by a great force, one that is integrally linked to the depths of our being. Our responsibility is simply to align ourselves with that cosmic, conscious power and enjoy the ride (even perhaps while we are occasionally knocked off the board). We can choose this type of life, a life of joyous responsiveness and creative vitality, instead of a life in which we fearfully struggle just to keep our heads above the water, fighting against the currents of life which buffet us from moment to moment.

Using another, more orthodox Bergsonian metaphor, I would claim that it is possible, like a master jazz musician, to merge into the rhythms, melody, and harmonies of life, responding intuitively and appropriately to the needs of each moment.[61] This intuitive responsiveness does

not happen overnight, or easily. When jazz musicians are "in the groove," when they are flowing with, and responding to, the creative, unstructured musical cues of the other band members, the entire process can seem magical, the correct notes emerging seemingly effortlessly at just the right moment, in just the right way. But this intuitive, freeform, flexible expressiveness is the result of years of arduous practice and study. In the same way, intuitive moral appropriateness does not happen overnight. Instead, it is the result of years of conscious spiritual cultivation; it comes from a willingness to open ourselves to our depths and the courage it takes to risk following our hearts rather than just our heads.

An intuitive ethical life is also, I would argue, most successful when it is based on a firm foundation of clearcut ethical norms and the prior cultivation of ethical virtues. As children we need moral guidelines and a precise knowledge of which actions are right and which are wrong. We also need to see adults modeling virtues, so that we can embody these beneficial ways of interacting with others at an early age. Then, as we mature, we also need to try on new modes of moral life. We need to learn how to make rational moral decisions based on articulate ethical principles. We also need to learn how to attune ourselves with a transrational mode of moral knowledge, a knowledge that comes from a profound intuitive alignment with the source of life as it expresses itself within us.

However, this intuitive decision making does not come easily. The social structures around us do not support it (since they encourage conformity, tradition, and stability). Additionally, and perhaps more crucially, this ethical openness has to fight against our own deeply embedded fear of change. A powerful part of ourselves wants to keep us confined within the familiar, yet increasingly rigid and inflexible, parameters of the moral and religious laws of our childhood. Frightened by the impulses we sense raging beneath our tightly controlled, pursed-lipped, clenched-jawed exterior, we often prefer to clamp down and to judge both

ourselves and others according to calcified, pre-set formulas of moral righteousness, rather than risk a life where there are no secure guidelines, no clearcut boundaries, no well-defined rules.

And, we ask ourselves, why would we want to risk this sort of intuitive ethical life? We see the examples of dubious spiritual leaders attempting to rationalize their moral failings and reprehensible conduct by just this sort of mystically-based, transmoral moral authority. If these individuals with years of committed spiritual work can be so fundamentally misguided, how can the decisions we make from our connection to our fundamental self be trusted? How do we separate the impulsivity that springs from egoistic desires from the genuine spontaneity of intuitive ethical choice? I would claim that there are, as might be expected, no easy, ready-made answers to these questions. Every moral path comes with risks . They cannot be avoided, even when we attempt to do so by blindly following a pre-set moral code or by attempting to formulate full proof rational ethical principles. But as Bergson realized, at least the risks that come from aligning oneself with the intuitive wisdom that emerges from the depths of the self are the risks that come from living life fully, passionately, and consciously. These are risks that are worth taking.

Henri Bergson, *The Creative Mind*. (New York: The Philosophical Library, 1946), 18. Henceforth, cited parenthetically in the body of the text as "CM". In addition, although perhaps not strictly necessary, since the English translations of Bergson's work were all authorized by him, for the sake of scholarly accuracy, I will also cite the pages of the critical edition of Bergson's original French texts: *Oeuvres* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1959). All citations from *Oeuvres* will follow the English translation citation, and will be written in italics. In the case of the above citation, the *Oeuvres* citation is (*1259- 60*).

[1]Here again, in this analysis, the structure of our language distorts the actual experience of our consciousness. To say that there are "states" of consciousness is to imply that each of these "states" is a separate, isolated, unit of experience, and to say that there are "many" of these states is to imply that these "states" can be counted -- but how do you count the subtle textures of awareness that interpenetrate each other, that have no clearcut boundaries, that are ceaselessly changing?

[2]Joseph Solomon points out that Bergson's work, which stresses the difference between the artificial, mechanical, uniform, clock time and the lived experience of durée, allows us to make sense of everyone's experience that "an hour of joy is infinitely shorter than an hour of expectation." Joseph Solomon, *Bergson*. (Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1912), 23.

[3]Bergson in *Matter and Memory*, the book he wrote after *Time and Free Will*, questions whether this fragmentation of the external world is any more accurate than the fragmentation of our inner world.

[4]Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*. (Montana, USA: Kessinger Publishing Company, no publishing date given), 144 [*95-96*]. Henceforth, cited parenthetically in the body of the text as TFW. In *Creative Evolution*, the book Bergson wrote after *Matter and Memory*, he also cites a well known quote by Pierre Simon de Laplace to demonstrate this type of extreme determinism. See Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1911), 38 [*526-27*]. Henceforth, cited parenthetically in the body of the text as CE.

[5]To use the term "moment" when discussing Bergson's philosophical perspective is perhaps misleading to many readers. For Bergson, there is no such thing as "the moment," if it is envisioned as an isolated and single mathematical point in time. Instead, "the moment" or the present, is rooted in our entire past, and is dynamically pushing towards the future. As A. A. Luce's notes, for Bergson, "my present is my past on tip-toe." A. A. Luce, *Bergson's Doctrine of Intuition*. (New York: Macmillan Co., 1922), 103.

[6]Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory* (New York: Zone Books, 1991). Henceforth, cited parenthetically in the body of the text as MM. *Matter and Memory* is a masterpiece -- it is a subtle, detailed, brilliantly unorthodox work. But unfortunately, in order to penetrate into the heart of this masterpiece, one must first pass through the dense, seemingly impenetrable walls of highly technical philosophical prose. It is my hope that what follows successfully "translates" this philosophical jargon into prose that is more easily grasped. For a recent, extremely detailed, commentary and analysis of *Matter and Memory*, see Frédéric Worms, *Introduction à Matière et mémoire de Bergson*. (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1997).

[7]The term "image" (also "image" in French), is somewhat misleading, in that it is a visual metaphor. A perhaps more cumbersome, yet more accurate phrase would be "experience vortex."

[8]See, for instance, MM 235 [*365*], where Bergson states: "The material universe itself, defined as the totality of images, is a kind of consciousness."

[9]In MM 36 [*186*], Bergson notes that in order to "transform" the matter-like nature of images into conscious perceptions, we, as living beings, have to "obscure some of its aspects . . . diminish it by the greater part of itself." We do this by the "suppression" of those aspects of the image-field that do not "interest" us.

[10]Henri Bergson, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977), 259 [*1195*]. Henceforth, cited parenthetically in the body of the text as TS. This understanding,

crucial to *Matter and Memory*, is retained in Bergson's later work on morality and religion. Bergson rarely abandoned or altered his previous understandings, and terse summations of early works frequently appear in the body of later works.

[11]This understanding of how our choices help to create our experience of the world is strikingly similar to the philosophical perspective of William James, a close friend of Bergson. For a detailed discussion of James's position, see chapter two of G. William Barnard, *Exploring Unseen Worlds: William James and the Philosophy of Mysticism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997). For a lengthy, if rather dated, comparison of the work of Bergson and James, see Horace Meyer Kallen, *William James and Henri Bergson*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1914).

[12]See also Henri Bergson, *Mind-Energy: Lectures and Essays* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1920), 95-96 [*873-4*]. Pete A. Y. Gunter, a contemporary scholar of Bergson's work, pointed out to me that "this idea of Bergson's has had an immense influence on parapsychology." (Personal communication). Thanks also to Jeffrey Kripal for reminding me of the similarity of this understanding to the theories of William Blake and Aldous Huxley.

[13]This type of condensation would not include the future, since according to Bergson, the future is not determined.

[14]Here also, Bergson's understanding is similar to that of William James, who describes each moment of experience as a fusion of two types of knowledge: "knowledge by acquaintance" -- the raw data of our sense experience -- and "knowledge-about" -- the culturally mediated, linguistic, pre-conscious, internalized information about that sense experience. For a fuller discussion, see chapter two of G. William Barnard, *Exploring Unseen Worlds: William James and the Philosophy of Mysticism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997).

[15]F. C. T. Moore, commenting on this aspect of Bergson's work, notes that "the 'filtering' of real properties [of the "image-field"], which constitutes pure perception, is not only a biological, but also a social phenomenon." F. C. T. Moore, Bergson: *Thinking Backwards*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 28.

[16]Bergson does not go into great detail describing the qualities these two types of individuals possess, but in my depiction, I attempt to remain faithful to the thrust of his original insights.

[17]Thomas Hanna notes that Bergson carefully and deliberately cultivated his "Janus faces," i.e., his ambiguous alternative between the face of "a mystic, drawing away from the natural world into the surging flux" and the face of "the avid, open-eyed student of the sciences, insatiably curious about the biological and physical structures of the natural world." Thomas Hanna, ed. *The Bergsonian Heritage*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1962), 2.

[18]In *Creative Evolution*, Bergson forcefully contrasts his position with other versions of vitalism. Bergson's vitalism is not "naive" vitalism -- i.e., a vitalism which posits a quasi-material substance (the vital fluid). Instead, Bergson's "critical" vitalism posits life as a form of energy or consciousness. This energy or consciousness is universal in scope -- there are not countless different internal vital energies specific to different organisms. Tom Quirk, noting the difficulty of categorizing Bergson's thought in relation to vitalism, says that "Bergson cannot be precisely identified with the vitalists per se, and he is perhaps best described as a maverick vitalist." Tom Quirk, *Bergson and American Culture*. (Chapel Hill, N.C.: The University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 42. For a detailed discussion of Bergson's version of vitalism, and how it contrasts with other vitalistic thought, see Frederick Burwick and Paul Douglass, eds., *The Crisis in Modernism: Bergson and the Vitalist Controversy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992). For an intriguing, if controversial, contemporary biological discussion (and reappropriation) of vitalism, see Rupert Sheldrake, *The Presence of the Past* (Rochester, Vermont: Park Street Press, 1988).

[19]As Leszek Kolakowski comments, "The central idea of Bergson's cosmology is this: the Whole is of the same nature as myself. The time-generating life of the consciousness is the model for the universe." Leszek Kolakowski, *Bergson*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 70.

[20]This is different than Ernest Haeckel's "biogenetic law," according to which ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny, i.e., the belief that stages of individual development replicate the form and order of the stages of the development of the human species. For a fascinating discussion of the influence of Haeckel on Carl Jung, as well as Bergson's influence upon Jung, see Richard Noll, *The Jung Cult* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994). Pete A. Y. Gunter also explores, in more detail, the links between Bergson and Jung. See: Pete A. Y. Gunter, "Bergson and Jung," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 4 (Oct. - Dec., 1982): 635- 652.

[21]In *The Two Sources*, Bergson uses this understanding to point out how static, self-enclosed cultures are also less able to embody the dynamism and universality of the life-impulse. The encapsulation and inertia of each society, inevitably, according to Bergson, leads to hatred of others and ceaseless warfare.

[22]Although Bergson, in some circles, is primarily famous for his work on intuition, Vladimir Jankélévitch, a friend and student of Bergson's, and one of Bergson's most astute interpreters, notes that "l'intuition proprement dite n'apparaît guère avant l'*Évolution créatrice*." [In actuality, intuition hardly appears before *Creative Evolution*.]. Vladimir Jankélévitch, *Henri Bergson*. (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1959), 49.

[23]This is not to say that he did not ever give any definitions of intuition, but rather, that these definitions were always understood to be working, partial definitions. Perhaps one of the most famous of these is in page 190 [*1395*] of his essay "Introduction to Metaphysics," found in *The Creative Mind*: "We call intuition here the sympathy by which one is transported into the interior of an object in order to coincide with what there is unique and consequently inexpressible in it."

[24]As Marie Cariou points out, for Bergson, "l'absolu n'est pas seulement un milieu dan lequel nous déployons notre énergie creatrice; il est le centre vivant dont nous tiron cette énergie-même." [The absolute is not only a surrounding in which we express our creative energy; it is the living center from which we draw that energy itself.] Marie Cariou, *Bergson et le Fait Mystique*. (Paris: Aubier Montaigne, 1976), 97-98.

[25]This is not to say that Western philosophy has not had a minority tradition that did try to advocate intuition, variously understood, e.g., Plato, Plotinus, Spinoza, Whitehead. For a lucid analysis of the place of intuitive knowledge in these and other thinkers, see: K.W. Wild, *Intuition*. (London: Cambridge University Press, 1938. For an intriguing contrast between Bergson's understanding of intuition, and that of Zen Buddhism, see Minoru Yamaguchi, *The Intuition of Zen and Bergson* (Japan: Herder Agency, 1969).

[26]In footnote in TS 227 [*1168*], Bergson comments that he read M. Henri Delacroix's *Studies of the History and Psychology of Mysticism*, a work that he said "deserves to be a classic." (He wrote a brief review of Delacroix's work in 1909). He also notes that he read several of the works of Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism* and *The Mystic Way* in particular, and mentions that Underhill in *The Mystic Way* "connects certain of her views with those we expressed in *L'Evolution Créatrice*." Bergson goes on to note that in *The Two Sources*, he takes Underhill's perspectives, and then carries them further. Bergson also was deeply influenced by his reading of William James's *Varieties of Religious Experience*. (James's picture was on Bergson's desk during the years he was writing *The Two Sources*). However, even though Bergson was a prolific reader, because of the paucity of his citations, it is difficult to determine the extent to which he read the primary texts of different mystical traditions.

[27]*The Creative Mind* was actually published last (1934) -- but it is a collection of previously written essays, along with two new lengthy introductions.

[28]Leszek Kolakowski notes, however, that "Durkheim is said to have been instrumental in the failure of his [Bergson's] application" [twice] "for a post at the Sorbonne." Leszek Kolakowski, *Bergson*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), vii.

[29]This understanding of Bergson has striking similarities James Fowler's description of "stage six" individuals. See James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1981).

[30]Because Bergson's methodology is so strongly empirical (in the broader sense of the word), he could have claimed that he made this change in his description of the *élan vital* based on the evidence of different mystical narratives. But he never makes this claim directly in the text, nor does he, in any rigorous way, examine any other mystical testimonies that might contradict this assumption.

[31]For another important theorist who also emphasizes the critical social impact of charismatic individuals, see Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1991). Weber's work is, in this area, more nuanced and sophisticated than Bergson's. Weber delineates various "ideal types" of charismatic individuals (e.g., prophets, saints), each linked to a different social and economic setting, each with a different social task to perform. Furthermore, it is clear that William James's discussion of "religious geniuses" in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* also influenced Bergson's understanding of the social impact of mystics and saints. See, for instance, page 252 [*1443*] of *The Creative Mind*, where in the article "On the Pragmatism of William James: Truth and Reality," (1911), Bergson comments on James's understanding of "mystical souls."

[32]This is almost a paraphrase from William James. See G. William Barnard, *Exploring Unseen Worlds: William James and the Philosophy of Mysticism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 19.

[33]As Kripal and I both discuss in the opening chapters of the book, the notion of individual dignity was historically a fairly recent development. Until the last several centuries, many, if not most, mystics were apparently not that concerned with it in their writings.

[34]Milec Capek notes that there is a "strange contrast between [Bergson's] criticism of the 'closed society' and of 'closed religion' in *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* and his 'moral adhesion' to Catholicism several years later. Since Roman Catholicism was founded on authority and unchanging tradition, does it really approach the ideal of the 'open society' and 'dynamic religion'?" Milic Capek, "Bergson's Theory of Matter and Modern Physics," in P. A. Y. Gunter, ed., *Bergson and the Evolution of Physics.* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1969), 313. Capek goes on to note that all of Bergson's books "have been on the *Index* since June 1, 1914." Ibid.

[35]For instance, according to Bergson, the philosophical claim "of an equal participation of all men in a higher essence" can be traced back to the "intoxicating fragrance left" by the mystical love of all humanity (TS 234, *1173*).

[36]Bergson argues that moral obligation "has not come *down*, as might be imagined, from above, that is to say, from a principle from which the maxims have been rationally deduced; it has come *up* from below, I mean from that substratum" of pre-existing social norms" (TS 91, *1052*).

[37]A. R. Lacey mentions that "there is a certain ambivalence about the *élan*" in this aspect of Bergson's work. Social morality is driven from "beneath" by an "impulsive force," whereas "open morality . . . is motivated by an attractive force" in the form of the appeal of the "charismatic figure." At times in *The Two Sources*, it can appear that Bergson has, in the end, embraced a modified type of finalism, writing as if nature had intended not only human beings, but the open society. A. R. Lacey, *Bergson.* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 206. Idella J. Gallagher, taking a slightly different tack, comments that "Bergson sees man as the end and apex of the evolutionary process, not in the sense that the rest of nature is for the sake of man, or that he was prefigured in the evolutionary process, but in the sense that in him the greatest measure of freedom has been achieved." Idella J. Gallagher, *Morality in Evolution.* (Holland: Martinus Nijhoff, 1970), 45.

[38]Bergson's prose alters dramatically whenever he describes the mystical source of morality (and of religion). In these sections of *The Two Sources* we enter into a completely different rhetorical world than the technical, dense, abstract philosophical prose of *Matter and Memory*, or even the moderate, reasoned, scholarly tone of much of Bergson's other work (including much of *The Two Sources* itself). In these sections of *The Two Sources*, instead of critical analysis, we find evocative, poetic discourse; here we find Bergson proclaiming rather than arguing, seeking to stir and uplift his audience, offering them an alternative vision of life, rather than a carefully reasoned and carefully modulated academic treatise. Of course, to the ears of the modern scholar, this shift in rhetoric can be somewhat off putting. Lacking the requisite ironic overtones, devoid of the ambiguity and skepticism that pervades much contemporary academic writing, Bergson's mystically-tinged prose can often seem, at best, sentimental and antiquated, and at worst, pompous and pretentious. Many scholars, confronted with this aspect of Bergson's work, might well have an understandable, if perhaps reactive, tendency not only to ignore Bergson's contributions to a philosophy of mysticism, but also to negate even Bergson's previous, more academic, contributions. I would suggest, however, that we do ourselves a great disservice if we overly quickly discount Bergson's perspective on mysticism. Perhaps there is a place for inspired, poetic, impassioned, and evocative discourse in the academy; perhaps we need to open ourselves to alternative perspectives, even if they do not always come neatly tied in the package we have grown used to receiving.

[39]In the words of Alfred Loisy, *The Two Sources* is "un poème théogonique, sotériologique, eschatologique." [“a soteriological, eschatological and theogonic poem.”] Alfred Loisy, *Y a-t-il Deux Sources de la Religion et de la Morale* (Paris: Emile Nourry, 1933), 16.

[40]This understanding of the defensive function of static religion in many ways echoes that of Sigmund Freud. See, in particular: Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1961); Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1961). It is clear that Bergson was aware of Freud's work. For an analysis of Bergson's interaction with psychoanalytic thought, see Marie Cariou, *Lectures Bergsoniennes* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1990), 33-79.

[41]It is difficult to determine whether Bergson read Malinowski's work, much of which was written a decade before *The Two Sources*. Bergson never cites Malinowski (as was noted above, he cites very few thinkers who have

influenced his thought), but the ideas, and even the examples he uses, are almost identical. See, for instance: Bronislaw Malinowski, *Magic, Science and Religion* (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 1992).

[42]Pete Gunter suggested that perhaps Bergson's reluctance to acknowledge the validity of the religious experiences of oral cultures is because they are rooted in a tribal setting. Therefore, these shamanic experiences function primarily to uphold the status quo of that particular tribe, and might even be used to justify and support intra-tribal warfare. (Personal communication).

[43]Bergson also draws upon William James's account of his experience during the San Francisco earthquake of 1906 to illustrate this point. (TS 153-56, *1105-7*). For a recent intriguing and thorough study of the role of anthropomorphism in religion, see Stewart Guthrie, *Faces in the Clouds: A New Theory of Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

[44]I do not want to romanticize these cultures -- historically, they had their share of brutality, stifling traditionalism, and xenophobia. But they also had much to be valued, and this was frequently overlooked or denied by Europeans of Bergson's time.

[45]I would argue that, up to a point, Bergson is correct, but only if philosophy begins with a detailed examination of specific mystical traditions, in all of their contextual richness. Then, and only then, can a worthwhile "extract" or overview of mysticism be articulated. Bergson however seems to think that he can skip over the hard work of getting to know the specific nuances of different mystical traditions before coming to more general philosophical conclusions.

[46]At first glance, this argument appears similar to that later advanced by Steven Katz. See Steven Katz, ed., *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978). In the end, however, Bergson's perspective is closer to that which I articulate in chapter two of *Exploring Unseen Worlds*.

[47]Ironically, *The Two Sources* has frequently by critiqued by various Christian thinkers as not Christian enough in its perspective. For an example of this type of critical appraisal, see John Joseph Kelly, *Bergson's Mysticism* (Fribourg, Switzerland: St. Paul's Press, 1954).

[48]Bergson's depictions of Christianity are also rather unsophisticated , but at least Christianity stands anointed as Bergson's primary representative of mysticism's essence. Loisey's work is an excellent examination of the limitations of Bergson's critical and historical understanding of various religious traditions. Alfred Loisy, *Y a-t-il Deux Sources de la Religion et de la Morale* (Paris: Emile Nourry, 1933).

[49]Bergson never discusses other mystical traditions, such as Sufism or Taoism. This is regrettable, because in many ways, Bergson's metaphysics is much more congenial with Taoism or Mahayana Buddhism than the Catholic Christianity which he had come to admire towards the end of his life. Also, bearing in mind that his grandfather worked closely with rabbis of several well known Hassidic dynasties, he also never mentions -- with the exception of the early prophets --Jewish mysticism. For biographical information on Bergson's life, the best source is the most recent: Philippe Soulez and Frédéric Worms, *Bergson: Biographie* (France: Flammarion, 1997).

[50]Based on Kripal's chapter in this text ("Seeing Inside and Outside the Goddess"), this observation by Bergson is perhaps more accurate about Vikekananda than Ramakrishna.

[51]Bergson's claim that mystics are individuals who are more attuned with the cosmic source of life might be philosophically defensible, but to portray mystics as if they were inevitably whirlwinds of worldly action is historically misleading. Many Christian mystics were monks or hermits who had very little conscious engagement with worldly life, and even those who were engaged in active life in the world frequently were also maintaining an active contemplative life as well. And, of course, dynamic action in the world was not limited to Christian mystics, as I argue in my response to Kripal's "Debating the Mystical as the Ethical" in this text. Ian Alexander, however, disagrees with my interpretation of Bergson's thought in this area. He claims that, for Bergson, the "religious life" is understood as "a movement of oscillation between contemplation and action." Ian Alexander, *Bergson: Philosopher of Reflection*. (New York: Hillary House, 1957), 65.

[52]Bergson actually says that the universe is a "machine for the making of gods," -- a puzzling metaphor given his stress on the un-mechanistic nature of life.

[53]See, for instance, Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Kali's Child*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995.

[54]I am not the first scholar of mysticism to make this observation. In *Mysticism*, Evelyn Underhill notes that Bergson, "ignoring if he does not deny the existence of . . . the still Eternity, the point of rest, finds everywhere the

pulse of Time, the vast unending storm of life and love." Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism*. (New York: New American Library, 1974.), 29.

[55]Siva and Sakti are Hindu male and female divine principles. Siva (male) is linked with stillness, presence, being, whereas Sakti (female) is linked to dynamism, creativity, change. Yin and yang are Chinese female and male cosmic principles. Yin (female) is linked with receptivity, earth, and cold. Yang (male) is linked with activity, heaven and heat. The Tao is the all-embracing unity of the ceaseless dynamic interaction of yin and yang at every moment.

[56]Bergson's empiricism, in conjunction with his stress on the value of intuitive knowing and his respect for the contributions of mystics, combine to make his philosophy a rich resource for a type of contemporary syncretic spirituality that is very prevalent in West today, a "New Age" spirituality that is suspicious of dogmatism, that values experiential religious knowledge and intuitive modes of perception, and yet also respects the value of scientific theories as well.

[57]There have been several fascinating and detailed recent studies of the numerous ways in which Bergson's work anticipated, almost prophetically, much of the findings of modern science. See: Philippe Gallois and Gérard Forzy, eds., *Bergson et les* (France: Institut Synthélabo, 1997); Milic Capek, *Bergson and Modern Physics* (Dordrecht, Holland: D. Reidel Publishing, Co., 1971); Andrew C. Papanicolaou and Pete A. Y. Gunter, eds., *Bergson and Modern Thought: Towards a Unified Science* (New York: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1987); Pete A. Y. Gunter, ed., *Bergson and the Evolution of Physics* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1969).

[58]See, for instance: Alexander Lowen, *The Language of the Body*. (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1971); John C. Pierrakos, *Core Energetics*. (Mendocino: LifeRhythm Publications, 1990); and Ron Kurtz and Hector Prestera, *The Body Reveals*. (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1984).

[59]This is not to imply that all spiritual and psychological transformation is the automatic and inevitable result of practicing various spiritual techniques, or to claim that there is no "place" for grace or the natural unfolding of the heart.

[60]Two books of essays that explore the complex interaction between psychological and spiritual transformation are: Roger Walsh and Frances Vaughan eds., *Paths Beyond Ego: The Transpersonal Vision* (Los Angeles: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Perigee, 1993) and John Welwood, ed., *Awakening the Heart: East/West Approaches to Psychotherapy and the Healing Relationship* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1983).

[61]For a similar perspective articulated by a practitioner and scholar of Ch'an Buddhism, see Peter D. Hershock, *Liberating Intimacy: Enlightenment and Social Virtuosity in Ch'an Buddhism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996).