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Time as the Source of Inalienable Freedom: Henri Bergson's "Immunizing" the Self

Abstract:

The paper looks at the idea of grounding human freedom in selfhood, with particular attention to the strategies of "denaturalizing" time, resulting in its separation into different modalities. The perspective of practical philosophy, interested in accounting for and making legitimate the spontaneous first person assumption of being a free agent, is enriched with some historical references to different ontological and anthropological attempts at inscribing verticality or transcendence into the human self in order to secure to this self what is called here *inalienable freedom*. The paper focuses on some elements of Henri Bergson's thought and tries to reinterpret them in terms of an example of a modern, anti-reductionist "immunization" of the triad of freedom – self – humanity. It also emphasizes the emancipatory potential and the novelty of Bergson's conception of the human self.

Key words:

human self, freedom, temporality, endurance, transcendence, Henri Bergson

1. Strategies of Binding the Human Self with Freedom

This paper discusses the idea of grounding human freedom in selfhood, with particular attention to the strategies of “denaturalizing” time, which results in its separation into different modalities. The perspective of practical philosophy, interested in accounting for and making legitimate the spontaneous first person assumption of being a free agent, is enriched with a few historical references to different ontological and anthropological attempts at inscribing verticality or transcendence into the human self, with the effect of securing to this self what I call *inalienable freedom*. I discuss at greater length, and I also try to reinterpret, some elements of Henri Bergson’s thought as an example of modern, anti-reductionist “immunization” of the triad of freedom – self – humanity.

More specifically, the paper first binds the problem of selfhood and freedom in Bergson’s thought in a way that the thinker did not address explicitly enough the issue of freedom, at least not as it is approached today; second, it will emphasize the emancipatory potential and the novelty of Bergson’s conception of the human self in relation to some other, persistent conceptions, which have hindered any advance in our thinking about freedom; and third, it will bring to the fore the importance of ontological/metaphysical strategies of immunizing human selves against reduction, while providing them with a more empirical frame (yet without falling into a narrow “naturalism”). Thus, in a way, it resituates the Heideggerian distinction between ontic and ontological.

Modern freedom – and here we are heirs to John Locke¹ – often speaks the language of rights and “liberties.” Leaving political liberty for whatever it may be, the attempts within the wider philosophical tradition at conceptualizing freedom is enormous. An early and unexpectedly enduring example of the articulation of freedom as essential to humanity (in its “exalted” condition) was St. Augustine’s distinction between free will, which is universal and “natural,” and freedom, which is exclusive, morally demanding, and which requires the human will to transcend finite temporality and turn toward the eternal good. The shift to interiority and the emphasis on moral discipline, along with the idea of divine grace “denaturalizing” the self, may be read as a strategy of weakening the impact of fatalism on human life. Augustine established so tight a bond between humanity and freedom that either term becomes questionable without the other.

Augustine, in this respect, inscribes himself into a powerful individualistic tendency of Western culture to locate freedom within the human self. “Man is a stream whose source is hidden,” wrote Emerson, and the soul “abolishes time and space.”² The romantic, rebellious, enlarged self, the *Over-Soul*, as the source of “spiritual” freedom, challenges the dead nakedness of positive facts and, hence, also challenges the viewpoint of fatality, introducing a trace of dualism into its own pantheistic premises. Later this idea would turn into that of freedom of expression and, as Taylor notes, prefigures our contemporary tendency to think of freedom in terms of “becoming oneself” and “authenticity.”

The moral freedom of Christianity, the overwhelming freedom of existentialism, along with the Cartesian and Kantian gesture of locating the source and the principle of freedom in reason, are examples of philosophical attempts to internalize freedom. Human being, thus understood, is inherently structured as potentially free (i.e., as transcending necessity). What is common for these – quite diverse – conceptions is their strategy of setting individual human autonomy “against” the world of facts. The boldness of this long experiment required a sort of ontological fortification for the human self. This (undeniably idealistic) strategy of coupling freedom

1) For more on Locke’s “punctual self” and its freedom of rational control, see: Charles Taylor, *The Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1995).

2) Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The Over-Soul”, in: Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Emerson. Essays and Poems* (New York: The Library of America, 1996), 385.

with selfhood and “abstracting” both from the factual world was criticized as “ungenuine subjectivism” by Heidegger, who concluded that “a correctly conceived” analysis of selfhood starts with “the elucidation of the constitution of existence.”³

What was Heidegger’s alternative to such subjectivism? Heidegger, a staunch critic of so-called Western metaphysics and of Enlightenment concepts of the rational self, understood that the reality of the self and of individual freedom is put into question once we become not only decisively anti-metaphysical but also consistently skeptical about reason. By replacing ontological “unwordliness” with a different, temporal strategy of individuation, he may have both reformulated and refortified “the subject.” He sought to escape the burden of factuality through the ecstatic temporal mode of *Dasein*’s being as well as through the *liberating value* of the revelatory human potential in relation to Being (i.e., authenticity). In other words, Heidegger molds the facticity of *Dasein*, that is, of human-being, by intricate temporal strategies, into a freedom. He anchored selfhood in death understood as a horizon that narrows possibility to one, our “ownmost possibility,” but, by the same token, implicitly always *in* life. Interestingly, death, being an ultimate, individualizing and liberating factor, is not opposed to life, not even to a beginning, but rather to *Dasein*’s fall, a decomposition associated with being enslaved to the mundane, recurrent, “vulgar” (or “ontic”) temporality of everydayness. It is only in relation to death that the time of existence becomes authentic, in his view.

Thus, Heidegger avoided the temptation of repetition/eternal return, replacing life with, or rather – conceptualizing it as – “the temporal foundation for the aspiration to death, which seems to carry in it a trace of verticality”. This is where the integrity – and freedom – of *Dasein* rests. There seems to be at least a hint of an analogy with the vision of Augustine, where consciousness, via attention, brings together the memory of the past and the anticipation of the future under the aegis of the present moment, which belongs to the duration of a single, finite life, consisting of irreversible acts (i.e., decisions). The awareness of the fact that the “multiplicity of temporality is a chance for freedom,” implicit in Augustine’s thinking, is obvious in the case of Heidegger.⁴

Henri Bergson “reinvented” the metaphysical take on freedom in a modern guise and went, perhaps, further than anybody in contemporary philosophy in the boldness of his claims, while rehabilitating the close association of freedom with humanity. The novelty of Bergson’s method of philosophizing rested in passing from the dynamic reality of everyday existence to careful introspection and then, extending the active vectors which had been detected into ontological categories. This switching in-between two planes, the experiential and the metaphysical, makes him a thoroughly contemporary thinker, whose method not only had much in common with the pragmatism and phenomenology of his own time, but also preceded the ontologies of thinkers like Heidegger or Deleuze. What raised criticism was his boldness in drawing immediate, often highly abstract and surprising ontological conclusions both from the psychological experiments of his era and from introspection. However, it seems that it is partly in this boldness of going “beyond the curve of experience” – to use Bergson’s phrase – that the illuminating aspect of his thought rests.

Besides the fact that today some of his metaphysical theses are being reconsidered in the light of recent scientific discoveries,⁵ Bergson’s method of philosophizing expresses his conviction that philosophical imagination

3) Martin Heidegger, *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988), 175.

4) Christophe Bouton, *Time and Freedom*, trans. Christopher McCann (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2014), 161.

5) A discussion of this issue may be found in: G. William Barnard, *Living Consciousness. The Metaphysical Vision of Henri Bergson* (Albany, New York: SUNY Press, 2011), and Jimena Canales, *The Physicist and the Philosopher: Einstein, Bergson, and the Debate that Changed Our Understanding of Time* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).

should question scientific language and that both should negotiate their positions among the sources of human wisdom. I would suggest that even though Bergson avoided openly normative claims, a certain perspective on human *eidōs* emerges from his work and his metaphysics seems to be designed to secure to human being what I propose to call an inalienable freedom. By the term “inalienable” I mean to highlight the unbreakable bond between freedom and the very ontological status of human selfhood. Let us have a look at the categories employed by Bergson in his ontology of the human realm, as I will call it, and examine it with respect to the strategies of immunizing the human self against reduction. Let us also keep in mind an interpretive key delivered by Paul Ricoeur, who claims that Bergson’s strategy relies upon establishing an irreducible “order of representation.”⁶

2. The Body as a Hyphen

Bergson writes:

But this special image which persists in the midst of the others, and which I call my body, constitutes at every moment ... a section of the universal becoming. It is then the place of passage of the movements received and thrown back, a hyphen, a connecting link between the things which act upon me and the things upon which I act.”⁷

My body is not immaterial, and since Bergson describes matter as a system of images, my body itself is an image among other images. By choosing the term “image” and developing it as a system that is neither “thing” (nature) nor “idea” (reason), Bergson goes beyond both Kantian distinctions: noumenal-phenomenal and objective-subjective. A non-subjective collection of images is hypothesized as “given” and said to constitute material reality as such, for the purposes of our philosophical descriptions. Hence, matter may be understood as already containing a grain of or a potential of consciousness (this may but does not have to be an indicator of some sort of panpsychism),⁸ and what Bergson achieves thereby is the promise of acquaintance with what Kant called thing-in-itself. In other words, we are presented with a sort of disenchantment of matter, or maybe even “disarmament” of matter (if seen in the light of the traditional tension of matter – spirit). Even if one may doubt, as I do, Bergson’s consistency about this suggested “familiarity” with material reality, the strategy seems to be reinforced by yet another category, namely that of “pure perception.”

As bodily beings, as images among other images, Bergson says, “we place ourselves in the very heart of things” via the act of pure perception.⁹ Pure perception is a section of images (taken as material reality, i.e., a pattern of repetition that creates an intensive continuity) limited by the range of possible interactions between the image I call “my body” and other images in the image system, which I identify as other bodies when their motion is like the motion of the image I call my body. It is pure because it is not “contaminated” with any subjective aspect such as sensation or memory. What is the nature of the passage from a pure, impersonal perception to a concrete, distinct, perception that could function as “one’s own”?

6) Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 432.

7) Henry Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, trans. Nancy Margaret Paul, W. Scott Palmer (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1911), 196.

8) G. William Barnard thinks that the “benefit of Bergson’s model of perception is that the genesis of our conscious perceptions does not have to be explained, since everything in the material world, as the totality of images, is at all times already a type of latent or virtual consciousness.” (G. William Barnard, *Living Consciousness. The Metaphysical Vision of Henri Bergson*, 139).

9) Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, 173.

In relation to material reality, my distinct perceptions may be compared to colorful photographs, which provide information to my living and moving body about the possibilities of action. My body is said to be “the last” of images, cutting through material reality like a knife’s edge. The metaphor of “cutting” is related to the idea of discontinuity introduced by the bodily needs, by utility. Along with the emergence of the sense of interiority, the body becomes the center of affection as well as action. The body has a past that is carried into and beyond the present. There is depth of affection in proportion as there is memory. The condition of incarnation, in other words, implies that reality is perceived, first and foremost, from the perspective of needs and possible action. Such action anticipates a future for the body that grounds its past, i.e., its retention of images no longer experienced as centers of action.

Perception thus exceeds consciousness. One’s concrete perceptions (unlike pure ones) are conscious and centered around attention, the organ of which is brain and the central nervous system. Yet, paradoxically as it may sound, an unconscious body “perceives” (or participates in perception) but it cannot not act. Action involves recognition, which is impossible without the intervention of memory. Before we pass to Bergson’s ideas of memory and recognition, let us briefly clarify what is understood by consciousness and its relation to perception.

Common examples of “unconscious perception” are so-called “automatic” bodily reactions to stimuli, certain affects, and sensations like pain. On such a view, pain is a symptom of a local and “blind” perception, followed by an “effort” of the body to respond to it – “an effort which is doomed to be unavailing.”¹⁰ Pain exemplifies an impotent perception and, as noted by Barbara Skarga, “in powerlessness rests its unconsciousness.”¹¹ Indeed, Bergson relates consciousness directly to the possibility of making a choice and acting, just as he always places power in the context of freedom. This means that on both extremes of the living continuum which a human being is, namely – on the side of pure, material perception and on the opposite side of pure memory (also called “spirit”), extends the sphere of powerlessness (which does not mean lack of movement but only lack of action – for Bergson all reality is dynamic through-and-through). It is only at the point of their crossing – which is the self of an incarnated conscious being – that the power of free action appears and the emancipatory potential of life may be actualized. The living body, then, is a hyphen between blind materiality and powerless memory.

This point of crossing is where “recognition” (in Bergson’s unusual sense of the term) occurs. Psychic life, we have said, encompasses both unconscious and conscious reality. Conscious perceptions – as “representations” (which Bergson defined as “unfinished acts”) – belong to the process of full *recognition*, which is organized along the lines of attention. For Bergson, attention has physiological rather than mental roots,¹² even if it is realized consciously. Recognition occurs in two stages – the first one called forth “by inattention” and the second one – “attentive.”¹³ Initiated by a bodily attitude, a sort of negative “attention” which occurs unawares, recognition is completed by image “recollection” (in a special sense, meaning that recollection is necessary for recognition, but not sufficient; it is a movement in memory not rising to the level of an action). The virtual image (memory) enjoys ontological priority in this process, where it “gradually obtains from the body useful actions or useful attitudes.”¹⁴ The result is a conscious representation which makes free action possible, but does not “cause” it. While it is clear, now, why Ricoeur points to the significance of “the order of representation,” our interpretation does not follow Ricoeur’s emphasis on the “dichotomy between action and representation,”

10) Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, 56.

11) Barbara Skarga, *Czas i trwanie. Studia o Bergsonie* [Time and *durée*. A study on Bergson] (Warszawa: PWN, 2014), 30.

12) Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, 121.

13) *Ibid.*, 118.

14) *Ibid.*, 168.

simply because the first is impossible without the latter and the latter without the first is insignificant. In addition, if representation is unfinished action, as it is for Bergson, the very dichotomy is dubious. Thoughts either act as substitutes for action or complete action.

But what does all this tell us about Bergson's "anthropology of freedom"? In any act of recognition, matter (as pure perception) and spirit (as memory) achieve effective unity. To say it emphatically – only in these circumstances, at least at this evolutionary stage of the universe, does their unity generate freedom. Having clarified certain concepts, let us now look at the temporal make-up of this conception.

In temporal language, matter *is* the present moment, defined as an absolute "now" which is constantly being renewed with negligible variation, and spirit is the past stored in memory, unrepeatable and remaining beyond the power of the present to alter it fundamentally. Experientially they can be encountered only in a "contaminated" form of the two aspects of "the subjective," namely – the combination of bodily movement and memory, of a body with a retention of past action. It should be noted that through the current attitude of our bodies we are in the closest proximity to the present moment.¹⁵ To be in one's present is "to be surrounded by a virtual space of action", a "zone of indetermination".¹⁶ With any conscious effort undertaken, though, the plane of the present is receding. It is so because through our consciousness we are predominantly in the past but with a strong inclination toward the future. We are unlikely to understand or even to notice the Bergsonian strategy of "separating" consciousness from the present, unless we realize that, in his vision, "to be in the present and in a present which is always beginning again – this is the fundamental law of matter: herein consists *necessity*."¹⁷ This is to say that freedom "is" beyond the present moment. Ingraining past into the present empowers a conscious, free self. Every recognition and every act is a symptom of freedom, an act of breathing spirit into matter, a microscopic blow of virtuality within the blind inertia of materiality. "The past," we are told "should be acted by matter and imagined by mind."¹⁸ A particular case, notes Randall Auxier, is that of an artist, who achieves relatively more intimate contact with the receding planes of the present through the intuition he holds of the whole of a creative act, i.e., the physical continuity of the "projected completion". Moreover, the artist, refraining from action, gives in to a "momentary cessation of life" and, via contemplation and the free play of imagination, intuits the present in its novelty and virtuality.¹⁹ At this point conscious experience is at the closest possible proximity to the material reality understood as a system of images. Having said this, let us turn our attention to the question of memory.

3. Memory: Establishing a Vertical Dimension

Although Bergson himself avoids spatial metaphors, that of "verticality" may be helpful in understanding his concept of memory and its function. We have said that bodily attitude, as an extension of some movement, enables the work of consciousness. In Bergson's words,

external perception provokes on our part movements which retrace its main line, our memory directs upon perception received the memory-images which resemble it and which are already

15) Bergson is clear about it when he writes: "Our present is the very materiality of our existence, that is to say, a system of sensations and movements, and nothing else." (Ibid., 178).

16) Randall E. Auxier, "Image and Act: Bergson's Ontology and Aesthetics", *Sztuka i Filozofia* 45 (2014): 69.

17) Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, 279.

18) Ibid., 298.

19) Auxier, "Image and Act: Bergson's Ontology and Aesthetics", 70, 77–78.

sketched out by the movements themselves. *Memory thus creates anew the present perception; or rather it doubles this perception by reflecting upon it ... its [memory's] own image.*²⁰

A memory-image has been selected from among a crowd of images standing at the gates of consciousness, and pure perception has been replaced by a conscious representation, an action begun in the past and stretching into the future as a possibility for action. The past held in my memory has blended with the present moment imprinted in or, as Bergson sometimes puts it, “imitated” by my bodily attitude. One may risk a general conclusion that what is at stake in Bergson’s vision is to expose the idea of the past “feeding” on the substance of the present incarnated in a human being, from which it [the past] can “acquire sufficient vigor and life.”²¹

Coming back to the order of priority, on the plane of action, a bodily, “automatic” recognition seems to be followed by a conscious one, just like it naturally seems that the formation of both the past and the memory of the present, follows the present moment itself. But in the metaphysical dimension, which in Bergson’s vision is of a higher order of meaning, it is rather the virtual, the past stored in memory (i.e., spirit) that enjoys priority in relation to material reality, the latter of which ultimately turns out to be merely a vehicle for the past to regain actuality in free action. But that is not all. Technically speaking, at the level of mental life, the past is contemporaneous with the present perception.(!) At the same time, Deleuze reminds us, Bergson’s “past” is a purely ontological category and is unlike our commonsensical/psychological understanding of the past as a bygone present. The difference between the past and the present is radical. The former is always already past, it is “past in general.”²² This difference, I am trying to argue, is crucial for securing inalienable freedom to human self: so is the generalized and impotent character of memory and its role in constituting the past of individualized images, that is, bodies. Even if the past as such exerts its full weight upon the present, it does not follow that the past as memory, as generalized images no longer acting, exerts a similar pressure on the individualized centers of action that are the present image system. Before we return to this idea of an undated past, let us evoke Bergson’s inverted cone representing the past stored in memory.

Human being is accompanied by a “shadow,” an indestructible, vertical dimension of memory. We must be wary of the spatial metaphor, but this is the image Bergson chooses, with warnings and caveats. This shadow symbolizes the totality of our individual past, is largely unconscious, and independent of the brain and afferent system. Bergson diagrams it as an inverted cone, the sharp edge of which touches the horizontal line of material reality, which is thought of as receding from the point of the cone, as a dynamic present that is never quite overtaken by memory, but is available to the acting body; the point of their nearest convergence stands for conscious life. Within the cone of memory there are many planes -concentric circles, each representing the totality of memory but in a different intensity of what Bergson calls “contraction.” Those of the deepest intensity of contraction approximate the pure memory of the past in all its immense complexity, its greatest stability, its

20) Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, 123. My emphasis.

21) Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, 125.

22) Gilles Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, trans. H. Tomlinson and B. Habberjam (New York: Zone Books, 1988), 59. By way of digression, this specific, counterintuitive order of priority appears throughout the corpus. In *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, for an instance, Bergson introduces the well-known idea of “fabulation function” – an adaptive, instinctual mechanism responsible, among others, for the creation of religion. One may be inclined to think of religion – and it is not uncommon among Bergson’s readers – as a *result* of fabulation function. In other words, the latter “causes” the former. Yet, this is not the case. Religion represents a deep-seated, natural human need (human nature, in its basic dimension, being something relatively stable for Bergson, even if transitory from an evolutionary viewpoint), and the ability to create religious fiction appeared as a response to (or a result of) this fundamental need. In other words, religion is the *reason* for fabulation (myth-making) activity, not its result. (See Henri Bergson, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, trans. R. Audra, C. Brereton (London: Macmillan and Co., 1935), 89.)

full remove from the present. The ones located close to the crossing with material reality are said to be most general, most easily approachable by consciousness and language, and applicable to action.

Virtual memory represented by the cone is one of the two basic forms of memory discerned by Bergson. The other is bodily or habit memory, which consists in automatic reactions to stimuli and all the learned routines which are performed quasi-automatically. Both forms of memory support each other and blend into one another to shape image recollections and these constitute conscious experience. The following passage illustrates the relation between the two in spatial terms (let us keep in mind that this spatialization distorts the temporal reality it symbolizes):

Above the body, with its mechanisms which symbolize the accumulated effort of past actions, the memory which imagines and repeats has been left to hang, as it were, suspended in the void.²³

As I already mentioned, Bergson is against the idea that memories are produced and stored in the brain or even the body. Throughout his corpus he presents a number of arguments to defend his position, one of them (a metaphysical one) being that the brain itself is an image; it is not interior to the image I call my body. Elsewhere he claims that memories are related to the brain in such a way, that they are activated and actualized by it, but in the final analysis, it is a mistake to translate “undoubted psychological facts into very questionable anatomical language.”²⁴ Notwithstanding the fact that a few contemporary neuroscientists would find Bergson’s position defensible, from an ontological and anthropological viewpoint, Bergson provides the idea of human being with an irreducible, autonomous spiritual aspect, which I refer to here as a vertical dimension.

Even though the criticism of Bergson’s approach to the past is not among the main aims of this paper, let me make, at this point, a brief digression concerning this issue. On one hand, I disagree with Barbara Skarga when she claims that Bergson reduces the past to the present. I’d say that ontologically, the present is merely serving the past in its pilgrimage toward the future. Besides, we, as persons, represent our past, or – even more emphatically – we embody it in all the possible actions we can finish or refrain from finishing. On another hand, however, it seems to me that Bergson indeed underestimates the past (as memory) in two respects – 1.) our unique past experiences in themselves, with all their intensity and particularity are not appreciated for what their value might be for an individual life, be it personal, sentimental, imaginative, or serving narrative self-integrity; 2) the past as memory of history and its share in the formation of identity, worldview, hierarchy of values etc. Even though one may find in Bergson’s corpus passages attesting to his awareness as to the significance of memory in a sense other than ontological, having downgraded symbolical mediation, he is consequently suspicious towards all interpretations, which – unfortunately for his otherwise immense interest in memory – are essential for both personal and collective memory. An intriguing question, perhaps for another discussion, is whether this “overlooking” may be viewed as the price paid for crediting the past (as memory) with such an immense metaphysical and vital function.

4. False Recognition or False Present?

Coming back to the Deleuzian remark concerning ontological past, let us look at it through the lens of what Bergson calls a “false recognition” and discusses in an essay, “Memory of the Present and False Recognition.”²⁵ The point of departure is the idea that sanity, or a healthy mental equilibrium, is secured by a sum of evolutionary “inhibitory mechanisms,” responsible for maintaining an attitude of alertness and liveliness called by

23) Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, 196.

24) Henri Bergson, *Henri Bergson. Key Writings*, eds. Keith Ansell Pearson, John O’Maolearca (London, New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 176.

25) *Ibid.*, 173–193.

Bergson “attention to life”. Their malfunctioning might explain, proposes the thinker, some cases of mental disorders. Meanwhile, psychological inquiry in general would benefit more from asking a question why a healthy mind is possible at all, rather than focusing solely on the nature of disorders. Hallucinations, and other psychic phenomena which involve blurring the boundaries between dreams and waking states, may turn out to reveal natural and fundamental functions and powers of the human psyche, unrestricted by the “corrective” functions. Insofar as “to be awake means to will,”²⁶ weakening of the will equals atrophy of attention to life, in which case a dream-self may overcome the waking-self. Memories, then, instead of being protected in the unconscious, enter consciousness freely, with no attachment to the reality of action. Thus, sanity, manifesting itself in successful recognition and relevance for action, is questioned.

Bergson, then, in order to have a first-person experience of the state of weakened attention to life, ventures an experiment with reflective self-introspection, accompanied by a sort of epochè in relation to the plane of action. More specifically, he aims to reconstruct the experience of persons bothered by the problem of “false recognition,” which, he believes, may be revealing as to the nature of mental life. He then extends his introspective findings into ontological categories to support his theses about perception and memory.

Conscious life is a dialectic of sorts between perception and memory, as I have described. Every lived moment, every distinct perception is at once accompanied by its own “mirror reflection,” namely what Bergson calls a virtual memory-image. No linear passing takes place from the perception of the present moment to the memory of it, as far as we know. Meanwhile, attention to life typically prevents our consciousness from suffering any disturbing influence from this instantaneous doubling of the present, or, in other words, memory remains unconscious until it is useful or necessary for action, in which case it is evoked as recollection. Unawares, we are constantly being enriched with new memories which sink into the totality of our past. Upon reflection, we are capable of retelling our story but this is an *interpretation* “we give of our past and has nothing absolute about it.”²⁷ But in cases when our psychic life detaches from the realm of action and stops treading toward the future, we may experience what is referred to as “false recognition.” In fact, recognition is “false” only in the sense of not serving life, otherwise it is revealing as to the ontological makeup of mental reality.

Regular recognition manifests itself in two ways: first, as a feeling of familiarity with the object recognized in general terms, on the basis of what is common (there is no impression of any prior personal contact with this particular object); and second, as a repetition of (an encounter with) the specific object of perception in a new situation (with a clear awareness of difference in time.) False recognition falls under neither of these two types. It is realized at once as memory of the present moment, as if what is perceived now has already been. It is said to uncover the fact that our existence, “whilst it is unrolled in time, duplicates itself all along with a virtual existence, a mirror-image. Every moment of our life presents two aspects, it is actual and virtual, perception on the one side and memory on the other.”²⁸ The absurdity of the situation from the perspective of a (falsely) recognizing subject rests in that:

I am unceasingly, towards what is on the point of happening, in the attitude of a person who will recognize and who consequently knows. ... As I cannot predict what is going to happen, I quite realize I do not know it; but I foresee that I am going to have known it... and this recognition to come, ... exercises in advance a retroactive effect on my present, placing me in the strange position of a person who feels he knows what he knows he does not know.²⁹

26) Ibid., 175.

27) Ibid., 177.

28) Ibid., 181.

29) Ibid., 182–183. My emphasis.

Our consciousness seemingly oscillates between past and future, hardly touching the present moment. It is thoroughly mediated by the virtual (and vertical) aspect of memory.

The question to ask at this point is: what do the revelation of false recognition and the mediating function of the vertical dimension in conscious life tell us about human freedom? They seem not to tell us much unless we take a closer look at the being most vitally interested in freedom – namely the human self.

5. The Double Splitting of the Self

According to Bergson's early conception of double selfhood,³⁰ a superficial, habitual self (ego) composed of the masks we wear in daily life, the roles we play, and the language we use, covers a deep-seated, authentic self, which is constantly becoming within the flow of our inner experience. The specific temporality of this deeper dimension is what Bergson famously calls *durée* – irreducible, irreversible, continuous, and creative becoming, the genesis of novelty and of selfhood itself. It occurs right at the crossing of the body with the life-giving "spirit" (in Bergson's special sense of that term). The self emerges out of this ongoing process like a growing snowball.

At every moment and in every act during a human lifetime, the totality of our being is engaged. In other words – we are a synthesis of all our past with the present act. There is no way to act with less than our whole past, our whole self, brought to bear upon the present. In each new experience, then, we are repeating ourselves and yet, at once, we are born anew and given a chance for a reconfiguration or transformation of ourselves. Our "essence," then, to use a term untypical of Bergson, is neither ready-made at birth nor waiting to be completed at death; it is rather dynamic, open-ended and consists in an unceasing growth. Yet, it is continuous, since it consists in countless, "new repetitions" of the totality of our psychic life. One of the main theses I am articulating here, is that Bergson seems to have translated a crucial philosophical idea of finitude into the irreversibility of the past.

Every free act, of which we are the authors, bears the imprint of our "finitude," thus understood, adding, at the same time, an aspect of novelty to this repetition of our own very self. This has a definite impact on the nature of our freedom. As we have noted in the previous section, there is yet another splitting (and yet another tension) within the self involved, one which is usually overlooked but may be uncovered under certain conditions, for example as a result of "false recognition." We might ignore this second splitting if it weren't for the fact that it sheds some light on the problem of freedom. As soon as we become aware of the fact that each conscious perception has a "shadow" in the sense described earlier – a memory of itself – an idea occurs that each decision, each action initiated by us has, in a sense, already been. As I mentioned previously, we are normally not bothered by this kind of awareness due to some instinctive functions that protect us from madness. Still, our heightened reflective consciousness evokes a sense of "a duplication of the self into two different personages, one of which appropriates freedom, the other necessity; the one, a free spectator, beholds the other automatically playing his part."³¹ Isn't this equivalent to saying that we seem to be constantly following in our own footsteps? If this "false recognition" is more revealing than misleading, one possible conclusion concerning our condition is that freedom is illusory and so is the human self as a free agent. But what freedom and what self are we talking about? Perhaps by jumping to such a conclusion we are falling prey to a linguistic prejudice (of which Bergson was a staunch enemy).

30) Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*, trans. Frank Lubecki Pogson (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1910).

31) Bergson, *Henri Bergson: Key Writings*, 184.

6. Inalienable Freedom as an Open-Ended *Eidos* of Being a Human

No matter how alien the term “eidos” seems to Bergson’s language, his philosophy does suggest a reformulated, dynamic sort of human *eidos* in view, and I am not the first scholar to use this concept. The axis of being a human, as it seems to stem from Bergson’s corpus, is creative freedom. Here a memento of what cannot be identified as freedom (and as essentially human) is needed.

Bergson was one of the early voices who rejected the persistent, alternatives of freedom – determinism, as based on a defective conception of the former and on linguistic illusion. Having dismissed the *cogito* and its *fiat*, he located freedom within the innermost depths of the temporal, creative experience of becoming, proper to a conscious and acting being. Thus, he made freedom inalienable and called it, boldly, “a fact, and among the facts which we observe there is none clearer.”³² (!)

Concerning linguistic illusion, it stems from a natural tendency of humans, striving to secure their needs, to conceive of reality in spatial terms. In order to make this reality operative, we tend to divide it into recognizable, measurable, manageable, and predictable things/units. This useful strategy becomes misleading when applied to the reality of mental life, which tends to be viewed as a chain of discontinuous states, governed by necessity or simply – by laws of nature. Without going into the details of the ongoing discussion of Bergson’s metaphysics from the perspective of contemporary science, it is enough to say that the author of *Matter and Memory* claims that the specific temporal reality of human becoming and the experience of freedom exceeds the conceptual apparatus on which the alternatives of freedom-determinism are based. Determinism assumes that there are certain conditions under which given events/states cause other events/states; hence it assumes events/states are repeatable, can be recognized, named, and predicted. In Bergson’s account, time is absolute, and *durée* is an unceasing generation of new reality, a fusion of continuity and change. It is not possible to “pinpoint” our mental life, to catch it “in the act” or to identify a specific self, for such an identification would petrify it. There are no clear-cut units or states and no part of this reality might ever be repeated. The self exists via *durée* and by the right of its affirmation.

It is the reality of *durée*, proper to the inner self, that is the source of creative freedom. The idea that associates freedom with becoming oneself (and, consequently, with self-interpretation), as opposed to the so-called libertarian freedom of deliberation, had occurred already to Nietzsche and later to Santayana, who named it *vital liberty*. It was a positive idea of freedom as expressive of a “living integrity,” an idea which arose from Santayana’s criticism of what he called “vacant freedom” and the “liberty of indifference” – Cartesian and libertarian ideas, which Bergson also opposed.³³ While much as the visions of these three thinkers differ, they share the idea (which combines naturalistic elements with a romantic striving for authenticity) that action embodies will and will is an expression of an “ingrained bent” of a given life. Hence, we, as selves, emerge out of our becoming and our action is but an affirmation of our becoming. This is a dynamic and relational account, in which human being is part and parcel of a larger, ever changing reality.

The specific meaning of Bergson’s thought about the self rests in the larger, metaphysical context he provides, according to which the primal impulse of life overcomes material necessity via free action of an incarnated human being. The human body, endowed with a central nervous system, is a place where sheer automatism of matter is suspended and movement is channeled into action. Consciousness, as noted previously, stands for readiness for action. Every choice, every decision, including those seemingly least deliberate, embody our inner evolution and express our personality in its temporal, synthetic aspect. As for moments of consciousness,

32) Bergson, *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*, 220.

33) George Santayana, *Dominations and Powers* (New York: Scribner’s, 1951), 44 – 60.

the whole personality is in a single one of them... And the outward manifestation of this inner state will be just what is called a free act, since the self alone will have been the author of it and since it will express the whole of the self.³⁴

This idea prompts our interpretation even further, as it implies an immanent affinity of freedom with personality insofar as both are grafted on *durée*.³⁵ It seems to me to be one of the most philosophically refreshing points made by Bergson. He remained consistent with this idea when he wrote later in *Matter and Memory*:

our character, always present in all our decisions, is indeed the actual synthesis of all our past states. In this epitomized form our previous psychical life exists for us even more than the external world, of which we never perceive more than a very small part, whereas on the contrary we use the whole of our lived experience.³⁶

Freedom, then, is inalienable – we, humans, “endure and therefore are free”.³⁷ Yet, freedom admits of variation, and since it is obvious that our action is mediated symbolically, the extent to which we can thrive on our freedom depends, first, on the extent to which we can intuitively attune our self to the rhythm of *durée* within us, and second, on our capacity to remodel, reconfigure our refracted, superficial ego in correlation with the flowing reality underneath. Obviously, this dynamic is not without a context. It can be enhanced or inhibited by broadly understood education and conscious use of language. The direction of the transformation in question and related perspectives on society and culture, as forming a more or less favorable ground for the exercise of freedom, is an issue on its own, perhaps for another discussion. Since we tend to “resign our freedom ... by sluggishness or indolence,”³⁸ what is required from an individual perspective is the ability to disrupt the schemata of thinking and the “self-reinforcing vicious circles of belief,”³⁹ which form a “parasitic self.”⁴⁰ While for Heidegger death is one’s “ownmost” possibility, for Bergson freedom is one’s “ownmost” challenge.

Looking back at the question tackled in the previous section, it is clear now that the first split within the self (deep-superficial) is a way of conceptualizing our specifically human reality, which secures to it a personal, in-depth source of freedom. The second split (actor-observer) serves, first, to illuminate the metaphysical context of mental life, and, secondly, to expose the origins of defective conceptions of time, self, and freedom. Bergson’s standpoint is perhaps best summarized by saying that to be free is to embody – in a creative way – the vector of one’s own evolution. One may say that while walking along the path of *durée* one cannot go wrong. The transcendental condition for the attitude of synchronicity with *durée* may seem highly individualistic but it nevertheless remains embedded within the integrity of the original vital, liberating impulse common for all humans – its milieu, scope, and aspirations definitely transcend the individual.

34) Bergson, *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*, 165–166.

35) By way of digression, the idea of character, or personality, as a response to the challenge of necessity and fate, was tackled by Walter Benjamin in one of his essays. Although Benjamin’s philosophical method is utterly different, his conclusions converge with Bergson’s intuition. See: Walter Benjamin, „Fate and Character,” in: Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings 1913–1926*, vol. 1 (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1996), 201–206.

36) Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, 188.

37) Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, 209.

38) *Ibid.*, 169.

39) Barnard, *Living Consciousness. The Metaphysical Vision of Henri Bergson*, 165.

40) Bergson, *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*, 166.

7. Concluding Remarks

Bergson's conception of freedom definitely inscribes itself into the logos of Western culture, usually recognized as transgressive, individualistic, demanding, and responsive to the Augustinian idea of self-transformation, where at some point we are expected to "die to our old ways of perceiving and acting."⁴¹ Neither can it be denied that Bergson's self does participate in the modern longing for liberation from necessity. Yet, the way this thinker appropriates these ideas results in an idiosyncratic conception, which is successful in liberating itself from the Cartesian, Lockean, or Kantian heritage without losing the aforementioned emancipatory logos. It distrusts theoretical and (supposedly) disinterested reason, but at the same time, despite its own emphasis on experience and action, is ultimately against some fundamental empirical methods and assumptions. It opposes both epistemic and instrumental approach to freedom. This view does not share in the assumptions of optimistic humanism. Instead, it provides the self with an access to the ultimate reality of the original vital impulse, which transcends any rationally conceivable worldly context. Apparently anti-essentialist, it identifies character and personality as playing a key role in the exercise of human freedom. Being against the dualisms of classical metaphysics, it introduces alternative ones, or rather – radically re-appropriates and reinterprets the ancient ones. Obviously, this paper is far from exhaustively discussing the problem of freedom in Bergson's corpus. It focuses on – in accordance with its title – philosophical strategies of binding the human self with freedom, of which Bergson is an outstanding representative. There remains more to ask, particularly with respect to the ethical, cultural, and religious stakes of his philosophical vista.

Looking at different formulas of freedom – moral, epistemic, spiritual, narrative, instrumental, existential, vital – one may note that they are commonly backed up by certain metaphysical assumptions (even if vague or merely implicit) or – at least – by denaturalizing strategies (wherever nature is understood too narrowly, as indeed it is nearly everywhere). Bergson's case has served as one of the most striking contemporary examples of binding selfhood, freedom and humanity by means of intricate temporal variation. This is not surprising insofar as the very idea of freedom – just like that of humanity – tends to be approached by philosophers as a postulate rather than as a merely descriptive category.

41) Barnard, *Living Consciousness. The Metaphysical Vision of Henri Bergson*, 170.