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«THE SOCIAL UNDERLIES THE VITAL»: ON BERGSON'S SOCIAL PHILOSOPHY FROM *CREATIVE EVOLUTION* TO *THE TWO SOURCES*

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1. Introduction

The social philosophy of *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* is clearly based on the biological assumptions set out in *Creative Evolution*. The correspondence between sociology and biology is so explicit in this book that some recent readers have gone so far as to refer to a "sociobiology" of Bergson, borrowing Edward Wilson's neologism perhaps too casually. In fact, Bergson's social philosophy, although also grounded in biology, has implications far removed from those of the sociobiology discussed since the 1970s.[1]

While the «entanglement of social and biological life» [White 2022, 271] is broadly stressed in *The Two Sources* (and sometimes also in the essay on *Laughter* [White 2022; Allen 2023, 175-182]), the interpretations of *Creative Evolution* contain fewer references to this «entanglement» of the social and biological dimensions. The social philosophy expressed in the 1932 book includes many references to *élan vital* theory, however. It is as though the metaphysics of the 1907 work essentially heralded the moral and social developments of Bergson's later thought.

[1] Cf. Wilson 2000. Keith Ansell-Pearson and John Mullarkey have stated that *The Two Sources* can be seen as "primarily a work in sociobiology rather than metaphysics" [Ansell-Pearson & Mullarkey 2002, 37], and Melanie White has more recently considered Bergson's "sociobiology" in the essay on *Laughter* and in *The Two Sources* [White 2022].

Already in *Creative Evolution*, Bergson describes the relation between human individuality and social life [Bergson 2023, 226-229; 2007, 259-261]. He recognizes «a certain equilibrium between individuation and association across the entire domain of life» [Bergson 2023, 227; 2007, 259], as the same tendencies to individuate and associate span the full range of life, from microbial colonies to human societies. For mankind, social life is also one of the crucial factors that determines the human specificity and success of the human species. After the brain and language, social life is the third indicator of human beings' inner superiority in the living world. The advantage presented by social life for the human species stems from the fact that it enables its members to free themselves from the constraints of matter, to preserve the efforts of previous generations, and to set a standard to which individuals must then adapt or even seek to surpass [Bergson 2023, 232; 2007, 265].

As Kisukidi has noted, while in *Creative Evolution* society represents an unconditional *evolutionary* success, its *moral* success is not unequivocal: societies may be open to universal brotherhood, but first and foremost they are closed and prone to identitarianism and war [Kisukidi 2013, 83]. In short, the shift from the biological gaze on society to the moral gaze gives rise to significant developments. Without projecting *The Two Sources* onto *Creative Evolution* and slipping into what Bergson would have called a "retrospective illusion", I would like to consider the elements of social philosophy that were already present in *Creative Evolution*, how its early readers interpreted it, and some of the debates of the time, compared to which *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* represents an original, unpredictable position, which is comparable neither to the reduction of *culture* to *nature* nor to the position that postulates a gap between the human world and the natural world. *Bergson* thus responds in an innovative way to a debate taking place both in France and internationally on biological sociology that has been a subject covered by the social sciences since their onset – and is perhaps yet to be fully solved.

2. Biology as a false sociology (Sorel)

From the earliest reviews of *Creative Evolution*, readers sought to anticipate its possible social developments. Georges Sorel published a quite remarkable, lengthy commentary in five issues of *Le Mouvement socialiste*, from October 1907 to April 1908.[2] A revolutionary syndicalist, heterodox Marxist, general strike theorist, and dedicated political philosopher after a twenty-year career as a public engineer, Sorel was one of the most assiduous auditors of Bergson's courses at the Collège de France, and, according to Bergson himself, the one who had best understood his thought.[3]

Sorel claimed that the true place of Bergson's philosophy was in social studies and argued that his biology was nothing but a "false sociology". In a meaningful passage, underlined by Bergson in his own copy of Sorel's article,[4] he stated:

> Evolutionism seems to me to be fabricated with data from economic history; it is even questionable whether any biological theory can be developed other than by imitating life through social constructs; for a long time, philosophy sought to imitate life with the inorganic. It has now emancipated itself from this error; but naturalists do not seem to have yet recognized that biology is nothing but a false sociology [Sorel 1907, 270].

In his 1921 essay *De l'Utilité du pragmatism* ('On the Utility of Pragmatism'), Sorel returned to the pages of *Creative Evolution* and proposed the seminal idea that «biology is constantly borrowing from social history» [Sorel 1921, 360]. For instance, the success of Cuvier's doctrine of the invariability of species could only be explained before the establishment of capitalism and the rights of the individual [Sorel 1921, 363]. Equally, the thesis of inheritance of acquired traits derived from a misconception that biology has drawn from social biases [Sorel

[2] Cf. Sorel 1907-1908, later developed in Sorel 1921.

[3] This is what Bergson stated in an interview in 1911, in which he also made it clear that he did not share Sorel's ideas on syndicalism [Bergson 1972, 940-941].

[4] The abstract from Issue 191 of *Le Mouvement Socialiste* is held at the Bibliothèque Littéraire Jacques Doucet in Paris, BGN 1699 / VII-BGN-IV-25.

1921, 375]. According to analogies of this type, his reading of Bergson's book was intended to shed light on questions of social history. Sorel sought to restore the social quality that acts as a disguise to the level of the pseudo-vital described by Bergson: «Bergson's creative evolution is merely an imitation of the history of human industry» [Sorel 1907, 275]. Like Max Scheler in Germany [Scheler 2021], Sorel interpreted the *Homo faber* in the context of the critique of pragmatism, and argued that the intellect theory set out in *Creative Evolution* was based on a utilitarian idea of work. Also taken from industry was the idea of a small world that tends to develop in the midst of a big world unravelling [Bergson 2023, 235; 2007, 269], from which it draws its energy [Sorel 1908, 278]. Finally, faced with the image of humanity as a galloping army capable of breaking all resistance [Bergson 2023, 237; 2007, 271], Sorel wrote that «we immediately think of capitalism, intoxicated by universal competition, armed with all the resources that previous centuries have accumulated for its benefit, and drawing its confidence from the incredible success it has already achieved over all rival forces» [Sorel 1921, 277]. *Creative Evolution* is the very antithesis of Marx, who in 1848 predicted the near demise of capitalism. Reading between the lines of Bergson, on the other hand, «capitalism no longer fears death, since it has learned from experience that it can overcome crises by accelerating its race in the pursuit of economic progress» [Sorel 1921, 277]. The last chapter of *The Two Sources*, published nine years after Sorel's death, would very likely have led him to reconsider his reading of Bergsonism as an ideological expression of triumphant capitalism. In any case, Philippe Soulez has rightly judged Sorel's interpretation of certain passages in *Creative Evolution*, casually superimposed on texts by Marx and Engels, as somewhat "wild" [Soulez 1989, 339]. Bergson himself wrote to Sorel on April 25th 1908, stating that he was not convinced of the sociological origin of his biological ideas. He admitted, at best, that these could easily be applied to the field of sociology, but he had not tried [Bergson 2002, 193-195]. In his letter, Bergson also admits the primacy of "history" in a quite different sense from the one defended by Sorel (who was a great admirer of Vico). Rather than opposing biological evolution and economic and social history, seeing the first as a vestige of the last (biology being a false sociology),

Bergson overrides this distinction by affirming the analogy between the reality of historical facts and the reality of the appearance of species, in short, the *historical* character of *biological evolution*, the entanglement of history and living nature, and thus the impossibility of reducing one dimension to the other.[5] The metaphysical innovation of *Creative Evolution* already had an anthropological and even ecological – as we would say today – scope for Bergson that was very innovative for his time. This impossibility of considering history and evolution, culture and nature as two distinct realms would also soon be expressed in the field of social theory, albeit differently from how Sorel had predicted.

3. Biological sociology (Espinas and Worms)

The age-old problem of the relationship between the organism and society was a heated topic of debate in France at the turn of the twentieth century, when Bergson wrote *Creative Evolution*. At the time in which sociology was establishing itself as an autonomous discipline, the debate on social organicism was central and biologism was its primary adversary [Mucchielli 2010, 261-291]. This tension became particularly marked in the last twenty years of the nineteenth century. After Auguste Comte and Herbert Spencer had defined sociology in an evolutionist scientific context, the discipline started to refuse any biological analogy in social terms, whether the parallel was based on content or method.

It was in Comte and Spencer's work, in particular, that the idea of a similarity between the organism and society became the basis for describing the object and method of the new branch of knowledge directed at understanding society. Similar ideas expounded by Comte – which were very widespread and well-received during the Third Republic – had laid the ground for the French reception of Spencer and his analogies between the functioning of society and of the organism. In his *Course in Positive Philosophy* (1830) and *Social Statics* (1852), Comte had also identified a close link between life science and social science, seeing the former as the basis of the latter.

[5] In times of historicism and neo-Kantianism, this association between "history" and the sphere of "nature" is very significant, cf. Zanfi 2021.

For his part, Spencer employed the principle of evolution and its laws as a universal basis for explaining reality as a whole, and thus as the foundation not only of biological facts but also psychological, moral and social ones. He had already set out his evolutionary theory of society in his 1851 study *Social Statics*. Often defined as "social Darwinism", Spencer's theory in fact preceded Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859) and *The Descent of Man* (1871).[6] Spencer's organicist theory, which presented societies as *social organisms,* is further described in his *Principles of Sociology* (1876), where he based the parallel between society and the organism on the structural analogy on the one hand and on the division of functions and labour on the other, from which the solidarity between individuals derived.

The French translation of Spencer's *Principles of Sociology*, first published by Alcan in 1878, just two years after the English edition, appears to have instigated the debate on so-called "social Darwinism", an expression that first appeared in France in 1879,[7] penned by the militant anarchist Émile Gautier. From then on, the link between biological evolutionism, sociology, and politics would become one of the most delicate points for nascent French sociology to clarify.

Alfred Espinas, a major representative of social Spencerism at the time of Durkheim's training, initiated a certain toing-and-froing between scientific and political references, albeit of a different form. Engaged in the social wing of the Republican sphere,[8] he was very close to his fellow student Théodule Ribot; he collaborated with Ribot's *Revue philosophique* and translated Spencer's *The Principles of Psychology* with him in 1874. In 1877, Espinas defended his doctoral thesis in literature, entitled *Des sociétés animales: étude de psychologie comparée* ('Animal Societies: Study in Comparative Psychology'), at the Sorbonne. Espinas sought to uncover the laws of society in the rest of nature, and objected to Hobbes and Locke's theory, which presented society as an artificial construction, an abstract conception subject to the

[6] Darwin's two works were translated into French in 1862 and 1872, respectively. The only work by Spencer on society translated into French in those years, however, is *Introduction à la science sociale*, cf. Spencer 1874.

[7] See Drouard 1999, 23.

[8] Feuerhahn 2011, 42. On Spencer's solidarist reception, see Beck 2014.

laws of logic alone and situated outside of nature. Instead, he proposed that man's social *instincts* were *natural*, and that human societies were in continuity with nature, as was the tool making ability. At the time, this ability could still be considered, along with language, as the aspect that allowed for a clear distinction between animals and men.[9]

By choosing Comte and Spencer as the philosophical interlocutors of Aristotle, Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau, Espinas triggered a foreseeable university *casus belli* and elicited reactions on the part of Elme Caro, Pierre Janet, and Charles Waddington, members of his jury and exponents of the spiritualist philosophy of the Sorbonne. The subject of Espinas' theory was itself anti-spiritualist and posed «a challenge to the scholarly order» [Feuerhahn 2011]. Espinas' polemic was not only directed at the philosophy of his time: zoology was also accused of being loaded with spiritualist prejudices, particularly that of Edmond Perrier, the author of a famous study on *Les Colonies animales* ('Animal Colonies'). While he did not dare term animal groups "societies", he was more casually allowed to assimilate them to the colonies.

Towards the turn of the century, the search for an organic model for human societies was again described, after Espinas, in the writings of René Worms. Worms sought to facilitate the international circulation of ideas about social organicism, both by setting up the International Institute of Sociology in 1893 and through editorial activities connected with the Institute's scientific activities: in 1893, he also founded the *Revue internationale de sociologie* and began editing the collection 'Bibliothèque sociologique internationale' by Giard et Brière, where he published Italian positivists and criminologists of the Lombroso school.[10]

In his 1896 work *Organisme et société* ('Organism and Society'), René Worms noted that of all the sciences, biology was the closest to sociology. Biology could thus contribute to the study of societies by uncovering the primitive design of the functioning of organisms. For Worms, society was similar to the organism, but it surpassed it in terms of

[9] In his essay on 'The Origins of Technology', published ten years after his thesis, Espinas in fact took up the ideas of Ernst Kapp, who interpreted technology as *Organprojektion*, cf. Espinas 1897, 45.

[10] Cf. Ferri 1896; Loria 1897; Nitti 1897; Rignano 1904; Sighele 1910.

its complexity and could thus be defined as a «supra-organism» [Worms 1896, 9]. In an essay from 1910 entitled *Les principes biologiques de l'évolution sociale* ('The Biological Principles of Social Evolution'), Worms presented social organicism according to a Lamarckian version of adaptation, defined in terms of an *effort* rather than a *struggle* for life. He contested Spencer's Darwinism, therefore, which he also criticised for its individualism: «Above all – noted Worms –, [Spencer] wishes to preserve the autonomy of the human being. He cannot concede that man is subordinate to society, then, as the cell is subordinate to the organism» [Worms 1910, 10].

Bergson's position in *The Two Sources*, which was certainly informed by readings of these texts, proposes a very different relationship between biology and sociology, and chooses as his main interlocutor in the sociological field not the positivist sociologists (such as Espinas or Worms), or his former colleague at the Collège de France Gabriel Tarde, but Émile Durkheim, whose comments on biological sociology therefore need to be situated within this context first of all.

4. Sociology contra biology (Durkheim)

While Durkheim's contribution to removing sociology from the naturalist framework must first be acknowledged, he still frequently called upon the biological sciences, and not only for metaphorical purposes. As he affirmed in *The Division of Labour in Society*: «the law of the division of labour applies to organisms as to societies; it can even be said that the more specialised the functions of the organisms, the greater the development» [Durkheim 1893, 41]. In short, for him society is an organisation that, like all organisms, is subject to a process of development and differentiation, or, rather, of development *by* differentiation. Durkheim's works thus at least partly reflect the epistemological framework of the social sciences of his time. This explains the considerable importance he attributed to the life sciences, whose lexicon he frequently adopted, such as when he insists on the heredity of «organico-physical conditions» connected to the division of labour, which «chain us, then, to our race, as the collective conscience chains us to our group» [Durkheim 1893, 304]. This is also apparent

when he refers to the volume of Parisian women's skulls to justify a certain sexual division of labour, which have evolved «with civilisation» [Durkheim 1893, 304], or when he maintains that the courage of aristocrats in the Middle Ages, or the propensity for medical professions in Asclepius's times, were transmitted through the blood [Durkheim 1893, 306].

At the same time, he could also be profoundly critical when it came to biological reductionism in sociology. According to Durkheim, heredity became increasingly stable throughout evolution as the value of social causes grew, which freed social units «from the yoke of the organism» [Durkheim 1893, 345]. He also took a very explicit stance against Espinas' idea, which established an analogy between human society and animal societies: «With animals, the organism assimilates social facts to it, and, stripping them of their special nature, transforms them into biological facts. Social life is materialised. In man, on the contrary, and particularly in higher societies, social causes substitute themselves for organic causes. The organism is spiritualised» [Durkheim 1893, 346].

Despite Durkheim's professed distance from social organicism, the organic metaphor resurfaced, for example in the description of the type of solidarity typical of advanced societies. The two types of solidarity discussed in *The Division of Labour in Society* – mechanical and organic – were only superficially related to the military and industrial societies discussed by Comte and Spencer.

While it was commonplace to speak about traditional societies as organic and more advanced ones as mechanical in the nineteenth century, in Durkheim the order of the terms was reversed: in the case of mechanical solidarity, the pressure on society to conform was rigid and automatic, while it was more flexible in the case of organic solidarity. Starting with a stage when the division of labour was very limited, as was also true of Spencer's descriptions, for Durkheim social development gradually began to allow greater room for an awareness of individuality and the creation of differentiated individualities, whose integration reflected the advanced division of labour of modern organic societies, where there is a greater recognition of and respect for individual difference. While for Spencer the organic metaphor referred to a type of cooperation, for Durkheim it underpinned a veritable solidarity.

For Spencer, social evolution could in fact culminate in radical liberal individualism, where individual differences are pacified in the wake of industrial capitalism, and where the division of labour is merely a «necessarily unstable composition of conflicting interests where no form of solidarity can occur» [Karsenti 2006, 25]. For Durkheim, on the other hand, the possibility of integration was part of the civic morality of republican France, also thanks to a brake which the State could use to curb the risks of de-socialisation borne by the economy [Burrow 2000, 72-77].

Durkheim again returned to the question of the relationship between society and nature in a lecture delivered at the 4th International Congress of Philosophy in Bologna in April 1911, entitled *Value Judgements and Judgements of Reality*. He concluded his address as follows:

> The aim is to bring *the ideal*, in its various forms, *into the sphere of nature, with its distinctive attributes unimpaired*. If to us, as sociologists, the task does not seem impossible, it is because society itself fulfils all the necessary conditions for presenting an account of these opposing characteristics. *Society is also of nature* and yet dominates it. Not only do all the forces of the universe converge in society, but they also form a new synthesis which surpasses in richness, complexity and power of action all that went to form it. In a word, *society is nature* arrived at a higher point in its development, concentrating all its energies to surpass, as it were, itself [Durkheim 1974, 51, my italics].

Durkheim's lecture was published in the *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* on 3 July 1911 and subsequently included in the collection *Sociologie et philosophie* (*Sociology and Philosophy*) edited by Célestin Bouglé. In his presentation of the work, Bouglé sought above all to underscore the distance that separated Durkheim from Espinas' biologism, which was deemed to contradict the republican principles of equality and freedom. He referred to this lecture when positing that the life of the group, to which value judgements refer, «is not an ordinary kind of life, but a spiritual life which in fact, as Auguste Comte said, helps the principle of humanity to predominate over animality in the lives of the members of the society» [Bouglé 1924, LIII].

This is very clear: Durkheim went beyond positivism, as noted by Bouglé. Yet as Iofrida observed, he also went beyond Kantianism [Iofrida 2014, 536-537]: with his relatively conventional terminology, he recognised that the social could not be reduced to a static dimension, associating it instead with a dynamic, vital moment of agitation and unpredictability. This is particularly clear when Durkheim posits that: «To live is above all things to act, to act without counting the cost and for the pleasure of acting. If the evidence demands that we do not discount economy, as man must amass in order to expend, nevertheless that expenditure [*dépense*] is his end, and to expend is to act» [Durkheim 1974, 45].

The question of expenditure, of uselessness, inherent in luxury and the superfluous, is even declared to be the true purpose of our actions. Nietzsche himself – whose philosophy lay within the horizon of the Congress in Bologna – was thus not absent from Durkheim's presentation, as Iofrida has suggested. Durkheim appeared to be attributing «*the qualities of Nietzsche's superman to the masses*: in fact, it is the masses, the community, which is capable of creating ever new values that surpass utility and move beyond all form of finality» [Iofrida 2014, 536-537].

Another conception of *life* connected with social life was also being formulated in early twentieth-century Europe under the impetus of such authors as Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Guyau, as well as Bergson, Dilthey, and Simmel [Zanfi 2022; Beiser 2023]. This idea tested the traditional antinomies specific to both spiritualism and positivism.

5. The social underlies the vital (Bergson)

When Bergson finally addressed the question of society directly in 1932, Durkheim had become his primary interlocutor. The responses to Durkheimian sociology presented in the first chapter of *Two Sources* were at once more explicit and attracted the greatest attention among critics, from Vialatoux up to the most recent analyses.[11] Yet the

[11] Cf. the classic Vialatoux 1939, as well as the most recent readings by Karsenti 2012 and Guerlac 2012, 41-45.

"organicist" current, in antithesis with Durkheim and his circle, also required a stance to be taken. In fact, a philosopher like Bergson, who, starting with *Creative Evolution,* had placed the question of life at the centre of his doctrine, could not but engage with the debate led by authors affiliated with positivism.

Setting himself apart from the Durkheimian school through his affirmation that all morality is neither rational nor social but «in essence biological» [Bergson 1935, 82; 2008, 103], Bergson did not abandon the comparison with the opposing current of «biological sociology»[12] in the debate of the time. After all, *Creative Evolution* remained an essential reference point in his 1932 work on account of its explanation of human sociability based on a biological framework, specifically: «the social – he wrote – underlies the vital» [Bergson 1935, 98; 2008, 123]. For, he explained, «mankind always presents two essential characteristics, intelligence and sociability. But, from our standpoint, these features take on a special meaning. They are no longer a matter for the psychologist and the sociologist only. They call, *first of all, for a biological interpretation*. Intelligence and sociability must be given their proper place back in the general evolution of life» [Bergson 1935, 96; 2008, 120-121, my italics].

Before turning to anthropology, sociology, and the history of religions, Bergson therefore sought *first of all* to understand societies from a *biological* perspective. Starting with his 1907 work, he had dealt with the subject of society through the study of man as a being inserted into the evolution of life, and thus into animality. This allowed him to avoid the error typical of spiritualist doctrines: indeed, as Bergson cautioned in *Creative Evolution*, «They are right to attribute to man a privileged place in nature, to hold that the distance is infinite between animal and man; but the history of life is there, which makes us witness the genesis by gradual transformation, and seems thus to reintegrate man in animality» [Bergson 2023, 268-269; 2007, 269]. Similarly, it is starting with a reintegration of the human being into animality that Bergson confronts the description of societies in the first chapter of *Two Sources*, where he presents society «emerging from the hands of

[12] According to the denomination provided by Bouglé 1901.

nature»,[13] describing it through an analogy with how the cells of an organism or the societies of hymenopterans function – the latter were recognised as the major success of life in the invertebrate sphere, just as the human being had prevailed over that of vertebrates.[14]

From *Creative Evolution* onward, human societies validated the liberation of human beings from the necessities and fixities laid down by the laws of nature, but their origin was still natural.

Human beings used intelligent devices to store up their efforts in the form of methods that were not only material and technical but also intellectual – such as social methods, which enabled them to take their leave of animal life. Nonetheless, this evolutionary success should not lead us to give into a sense of pride that might tempt us to believe both in the superior value of recent generations over previous ones and in a denial of the «original subordination [of our intelligence] to biological necessities» [Bergson 1935, 135; 2008, 168].

While Bergson fully rejected the heredity of acquired characteristics at the physiological level, he nonetheless recognised every chance of progress in society. This was not a "cultural" progress in the "non-natural" sense of the term, however. Rather, the achievement of such social progress resembled that which also occurred at other levels of life.

Indeed, in his examination of human questions such as morality and religion, Bergson did not limit himself to considering freedom and the spiritual pole of experience by referring to the metaphysical principle of life. Rather, he also dedicated numerous reflections to biological life *stricto sensu*, which, for him, always conditioned social forms and their historical progress. The social life described in *Two Sources* was still grounded on moral pressures and «organic tendencies» [Bergson 1935, 43; 2008, 54], which functioned in an organicist manner: «the essence of obligation is a different thing from a requirement of reason» [Bergson 1935, 15; 2008, 18]. Equally: «the obligation we find in the depths of our consciousness and which, as the etymology of the word implies, binds

[13] Bergson 1935, 17; 2008, 21.

[14] This topic is anticipated in Bergson 1935, 95-96; 2008, 101-102; cf. also Bergson 2020, 26-27; 2009, 26-27.

us to the other members of society, is a link of the same nature as that which unites the ants in the ant-hill or the cells of an organism».[15]

Two Sources radically shook up the typically modern distinction between animality and humanity, nature and culture, nature and society, or even between the laws of nature and those of rational morality [Guerlac 2012, 46 ss]. This is evident from the initial pages, where Bergson recognises that moral laws and natural laws function in similar ways, all being presented as imperative and unavoidable. Hence, if Bergson's social philosophy contains a «naturalist analogy» [Caeymaex 2012], it does not exclude a morality of aspiration and freedom, without nonetheless separating it from a reference to life in «the very wide meaning it should have» [Bergson 1935, 82; 2008, 103].

If a certain "organicist" paradigm was shared across the board in the debate about society taking place from the turn of the century up to *Two Sources*, the conception of life proposed by the different authors was clearly not the same, just as their positions did not have the same implications. In short, the doctrine of *Two Sources* conflicted with rationalism moulded on Kantianism, but it was also at odds with naturalist and organicist theory. Or rather, since Bergson did not hesitate to use the term "biology" to define the essence of all morality, one could posit that he was seeking «true biologism» as opposed to «false biologism», that of social organicism, just as in *Creative Evolution* he had drawn an opposition between a «true evolutionism» and the «false evolutionism of Spencer» [Bergson 2023, 5; 2007, X]. In so doing, Bergson described a precise meaning of life, removed from its "naturalist" meaning. Bergson's «biologism» was not identical to the naturalism of the nineteenth century, either in *Creative Evolution* or in *Two Sources.* For Bergson, the problem no longer laid in defining the position of life in nature, or of culture in nature, based on the model

[15] Bergson 1935, 67; 2008, 84. The analogy between closed societies and the natural world is argued through further biological parallels with the societies of hymenopterans and with cells: «The members of a civic community hold together like the cells of an organism. Habit, served by intelligence and imagination, introduces among them a discipline resembling, in the interdependence it establishes between separate individuals, the unity of an organism of anastomosic cells» [Bergson 1935, 5; 2008, 60].

of positivism, that is, «a certain new scholasticism that has grown up during the latter half of the nineteenth century around the physics of Galileo» [Bergson 2023, 316; 2007, 369]. Rather, Bergson reversed the terms of the issue and sought to define the field of "nature" (to be understood here in the sense of *natura naturata*) *within a dimension that surpasses it*: that of *life* in very comprehensive terms, including its scientific and metaphysical meaning [Worms 2004].

Based on this understanding of life, he defined physical nature, subject to the laws of matter, as a static result of an *élan vital.* In *Two Sources,* the broadening and enrichment of the domain of biology in fact enabled Bergson to depart from traditional dichotomies. In *Two sources*, the distinction between closed and open was not commensurable with the distinction between nature and reason: it was not *reason* exerting itself against *nature.* For Bergson, it was *life* itself that exerted itself against nature. He helped reformulate this concept in a manner that might still bear fruit in the contemporary debate, basing a theory of society on *life* – distinguished from a sociobiology grounded on an impoverished biology on the one hand, and on an equally impoverished social science on the other, since both had lost contact with the *living reality* of human beings. Indeed, the paradigm of the "vital" in social philosophy as proposed by Bergson reframed the terms of a European debate that encompassed the life sciences, anthropology, the social sciences, and philosophy at the turn of the twentieth century. The conception of biology underpinning Bergson's examination of anthropological and social questions offers a key to understand the two approaches – naturalist and culturalist – in the name of *a philosophy of life in very comprehensive terms.* The «two sources», or the «two senses of life» are not enmeshed in the traditional dichotomous structure [Worms 2004; Grosz 2005]. Going beyond the terms that structured the debate on biological sociology, Bergson offers new way of conceptualising the relations between the biological and the social, the natural and the cultural, and completely reconfigures the framework of both sociology and biology.

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Keywords

Henri Bergson; Georges Sorel; Émile Durkheim; philosophy of biology; social philosophy

Abstract

Immediately after reading *Creative Evolution*, Georges Sorel claimed that the true place of Bergson's philosophy was in social studies. At the time, the ancient analogy between society and the organism had ignited a debate in French sociology, wherein the Durkheim school opposed followers of Spencerism such as Espinas and Worms. Well aware of the European debate on biological sociology, and having remained cautious about addressing social issues for many years, Bergson himself only made the entanglement between the biological and the social more explicit in his 1932 work. Without following either of the two major positions of the contemporary French debate, he proposed a theory of society based on the assumptions set out in *Creative Evolution*. Bergson argued that «the social underlies the vital» and grounded his theory of a closed and open society on biology «in a comprehensive sense». Through a cross reading of *Creative Evolution* and *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, I will examine how Bergson developed his social theory in relation to his philosophy of biology, while at the same time responding to a core question of the contemporary sociological debate.

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