



# Bergson's Fundamental Intuition

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## Abstract

The following text is a translation of Semyon Frank's "L'intuition fondamentale de Bergson" published in *Henri Bergson: Essais et témoignages inédits*, edited by Albert Béguin and Pierre Thévenaz, Neuchâtel: Éditions de la Baconnière, 1941. In this article, Frank addresses Bergson's notion of intuition, his anti-intellectualism, his mysticism, his closeness to *Lebensphilosophie*, the notion of lived experience, the distinction between intuition as pure contemplation and intuition as living knowledge, the distinction between cognition of the atemporal essence of reality and cognition of the world of becoming, pragmatism, the disinterested and open intuitive spiritual attitude vs the utilitarian attitude of social groups closed in on themselves, the transrational vs the irrational, spiritual life, psychic life, the Absolute, and the temporal flux. The article contains criticisms of Bergson on the issues of time and intuition: the *durée*, the intuitive time, is incomprehensible without an atemporal foundation. Therefore, according to Frank, Plato was correct—*contra* Bergson—to define time as the moving image of eternity. And, if there is such an atemporal foundation, then, contrary to what Bergson seems to think, intuition as living knowledge cannot be the sole mode of intuition. Moreover, unlike what Bergson appears to think, an intuition of the Absolute would be an intuition of the transrational rather than of the irrational. The translation is preceded by an introduction tracing the genesis of the article, which was commissioned by the Swiss philosopher Pierre Thévenaz.

**Keywords** Russian philosophy · French philosophy · Henri Bergson · Semyon Frank · Pierre Thévenaz · Intuition · Living knowledge · *élan vital* · Time · *durée* · Creative evolution · Intellectualism · Rationalism · Irrationalism · Transrationalism · The Absolute

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## Translator's introduction

In 1937, Semyon Lyudvigovich Frank published *La connaissance et l'être* (*Knowledge and Being*) (1937), consisting of an abridged French translation of *Predmet znania* (*The Object of Knowledge*) (1915), with the Parisian publisher Fernand Aubier.<sup>1</sup> In a letter addressed to Vasily B. Elyashevich dated October 2nd, 1937, Frank mentions that, thanks to this translation, he made connections in French philosophical circles (Obolevitch 2022, p. 47). Teresa Obolevitch comments that “Frank’s book did not evade the attention of prominent French philosophers. [...] Thanks to it, the Russian philosopher gained some fame and recognition in the French philosophical milieu” (Obolevitch 2022, p. 49).<sup>2</sup> But this notoriety was not limited to France. *La connaissance et l'être* also attracted attention eastward of France, in the French-speaking part of Switzerland.

In a manuscript draft letter written in French, dated November 1940, and addressed to Ludwig Binswanger, a Swiss psychiatrist and a friend of Frank, the Swiss philosopher Pierre Thévenaz wrote as follows:

Binswanger Nov 40

Please forgive me for failing to acknowledge receipt of Frank’s *Sonderabdrücke*, which you were kind enough to send me. They reached me after the Lucerne course at a time when vacations and absences encourage relaxation and forgetfulness. This oversight is, however, unforgivable and I express my confusion to you.

But I return to you all the articles, of which I took great care, and which I read with the greatest interest (both the “literary” studies and this admirable text on “Das Absolute”).

The Society of Philosophy of Lausanne asked me to give a talk on Frank in November and I was going to send it all back to you when new concerns assailed me: I am in fact responsible for giving 2 hours of courses at the University of Neuchâtel to replace a sick professor. The preparation for these courses has completely absorbed me lately, and prevents me from returning to Basel straight away.<sup>3</sup>

This position of Frank, fundamentally existential, but without abandonment to the irrational, is very sympathetic to me; it has some analogy (especially in the human attitude) with that of Heinrich Barth who last Sunday spoke about existential truth at the meeting in Bern.

With my apologies again, and hoping to have the opportunity to speak with you at greater length about Frank, please...<sup>4</sup>

Binswanger had thus sent *Sonderabdrücke* (offprints) of some of Frank’s articles to Thévenaz, including the offprint of “Das Absolute” (Frank 1935). The meeting in

<sup>1</sup>The book was abridged due to Aubier’s length restrictions (Obolevitch 2022, p. 43).

<sup>2</sup>Unless otherwise indicated in the list of references, translations are mine.

<sup>3</sup>The course in question was a course on time, the manuscript notes of which have been preserved (Thévenaz 1940a).

<sup>4</sup>This draft of letter to Binswanger is preserved at the Bibliothèque cantonale et universitaire de Lausanne, Fonds Pierre Thévenaz (Thévenaz 1940b).

Bern that Thévenaz was referring to was the founding meeting of the Swiss Philosophical Society, which was held on Sunday November 3rd, 1940.<sup>5</sup> This draft letter was therefore written during the week following the 3rd of November. After receiving Thévenaz's letter, Binswanger wrote to Frank, on November 23rd, 1940, that "[t]he student of Häberlin [*Der Häberlin-Schüler*] that I told you about has read your *Sonderabdrücke* with great enthusiasm and will give a lecture about you soon" (Antonov et al. 2021, p. 422). Binswanger did not, in this letter, mention the name of this *Häberlin-Schüler*, but for two years after his doctorate, during his *Privatdozent* period, Thévenaz was affiliated with the philosophical researches led by Paul Häberlin at the Lucerne Foundation in Basel. And, as it turns out, Häberlin was a lifelong friend of Binswanger.<sup>6</sup>

On December 7th, 1940, Binswanger wrote again to Frank specifying that his new young admirer is named "Thévenaz" and that he is from Neuchâtel: "Your young new admirer is called Thévenaz. He is from Neuchâtel and wants to give his lecture there too" (Antonov et al. 2021, p. 427). Thévenaz's lecture was entitled "Connaissance et être d'après Simon Frank" ("Knowledge and Being According to Semyon Frank") and was in fact given at a meeting of the "Société romande de Philosophie" in Lausanne, on the same day that Binswanger had written this letter, namely, on December 7th, 1940 (De la Harpe 1941, p. 80).<sup>7</sup> Thévenaz had used Frank's *La connaissance et l'être* as well as the offprints that Binswanger had sent him (amongst other material) to prepare his lecture. Thévenaz later sent a letter to Frank containing some critical remarks on his book that Frank characterized as "interesting" (Antonov et al. 2021, p. 447). These remarks quite probably consisted in the criticisms that Thévenaz had formulated in "Connaissance et être d'après Simon Frank."

In early January 1941, Bergson passed away, and soon afterward Thévenaz teamed up with Albert Béguin to co-edit a collective book on Bergson meant as a sort of tribute to the philosopher. Frank's *La connaissance et l'être* contains discussions of Bergson's philosophy, especially in Chap. 10, "Le temps et le nombre" ("Time and Number"), where Frank is concerned with Bergson's conception of time. Although Thévenaz's lecture on Frank is not specifically about his reading of Bergson and his conception of time, it nevertheless mentions Bergson and Bergsonism. Thévenaz was thus well aware of Frank's familiarity with Bergson, and it must be this awareness that prompted him to invite Frank to contribute to the collective book on Bergson that he was co-editing. This invitation was extended through the mediation of Binswanger. In a letter dated February 9th, 1941, Thévenaz wrote, in French, the following to Binswanger:

<sup>5</sup>For a report of this meeting, see Schaerer (1940).

<sup>6</sup>On the relationship between Binswanger and Häberlin, Thévenaz himself wrote the following: "The psychiatrist Ludwig Binswanger (born in 1881 in Kreuzlingen, director of the Bellevue clinic in Kreuzlingen) was strongly influenced by Bleuler and Freud, of whom he was a personal friend, and also by Jung. Subsequently, close contacts with numerous philosophers (Paul Häberlin, Simon Frank, René Le Senne, E. Minkowski) and the study of phenomenology (notably Heidegger) guided his research, both psychological and philosophical, increasingly towards anthropology" (Thévenaz 1941a, p. 106).

<sup>7</sup>The manuscript of the lecture is preserved at the Bibliothèque cantonale et universitaire de Lausanne (Thévenaz 1940c). An annotated transcription of the lecture accompanied by an introduction has been published in the *Revue des études slaves* (Tremblay 2023).

Sir,

Mr. Albert Béguin, professor at the University of Basel, told me about his intention to publish a volume in homage to Bergson, with French and Swiss collaborators. A publisher has been found and it would be a volume of approximately 150 pages where each collaborator would have 5 pages in-80 at their disposal for an original study on a point of Bergsonian thought.

I immediately thought of you, who would certainly have something interesting to say, for example, about Bergson and psychology or psychiatry, or even about Bergsonian anthropology. Furthermore, knowing the close ties of thought that unite Semyon Frank to Bergson, knowing, on the other hand, that you are in contact with him, I would be very obliged to you if you would either propose to him yourself (which would be best) to send us a text too, or give me his address. Do you happen to know where Jean Wahl and R. Le Senne are currently?

It is probably impossible today to have German collaborators for a tribute to Bergson. Certainly, an article by Jaspers or Heidegger would have been welcome. If nothing better, do you know any texts by German philosophers or writers from which it would be worth quoting extracts?

This volume should appear without delay and the texts should reach me at my address in Neuchâtel, 14 Bachelin Street, by April 1st.

Pierre Thévenaz<sup>8</sup>

Binswanger, who did not contribute to the volume, forwarded Thévenaz's letter to Frank. On February 21st, 1941, Frank replied to Binswanger as follows: "Thank you very much for sending Thévenaz's letter. I answered 'yes' 1) because I have nothing to do after the end of my work, 2) because in my solitude I enjoy every connection to philosophical circles, and 3) because I am also tempted to say a few things in a nutshell, what seems essential to me" (Antonov et al. 2021, p. 444). The article, which Frank wrote in German, was written quickly. On March 23rd, 1941, i.e., about a month after announcing to Binswanger that he had accepted the invitation, Frank wrote to him again saying: "I wrote the essay on Bergson ('L'intuition fondamentale de B.') and put in a lot of effort because of the small size required. Thévenaz has already answered me—he is doing the translation into French himself" (Antonov et al. 2021, p. 447).

The article was published in *Henri Bergson: Essais et témoignages inédits*, recueillis par Albert Béguin et Pierre Thévenaz, Neuchâtel: Éditions de la Baconnière, 1941. A second edition appeared in 1943. In a letter dated June 19th, 1941, Frank complained to Binswanger about a mistake that Thévenaz made in his translation:

I am [...] annoyed by a confusing error in the translation of my essay (at the end). Instead of '*renaissance catholique*,' as it should have been (I was thinking primarily of the wonderful figure of Péguy), Thévenaz translated the word '*Erneuerung*' as '*modernisme*' (I have no sympathy for modernism—religious

<sup>8</sup>This letter was discovered by Nikolai Frank and Gennadii Aliaiev in the S. L. Frank Family Archive in Munich (Thévenaz 1941b).

pragmatism). But perhaps only authors notice such things and take them too seriously. Otherwise the translation is excellent and I have thanked Thévenaz. (Antonov et al. 2021, p. 480)<sup>9</sup>

The collective book on Bergson contains texts by Charles Péguy, Paul Valéry, Jean Wahl, Gabriel Marcel, Louis Lavelle, Maurice Blondel, Vladimir Jankélévitch, Léon Brunschvicg, Emmanuel Mounier, Thévenaz himself, and many others. The book was intended as a kind of tribute to the philosopher's memory. But, in their foreword, the editors—Béguin and Thévenaz—specified that they “conceived it less as a funeral tribute, where only eulogies would have been acceptable, or as a collection of studies on a great philosophy, than as a living and contemporary testimony” (Béguin and Thévenaz 1941, p. 7).

In his bibliography of his father's works, Vasily Frank wrote “Le Symposium Bergson a eu lieu en 1941 et l'intervention de S. Frank a été faite en allemand” (“The Symposium Bergson took place in 1941 and S. Frank's presentation was given in German”) (Frank 1980, p. 34). This sentence suggests that Béguin and Thévenaz co-organized a “Symposium Bergson” in early 1941, and that the book consists of the proceedings of that event. Given that Béguin and Thévenaz were Swiss living in Switzerland, and given that the book was published by a Neuchâtel-based publishing house, we could presume that such a symposium would have taken place in Switzerland. But, if there had been a symposium, Frank could not have attended it. If he had contributed to a symposium at all, it would have been *in absentia*, because, at the time, Frank, who moved to France in early 1938, lived in the Vichy *zone libre*, which adopted a policy of collaboration with Germany. By crossing borders, Frank, who was ethnically Jewish, would have run the risk of getting arrested. In May 16, 1941, for instance, Frank wrote to Binswanger “I am completely isolated here, and I practically cannot travel” (Antonov et al. 2021, p. 465). Therefore, if there had been a symposium, Frank could not have taken part in it in person.

However, upon closer scrutiny, Vasily Frank's claim that there has been a “Symposium Bergson” in 1941 appears to be mistaken. Vasily is the only one to mention such a symposium. In their correspondence, Frank and Binswanger normally mention the *Vorträge* (lectures, presentations, talks) that they gave or intended to give. Yet, no allusion to such talk is made in their correspondence. Moreover, Béguin and Thévenaz make no mention of a symposium in the preface to their book on Bergson, where it would have been natural to mention such an event. Furthermore, in a text to the memory of Thévenaz, Béguin writes that he met Thévenaz for the first time in 1941 when they collaborated on the book on Bergson, but does not mention any event on Bergson, which would have preceded their collaboration on the book and, thus, their initial meeting (Béguin 1955). Therefore, in the absence of corroborating evidence, and given these blatant omissions and contradictory implication, Vasily's claim appears dubious.

What probably happened is that, in a letter to Frank dated July 3rd, 1941, Binswanger called the book on Bergson a “symposium”: “I was all the happier about your contribution to the Bergson book, which should not have been missing from this whole symposium [*diesem ganzen Symposium*]. In any case, the editors were very

<sup>9</sup>On Frank and Thévenaz, see also (Aliaiev et al. 2021, pp. 328–329).

pleased about it” (Antonov et al. 2021, p. 476). It is clear from the context that Binswanger meant the word “*Symposion*” figuratively, in the sense of a “feast of ideas” or “gathering of minds.” But Vasily, who was acquainted with the correspondence between his father and Binswanger, and who must have used it when compiling his bibliography, might have misinterpreted the word literally as meaning “conference.” Thinking that an actual conference took place, Vasily would have jumped to the conclusion that his father gave a talk (“*intervention*”) there. This would not have been the only mistake that Vasily made in his bibliography. For instance, he wrote that Frank moved to France in 1937 (Frank 1980, p. 13) when in fact Frank’s correspondence with Binswanger shows that he was still in Berlin in late December 1937, and that he did not begin sending letters from and receiving letters to France until February 1938 (Antonov et al. 2021).<sup>10</sup>

Frank’s original text in German does not seem to have been preserved. It would have last been in the hands of Thévenaz, and there is no such document in the Thévenaz “dossier” at the library of the University of Lausanne or in the “Fonds Pierre Thévenaz” at the Bibliothèque cantonale et universitaire de Lausanne. I also reached out to the sons of Pierre Thévenaz, namely, Jean-Pierre and Jacques Thévenaz, who assured me that they do not have this document. There exists a Russian translation by Irina Blauberg of the same article, which was also done from the French version (Frank 2014). From Blauberg’s notes of the latter translation, we glean that “[a]ccording to information received from Frank’s heirs, there is no German original of this text in the philosopher’s archive” (Frank 2014, p. 518). The text that follows has thus been translated from the French version. I have inserted the original pagination in angle brackets. Since the book was reedited in 1943, and since the pagination is different in the 1941 and 1943 editions, I simply added the page numbers of both editions separated by a slash. I have inserted some of the French words in square brackets when I deemed that doing so could be useful to the reader, as well as transliterations of the Greek terms. I have also heavily annotated the text. My own notes are always enclosed in square brackets and preceded by the words “Note from the translator.” The notes that are not enclosed in brackets are from Frank.

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<195/187> In his remarkable lecture on “L’intuition philosophique,”<sup>11</sup> Bergson has shown with his characteristic clarity and penetration that all philosophical systems, seen from the outside, are of a terrible complexity; their conceptual machinery is reminiscent of a powerful dreadnought.<sup>12</sup> But, deep down, through the detour of concepts, they aim at something infinitely simple, so simple that the philosopher has not

<sup>10</sup>Philip Boobbyer also gives 1938 as the year of Frank’s relocation to France (Boobbyer 1992, p. 243).

<sup>11</sup>[Note from the translator: Bergson gave this lecture at the IVth International Congress of Philosophy in Bologna in April 1911. The text was published in the *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* in November 1911 (Bergson 1911). The article was then translated into Russian by P. S. Yushkevich and published in 1912 in the newly created collection *Novyya idei v filosofii* (*New Ideas in Philosophy*) edited by Nikolai Lossky and Ernst Radlov (Bergson 1912). The same year, Frank published a review of the article in the journal *Russkaya mysl'* (*Russian Thought*) (Frank 1912).]

<sup>12</sup>[Note from the translator: The word “dreadnought” appears in English in the French version. Frank borrowed it from Bergson himself, who uses it in “L’intuition philosophique” to characterize Spinoza’s *Ethics*: “those tremendous things called Substance, Attribute and Mode, and the formidable array of the-

succeeded in expressing it: his concrete and original intuition, his first vital impression, which governs everything. We understand a philosophy if we pierce through the system to this primary intuition to recapture it and relive it without mediation.

Bergson spared us from having to make this effort with his philosophy. He specifically renounced building a “system” in the classical sense of the term; he only seeks to make us immediately sense his intuition, the scope of which he demonstrates in diverse domains of knowledge. The perfection of the Bergsonian style precludes any hope of finding, in order to describe this intuition, a clearer expression than the one he himself found. However, the general remark that he made—namely, the philosopher’s incapacity to give an exact and transparent expression of his immediate <196/188> and fundamental intuition or, as Goethe says, of his *stilles besseres Wissen*<sup>13</sup>—applies to his own philosophy. His intuition remains somewhat vague, mysterious, opaque; the reader must try to shed some more light onto it himself. But, to do so, we have to, as it were, take the reverse path: we must try to provide a more precise conceptual determination to what Bergson presented in an artistic form.

Our attempt to do so is facilitated by an observation. No original creation in philosophy is completely isolated and remains without a point of comparison in the history of thought. It always carries within itself something universally human; it is thereby tied to a spiritual tradition that perpetuates itself; it is a new aspect, a new nuance of a particular tendency that has its foundation in the nature of the human spirit. Every true philosopher is a member of an invisible and secular spiritual community. He is so through an intimate affinity and not through learning or imitation. The surest way to understand him is by situating him within this community.

From this point of view, it is evident that Bergson’s philosophy belongs to the very ancient and perpetually renewed current that aims at *overcoming intellectualism*. Our understanding, our thinking, remains riveted to the deceptive superficiality of things—such is the deep conviction—, while the intimate and veritable essence of being reveals itself to us immediately in another way. To this current of thought obviously belongs all “mysticism” (if we abstain ourselves from disfiguring or narrowing the sense of this word), as well as all thorough empiricism unaltered by a rationalist interpretation. Beginning <197/189> approximately with Indian religious thought and with Heraclitus, and asserting itself in Plato’s idea of a “truer” world, this tendency dominates all the thought of Plotinus, medieval philosophy, and mysticism of

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orems with the close network of definitions, corollaries and scholia, and that complication of machinery, that power to crush which causes the beginner, in the presence of the *Ethics*, to be struck with admiration and terror as though he were before a battleship of the Dreadnought class” (Bergson 2002, pp. 236–237). For the French original, see (Bergson 1911, p. 814). The dreadnought was the main kind of battleship in the early twentieth century.

<sup>13</sup>[Note from the translator: These words literally mean “the silent better knowledge.” In *Nepostizhimoe* (*The Unknowable*), published two years earlier, Frank also wrote: “The intuitive knowledge that guides us here is what Goethe called *das stille bessere Wissen*. It is mute, silent, unspeakable knowledge. But this means that it is knowledge of the *unknowable*, of reality in its genuine, metalogical nature” (Frank 1983, p. 29). For the Russian original, see (Frank 1939, p. 49). However, Frank provides a reference for this citation neither in 1939 nor in 1941. Irina Blauberg could not locate the source of this citation (Frank 2014, p. 521). Neither could I. As Gennadii Aliaiev and Tatyana Rezvich suggest (in Aliaiev et al. 2021, p. 471), it could be a misremembered line from Goethe’s *Schlußpoetik*: “Solch ein Inhalt deiner Sänge, / Der erbauet, der gefällt, / Und, im wüstesten Gedränge, / Dankt’s die stille, beßre Welt” (Goethe 1826, p. 21).]

a Neo-Platonic coloring and, through this channel, the Romantic Idealism of the 18th and 19th centuries. It also represents the most profound sense of Hume's empiricism, it can be seen in the Kantian doctrine of the "primacy of practical reason," constitutes the foundation of Goethe's esthetic empiricism, and finally emerges in the various forms of modern *Lebensphilosophie*.<sup>14</sup>

These general indications are naturally too broad to suffice as a characterization of Bergson's intuition. It should be noted that the immediate grasp of reality designated by the word "intuition" can be conceived in two different ways (between which, it is true, insensible transitions are possible). Either we see in it disinterested "pure contemplation," a kind of vision that mirrors reality, or we conceive of it as "inner life" [*vie intérieure*] or "lived experience" [*vécu*]. It is in this way that ancient philosophy, in its classical period, has always attributed the highest epistemological value—or the supreme value *tout court*—to pure contemplation (*θεωρία* [*theoria*]) and at the same time has always seen in it the superior form of human activity. In Plotinus alone—both in his description of the life of the soul and in his conception of the Absolute and the Divine (the One)—contemplation is overcome and replaced by "living knowledge." This second form of intuition asserts itself even more clearly <198/190> in the typically *religious* notion of truth where truth is essentially, to borrow an evangelical expression, "the way and the life."<sup>15</sup> We find it in its most pronounced form in the Christian conscience that rejects "the wise and prudent"<sup>16</sup> and for which truth is like a "light" that manifests itself in the purity of the heart and in love. It is clear that in Bergson's eyes this second intuition, the "living" intuition, is the only adequate one: truth is not in a gaze that would grasp reality from outside, it is only revealed in the immanence of what we call our inner life. Bergson would certainly agree with Goethe's saying: "*Liegt nicht der Kern der Natur Menschen im Herzen?*"<sup>17</sup>

This distinction between two forms of intuition yields another one. Contemplation has this in common with thought that it considers the *atemporal* essence of reality and that, at the same time, it does so *sub specie aeternitatis*.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, in pure contem-

<sup>14</sup>On this subject, we can see an almost literal anticipation of Bergson's fundamental ideas in some considerations of Plotinus (e.g., *Enneads* IV, 4, 6–8) and in some of Goethe's *Sprüche in Prosa* concerning the theory of knowledge.

<sup>15</sup>[Note from the translator: "Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me." John 14:6, King James Bible.]

<sup>16</sup>[Note from the translator: "In that hour Jesus rejoiced in spirit, and said, I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes: even so, Father; for so it seemed good in thy sight." Luke 10:21, King James Bible.]

<sup>17</sup>"Is not the core of nature in the heart of man?" [Note from the translator: The German is not accurate here. What Goethe wrote is: "Ist nicht der Kern der Natur | Menschen im Herzen?" (Goethe 1867, p. 81). For some reason, in the French version *ist* has been substituted for *liegt*. But the substitution does not affect the meaning of the sentence. About these two lines, Karl Grün commented that what Goethe meant was as follows: "Der Kern der Natur ist Menschen im Herzen. Im Menschenherzen ist der Kern der Natur. Die Natur hat ihren Kern im Herzen des Menschen" ("The core of nature is in the heart of man. The core of nature is in the human heart. Nature has its core in the human heart") (Grün 1846, p. 250).]

<sup>18</sup>[Note from the translator: *Sub specie aeternitatis* is Latin for "under an aspect of eternity" or, more literally, "under a species of eternity." The expression was used by Spinoza (a philosopher with whom both Bergson and Frank felt close affinity) to describe what is universally and eternally true, without any reference to or dependence upon merely temporal reality. See *Ethica* II, 44 Cor. 2, *Ethica* V, 22, 23, 29 Schol., 30, Dem. 31 Schol., and 36 (Spinoza 1830).]



plation we set aside the concrete psychic data and the contemplator becomes the pure, immobile, “mirror of the world.” This is the philosophical attitude *par excellence* by virtue of which philosophers very often find themselves naturally inclined to deny the reality of becoming, of time, and of the temporal, and to attribute genuine reality only to the atemporal-eternal. If, however, we penetrate all the way to the “living” intuition, we then grasp reality itself as “life,” on the model of the life of the soul. We see “vitality” and “becoming” appear at the very core of reality. The Bergsonian intuition, needless to say, focuses precisely on this point. Bergson proposes to combat the widespread <199/191> philosophical prejudice that the immobile, the immutable, the atemporal, and fixity represent the supreme value and constitute alone the true essence of reality. On the contrary, he clearly highlights the fact that the essence of reality is life, becoming, *élan vital*, a kind of intimate activity, and that it corresponds to the true nature of non-rationalized “time.” For the believer, God is not the God of the dead but of the living. Likewise, for Bergson, the Absolute is not immutability but creative life. By conceiving it on the model of the psychic and of the lived experience [*vécu*], it is the intimate essence of the psychic and of the lived experience that he succeeds in a very brilliant way to penetrate. Therein lies his most glorious philosophical conquest—a true κτήμα ἐς αἰεί.<sup>19</sup>

However, this is also the point where what is most problematic in Bergsonian thought appears; and it is of a capital theoretical and spiritual importance to present it under its true light. For metaphysics, this intimate essence of the psychic is in the final analysis only a point of departure wherefrom we see various paths opening up. What matters here is to choose the right one. There are in fact essentially two paths, which we could first call “the outward path” and “the inward path.” If the experience of inner activity is the best token of the true essence of reality, we are led to conclude that “practice,” the active attitude, has, in the domain of knowledge, a “primacy” over theoretical contemplation. This would lead to a relativization of the idea of truth, as is the case with pragmatism. But, on the other hand, this attention focused on the psychic could mean that we are dealing with an “interiority” that is in opposition to the external world and that makes us sense “beyond” an “other” hidden reality. Attempts have often been made to bring Bergsonism closer <200/192> to pragmatism. There are indeed points of contact between them. And yet such an interpretation would be in contradiction with the most original feature of the Bergsonian intuition. According to Bergson, what is useful in practice, what proves itself in action and reveals itself appropriate for its purpose, has nothing to do with truth. The representations indispensable for our action are only convenient fictions that disfigure the true essence of reality in an intellectualist sense by artificially fixing and crystallizing what in it is fluid and rationally ungraspable. Bergson drew the ultimate conclusions of this conception when he turned to the problem of religion in *Les deux sources*. He radically opposes disinterested love, an open and intuitive spiritual attitude, to the attitude of social groups closed in on themselves, whose existence answers to purely vital and

<sup>19</sup>[Note from the translator: κτήμα ἐς αἰεί (*ktēma eis aei*) means “a good forever,” “a possession for eternity,” or again “an everlasting possession.” The expression is from Thucydides’ *The Peloponnesian War* (1.22.4): “My history is an everlasting possession [κτήμα ἐς αἰεί]” (Thucydides 1881, p. 15).]

utilitarian needs.<sup>20</sup> True inner life is placed in close relation with the transcendent ontological reality that theology calls grace.

In this respect, Bergson's spiritual choice is absolutely clear, but, on another closely related point, he does not seem to have avoided all obscurity or dangerous confusions. Combating intellectualism can mean two things. To what is rational we can oppose either the *transrational* or the *irrational*. In the first case, we overcome the rational by subordinating it to something higher and broader; we thereby limit its validity while recognizing its subordinate position. In the second case, on the other hand, we simply withdraw from the rational its ontological rights and we substitute it by its opposite; and the Bergsonian intuition seems to lean towards the latter. But—without mentioning other difficulties—let us not forget that, from the point of view of the general method, the essence of reality must <201/193> be conceived as the common root of *all* ontological instances; therefore, what is opposed to being as an “appearance” must nevertheless, at the same time, be conceived as an “apparition” of being itself. And, even though the most assertive philosophical temperaments tend to deny and to qualify as “illusion” that which is foreign and repugnant to their intuition, we must put forward a very simple objection: it is nonsense to absolutely deny something that exists; rather, it can only be a matter of finding its rightful place within the total system.

But we expose ourselves to an even greater danger. We can wage war against intellectualism on two fronts: either from *above* the intellect and the rational or from *below*. By opposing the intuition of the lived experience to intellection, we can understand by this just as much *spiritual* life, i.e., the living contact of our intimacy with the deep essence of reality, as “life,” i.e., elementary vitality, the *pure power of nature*. The Bergsonian intuition seems to float, so to say, midway between these two possibilities. To evaluate this indetermination, it suffices to compare it with the distance that separates, for instance in Plotinus, psychic reality as a power of nature (φύσις [*phusis*]) and the interiority of a psychic life related to the divine life of the One, rationally ungraspable. Bergson's biological preoccupations, otherwise extremely fertile, incline him to link the living intuition with instinct, the *élan vital*, and the entelechy of biological creation. Added to this, in truth, is the profound idea of a paradoxical affinity whereby the lower and elementary can often be more intimately related to the higher principle than the intermediate levels to which we accord far more importance in daily life (*cf.* the evangelical idea that children are close to God). We <202/194> thus nevertheless risk uniting under the name of “psychic” both spiritual life (or living spirituality) and obscure blind vitality (more or less in the sense in which Klages magnifies the “soul” at the expense of the “spirit”).<sup>21</sup>

This is evidently one of the reasons why Bergson makes no positive use of the ideas of eternity or of the *transtemporal*. He identifies them with fixity and immobility and, instead, finds the mark of the Absolute in the temporal flux. It is certainly, as

<sup>20</sup>[Note from the translator: On *Les deux sources de la morale et de la religion* (*The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*) (Bergson 1932, 1935), and especially on Bergson's distinction between the closed and open spiritual attitudes, see also Lossky 1932, 2017a.]

<sup>21</sup>[Note from the translator: The word “soul” here translates *âme* and “spirit” translates *esprit*. *Âme* and *esprit* are most probably, in turn, translations of, respectively, *Seele* and *Geist*. The German vitalist philosopher Ludwig Klages opposed the life-affirming *Seele* to the life-denying *Geist*. See Klages, *Der Geist als Widersacher der Seele* (*The Spirit as the Adversary of the Soul*), Leipzig: Johann Ambrosius Barth, 1933.]

we have said, the indisputable merit of Bergson to have shown in experienced time [*temps vécu*] an integral element of the deep essence of life and, therefore, of being. But the imprecision and contradiction are obvious. Sure, Bergson could convincingly show that experienced time is distinct from the rational or mathematical conception of time, the one being fluid and continuous, the other being a succession of discontinuous moments that mutually exclude each other. But, furthermore, insofar as the *durée*, as a time-embracing unity, is “grasped” or “com-prehended”<sup>22</sup> by the mind, is “under its gaze,” it already presupposes the intervention of the transtemporal, and the eternity of the spirit [*esprit*], living and present at every instant, thanks to which it does not simply *sink* into the blind unconsciousness of the temporal flux. Therefore, intuitive time cannot be conceived otherwise than as “the moving image of eternity,” to use Plato’s expression.<sup>23</sup> Between this eternal aspect of the spirit, the activity of which embraces time, and the blind dynamism of the vital or of the psychic, there is the abyss that separates the luminous sphere of the spirit and the obscure chaos of life. In this respect, again, <203/195> we see that we truly overcome rationalism, not through irrationalism, but only through transrationalism.

These are in no way theoretical subtleties. These views are of decisive practical—spiritual and moral—importance. Great authors usually have no idea of the practical consequences of their theories and of the fundamental spiritual upheavals that they can trigger. Descartes certainly never imagined that his thought could, in the eighteenth century, become the source of the philosophy of the freethinkers [*libres penseurs*] and of the French revolution.<sup>24</sup> If we consider that the Bergsonian spiritual “climate” gave rise to intellectual movements such as the Catholic renaissance,<sup>25</sup> on the one hand, and, on the other hand, Sorel’s *Reflections on Violence*, we will realize how important it is to clarify the true meaning of the Bergsonian intuition and not to get lost by starting from it.<sup>26</sup> Schiller said: “Thoughts dwell together closely, but things collide hard in space” (“*Dicht beieinander wohnen die Gedanken, doch hart im*

<sup>22</sup>[Note from the translator: The French word that I have translated as “com-prehended” is *com-prise*. *Comprise* means “understood, grasped by the understanding,” but in its etymological sense (*com-* = with, together; *prise* = taken, grasped) it means “grasped together.” The French *com-prise* could be a translation of *be-greifen* (to grasp). *Pris* is the past tense of *prendre*, which derives from the Latin *prehendere* (to grasp, to seize, to catch), and *com-prehendere* has given rise to the English verb *to comprehend*.]

<sup>23</sup>For further details, see my book *La connaissance et l'être*, Paris, 1938, pp. 258–266. [Note from the translator: A similar criticism of Bergson with regards to the transtemporal can be found in Lossky 1913, 2017b.]

<sup>24</sup>[Note from the translator: The French *libre-penseurs* (freethinkers) were, around the 1860s, proponents of the *libre-pensée* (freethought), which consisted in a search for truth based solely on the use of the scientific method, thus based only on reason and experiment, and not on theological dogma. Amongst the most well-known *libre-penseurs* was Victor Hugo.]

<sup>25</sup>[Note from the translator: In his correspondence with Ludwig Binswanger, Frank mentions that Thévenaz made a mistake in the translation; the latter translated *Erneuerung* as *modernisme*, whereas it should have been translated as “renaissance” (Antonov et al. 2021, p. 480). In light of this, I have translated *modernisme* as “renaissance.” “Catholic renaissance” refers to Charles Péguy’s *renaissance catholique*.]

<sup>26</sup>[Note from the translator: Georges Sorel was a French social and political thinker. Thévenaz translated the book title as *Essai sur la violence*, but the title in French is in fact *Réflexions sur la violence* (Sorel 1908). The book was subsequently translated into English as *Reflections on Violence* by Thomas E. Hulme (Sorel 1912). I thus rendered it here as *Reflections on Violence* instead of as *Essay on Violence*.]

*Raume stoßen sich die Dinge*).<sup>27</sup> Which path has Bergson personally taken—despite all the indeterminateness and wavering remaining in his intuition? His last work, *Les deux sources*, answers the question unequivocally and his own religious conversion testifies to it.

\* \* \*

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## Declarations

**Competing Interests** The author declares that he has no conflict of interest.

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<sup>27</sup>[Note from the translator: I have left the text as I found it, but here either Frank or Thévenaz made a mistake. Thévenaz's translation reads as follows: "Les idées, disait Schiller, demeurent tout près l'une de l'autre, et pourtant les choses se heurtent durement dans l'espace ("Dicht beieinander wohnen die Gedanken, doch hart im Raume stoßen sich die Dinge")." However, these lines, from Schiller's play "Wallenstein," are: "Leicht beieinander wohnen die Gedanken; Doch hart im Raume stoßen sich die Sachen" (Schiller 1830, p. 376). Somehow, the word *Leicht* has been substituted for *Dicht*, and *Sachen* for *Dinge*. The change from *Sachen* to *Dinge* does not affect the meaning of the sentence, for both mean "things," but the modification from *Leicht* to *Dicht* changes the meaning from "easily" to "closely," and the former makes more sense: "Thoughts dwell together easily, but things collide hard in space."]

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