

# MATTER

journal of new materialist research

Universitat de Barcelona

ARTICLE  
ISSUE 9

## Henri Bergson and New Materialism

Henri Bergson y el Nuevo Materialismo

Henri Bergson i el nou materialisme

Adam Lovasz (0000-0003-1422-0381)

Institute of Philosophy, ELTE University, Hungary

Date of submission: April 2023

Accepted in: December 2023

Published in: March 2024

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1344/jnmr.v9.46300>

### Recommended citation:

Lovasz, Adam (2024). Henri Bergson and New Materialism. *Matter: Journal of New Materialist Research*, 9, 1–15. University of Barcelona. <https://doi.org/10.1344/jnmr.v9.46300>



The texts published in this journal are – unless otherwise indicated – covered by the Creative Commons Spain Attribution 4.0 International license. The full text of the license can be consulted here: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

## Abstract

Henri Bergson's *Matter and Memory* presents a panpsychist ontology. Bergson pushes the dualism of mind and matter to breaking point. Matter is reconceived as the sum of all images. Idealism and deterministic materialism are bypassed. We get an indeterministic and emancipative model of the world. The idea that matter is inherently creative and endowed with both perception and memory is highly relevant today. Materiality, far from being dead or passive, is equipped with agency. Bergson's themes coincide with the concerns of contemporary New Materialism. Authors working in the latter school explicitly cite Bergson as a key influence. Bergson can help us understand what "newness" means in New Materialism. That being said, recent scholarship has pointed to certain unpalatable political implications of Bergson's works, in particular the anthropological premises of *Two Sources of Morality and Religion*. In my article, I seek to address such critiques. In my view, by reading Bergson ontologically as a New Materialist process philosophy, some of the unfortunate cultural and ideological presuppositions Bergson did not reflect upon may be ameliorated to a great extent.

## Keywords

Henri Bergson; indeterminism; materialist feminism; new materialism; process philosophy

## Resumen

Henri Bergson's *Matter and Memory* presenta una ontología pansicista. Bergson lleva el dualismo de la mente y la materia hasta el punto de ruptura. La materia es reconcebida como la suma de todas las imágenes. El idealismo y el materialismo determinista son evitados. Obtenemos un modelo del mundo indeterminista y emancipador. La idea de que la materia es inherentemente creativa y dotada de percepción y memoria es muy relevante hoy en día. La materialidad, lejos de ser muerta o pasiva, está equipada con agencia. Los temas de Bergson coinciden con las preocupaciones del nuevo materialismo contemporáneo. Los autores que trabajan en esta última escuela citan explícitamente a Bergson como una influencia clave. Bergson puede ayudarnos a entender qué significa "novedad" en el nuevo materialismo. Dicho esto, la investigación reciente ha señalado ciertas implicaciones políticas desagradables de las obras de Bergson, en particular las premisas antropológicas de las dos fuentes de moralidad y religión. En mi artículo, intento abordar estas críticas. En mi opinión, leyendo a Bergson ontológicamente como una filosofía de proceso nuevo materialista, algunas de las presuposiciones culturales e ideológicas desafortunadas que Bergson no reflexionó pueden ser mejoradas en gran medida.

## Palabras clave

Henri Bergson; indeterminismo; materialismo feminista; nuevos materialismos; filosofía procesual

## Resum

Henri Bergson's *Matter and Memory* presenta una ontologia pansicista. Bergson empeny el dualisme de la ment i la matèria fins al punt de ruptura. La matèria es reconcebuda com la suma de totes les imatges. L'idealisme i el materialisme determinista són evitats. Obtenim un model del món indeterminista i emancipador. La idea que la matèria és inherentment creativa i dotada de percepció i memòria és molt rellevant avui en dia. La materialitat, lluny de ser morta o passiva, està equipada amb agència. Els temes de Bergson coincideixen amb les preocupacions del nou materialisme contemporani. Les autores que treballen en aquesta darrera escola citen explícitament Bergson com

a influència clau. Bergson pot ajudar-nos a entendre què significa "novetat" en el nou materialisme. Dit això, la recerca recent ha assenyalat certes implicacions polítiques desagradables de les obres de Bergson, en particular les premisses antropològiques de les dues fonts de moralitat i religió. En el meu article, intento abordar aquestes crítiques. En la meua opinió, llegint Bergson ontològicament com una filosofia de procés nou materialista, algunes de les presuposicions culturals i ideològiques desafortunades que Bergson no va reflexionar poden ser millorades en gran mesura.

### **Paraules clau**

Henri Bergson; indeterminisme; materialisme feminista; nous materialismes; filosofia processual

## Introductory Remarks

Over the past decade, New Materialism has emerged as a trend within theory. The geographic loadedness of this term notwithstanding, theory<sup>1</sup> more broadly has demonstrated a new openness towards a range of configurations such as the ahuman, nonhuman or posthuman (Braidotti, 2022; Braidotti and Hlavajova, 2018; Ferrando, 2019; Grusin, 2015; Herbrechter, 2021; MacCormack, 2020). New Materialism is part of a general postanthropocentric turn. Despite their striking ideological diversity, the novelty of these tendencies lies in their shared rejection of humanism, as well as the systematic critique of various dualisms (mind vs body, matter vs spirit, male vs female, nature vs culture) associated with oppressive structures of anthropocentric domination. As Val Plumwood ecofeminist philosopher showed in the by now classic work, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, the various binaries undergirding Eurocentric modernity form a coherent whole. Underlying all the interconnected social structures of oppression is the dualism between humans and nonhumans (Plumwood, 1993). This insight informs much of subsequent New Materialist theory. According to the view proposed by New Materialist/posthumanist feminist scholars such as Rosi Braidotti, the devaluation of matter, especially acute since René Descartes' division of the world into thought and matter (the latter being categorized as passive, undistinct, uniform *res extensa*) can be mapped critically onto masculinist devaluations of the feminine as somehow irrational and being situated closer to the realm of nature than the male. For Braidotti, Descartes' separation between mind and body, the latter consigned to the benighted realm of mere extension, is by far the most disastrous of the modern dualisms, for it has contributed in greatest measure to the consolidation of a "modern rational order" that seeks to regulate and reorganize materiality (Braidotti, 1994, p. 58). In post-Cartesian metaphysics, the mind is conceived of as masculine, the seat of

activity, whereas the body is feminine, passively following (ideally) the commands of mind.

A recent critique of New Materialism emphasizes how the movement is far from "new". Indeed, the works of both leading feminist scholars quoted above (Plumwood and Braidotti) dates back to the 1990s, as do the early works of fellow New Materialist Neo-Deleuzian philosopher Manuel DeLanda (DeLanda, 1997). Michał Krzykowski goes even further back in time, highlighting how New Materialism's rejection of metaphysical dualism is essentially a rehash of the French process philosopher Henri Bergson's anti-dualist metaphysics. In Krzykowski's highly skeptical view, because of its resemblance and even explicit borrowings from Bergson, "it is (...) unclear on what basis new materialism can be defined as a new metaphysics (...) and what is actually new in this affair" (Krzykowski, 2019, p. 94). In this article, I seek to make explicit what the "newness" of New Materialism means, defending the movement from the accusation of empty sloganeering or, worse, academic marketing levelled against it by Krzykowski's rather mean-spirited critique. I shall argue that far from discrediting New Materialism, its endorsement of a Bergsonian view of reality is a strength. In the first half of this paper, I present a reading of Bergson's philosophy, drawing primarily upon *Matter and Memory* (*Matière et mémoire*). My aim is to show how Bergson's ideas intersect with those of New Materialism.<sup>2</sup> In the second part of the paper, I will examine Bergson's social philosophy in light of Alia al-Saji's postcolonialist critique of certain unexamined cultural racist assumptions in Bergson's final book, *Two Sources of Morality and Religion* (*Les deux sources de la morale et de la religion*). Al-Saji suggests that we may read Bergson "against" Bergson through an affirmative materialist interpretation of *Matter and Memory*, while rejecting *Two Sources of Morality and Religion*. I propose that alongside *Matter and Memory*, we may also use *Laughter* (*Le Rire*)

---

<sup>1</sup> Under this term, I understand contemporary philosophy of any type that deals with the big questions relating to reality, being, the meaning of nature and the ontological status of life. Any discourse lacking such a focus I hesitate to designate with the term "philosophy."

---

<sup>2</sup> As I hope to show, this manifestly does *not* entail reading Bergson as a conventional "materialist" by any means, if under materialism we understand an immanentist *and* deterministic ontology centered upon a reductivist scientific interpretation of reality as being composed of corpuscular particles of primarily inorganic, i.e. "dead", matter.

in a similar manner, highlighting how social reality can be reinterpreted in light of Bergson's concept of reality as the permanency of change. In my conclusion, I respond to Heike Delitz's suggestion that *Matter and Memory* could serve as the foundation for a new form of emancipatory politics.

### Towards the Frameless Mind: Taking Dualisms to their Extremes

In an interview with Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin, two leading proponents of New Materialism, Braidotti emphasizes the following, interrelated points: "as a meta-methodological innovation, the embodied and embedded brand of feminist materialist philosophy of the subject introduces a break from both universalism and dualism" (Dolphijn and van der Tuin, 2012a, p. 22). My goal here is not a reconstruction of materialist feminism, New Materialism or materialism as a whole. Rather, it is to critically investigate the specific uses of Bergson's metaphysics within New Materialist scholarship. My primary motivation with this piece is to craft a compelling response to Krzykowski's summary dismissal of New Materialism as a movement that brings nothing new to the table compared with Bergson's metaphysics. Bergson would supposedly give us everything we need, and New Materialism is therefore superfluous. In my view, this criticism is severely misplaced, resting upon a fundamental misunderstanding of what the "newness" of New Materialism actually is. Simply put, Krzykowski has attributed a falsely narrow meaning to the word "new", with devastating ramifications for the entire train of thought the author proposes. Firstly, however, I begin with an outline of how Bergson suggests we ought to overcome dualism in metaphysics.

New Materialism is, in essence, a continuation of the Bergsonian project, as outlined in *Matter and Memory*. In this regard, its proponents are very clear. Bergson's importance, for Dolphijn and van der Tuin, lies in the demonstration that "while ordinary dualism is inherently problematic, the act of making distinctions between terms is not. It is the treatment the distinguished terms receive

that makes dominant cultural theory—then and now—questionable" (Dolphijn and van der Tuin, 2011, p. 391). The philosophy of Bergson, for Dolphijn and van der Tuin, constitutes an opportunity for "rewriting" or "diffracting" modernity. By borrowing the method and even content of Bergson's process metaphysics (alongside other representatives of process philosophy influenced by Bergson, such as Alfred N. Whitehead, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari), we may elaborate a view of materiality that conceives of matter as active, self-creative or "agential." In the view of New Materialist feminism, materiality is itself laden with performativity (Barad, 2003). To paraphrase process theologian Charles Hartshorne, if "all activity is creative", then this also means that *all matter is creative* too (Hartshorne, 1937, p. 165). Bergson is often read as a vitalist, but, as Thomas Nail has correctly pointed out, the most important insight of Bergson's philosophy is its recognition of "the absolute primacy of mobility," identifying "duration and the *élan vital* with movement itself" (Nail, 2019, p. 35). Nail holds that this was a relatively late development in Bergson's work, but I believe this metaphysical position was present from the outset. Bergson's invocation of consciousness against both materialism and idealism already leads beyond the false dualism of matter versus mind.

This theoretical breakthrough is the model which New Materialism follows in its attempt to similarly overcome dualisms still prevalent in late modernity (Dolphijn and van der Tuin, 2011, p. 394). Above all, I am interested in how Bergson's metaphysics can be read in a New Materialist vein. Of course, it is far from evident that Bergson is indeed amenable to a New Materialist, emancipatory, and/or feminist reading. Rebecca Hill for one has argued that underlying Bergson's vitalistic monism is a violently hypermasculinist fetishization of life as striving or growth, rendering it unsuitable for use in the context of feminist theory altogether (Hill, 2008). Against Hill's wholesale rejection of Bergson's philosophy, van der Tuin has argued for a "diffractive" reading that extracts and reuses various elements without affirming or denying the positionality of an author as a whole. Following Donna J. Haraway, van der Tuin characterizes diffraction methodologically as

the rejection of any “fixity between signifier and signified, word and thing” (van der Tuin, 2011, p. 26).<sup>3</sup> Reality is simply too fluid for us to strictly confront various schools and concepts with each other. Conceptual creation as an imperative necessitates readings that heighten mutual interference among even antagonistic schools of thought. Instead of Descartes’ ideal of reaching *clare et distincte* judgements, the aim is creative interbreeding of concepts, generating maximal conceptual chaos, an approximation of discourse with the real multiplicity of materiality.

The overarching goal of *Matter and Memory* is to take us beyond the dualism of idealism on the one hand and materialism on the other. Bergson’s method is to take the duality of representation and represented and extend it to the point whereby conventional concepts break apart. By pushing dualism to an extreme, the “contradictory elements” of each pole can be successfully “dissociated”, fragmenting them until a third term emerges (Bergson, 1991 [1896], p. 181). Key to the proposed transcendence of dualism is the idea of the self-existing image. This entails the rejection of the ontological gulf between primary and secondary qualities. As Bergson mentions, already George Berkeley recognized that secondary qualities are just as real as primary qualities. Differently put, a representation is not a second-hand derivative of a somehow “realer” or more material reality “out there.” Everything is an image: “all seems to take place as if, in this aggregate of images which I call the universe, nothing really new could happen except through the medium of certain particular images, the type of which is furnished me by my body” (Bergson, 1991 [1896], p. 18). Far from being the seat of representations, the brain too, just like the body, is an image among images, a media for the transmission of movement. As Bergson states, “my body is (...) an image which acts like other images, receiving and giving back

movement” (Bergson, 1991 [1896], p. 19). The world is built of images, centers of action that are always already active in themselves. No longer do we have Descartes’ uniform *res extensa*, or discrete particles that can be neatly separated from each other. Materiality is defined by Bergson as the sum of active images: “I call matter the aggregate of all images, and perception of matter these same images referred to the eventual action of one particular image, my body” (Bergson, 1991 [1896], p. 22). We can say that the universe in this model is not composed of objects and their movements. Rather, an image is movement itself. Decades prior to quantum physics, Bergson presents a cosmology wherein particles are conceived of as particles of change. Substance is alternation. As Mark Sinclair summarizes, in *Matter and Memory* “an ontology of unchanging, discontinuous and essentially inert things changing position according to relations of force which act upon them from the outside is dissolving in the development of the sciences, Bergson suggests, into an ontology of vibratory movements and lines of force showing up against a background of universal continuity” (Sinclair, 2020, p. 119). This emphasis on impermanence has important ramifications for the mind-body problem.

We cannot declare that an image is necessarily outside or inside of us. Presaging the insights of relativity theory, Bergson upholds the inherently relational nature of such spatial categories. There is no privileged image in the universe: any such view is an illusion stemming from our own imbrication in the manifold relations of the world (Bergson, 1991 [1896], p. 26). As Frédéric Worms points out regarding images, “neither the body, nor for that matter consciousness can contain these representations” (Worms, 1997, p. 189). An image *is* movement or, more precisely, the manifestation of change visualized at the moment of its coming-into-interference with other changes. The relativity of images by no means reduces or minimizes the role of the body. Suzanne Guerlac correctly points out the dependence of memory (identified with virtuality) on action or perception, which Bergson identifies (at least in the case of biological organisms) with the body: “memory-images, which are virtual, need the body to come to life or actualize themselves”

---

<sup>3</sup> In Haraway’s summation, “to be an ‘inappropriate/other’ means to be in critical, deconstructive relationality, in a diffracting rather than reflecting (ratio)nality—as the means of making potent connection that exceeds domination” (Haraway, 1992, p. 69). Diffraction as a method rejects the Enlightenment’s privileging of clarity, simplicity and rationality in favor of a darkened pluralism more in line with the real heterogeneity of material becoming/s.

(Guerlac, 2020, p. 115). In readings of *Matter and Memory*, perception is commonly associated with the actual, while memory has often been associated with the virtual.<sup>4</sup> Far from privileging the virtual as some type of Platonic idea though, as Deleuze and the latter's followers are sometimes prone to doing, Bergson recognizes the unavoidable dependence of the virtual (memory) upon the actual (corporeality). To become actual –that is, recalled– memory needs a body. Recall is an action which is inherently embodied: “memories need, for their actualization, a motor ally, (...) they require for their recall a kind of mental attitude which must itself be engrafted upon an attitude of the body” (Bergson, 1991 [1896], p. 120). This recognition again pre-dates the corporeal turn in French phenomenology by over half a century, the materialist turn in feminist philosophy, not to mention the very late concept of the “embodied mind” in analytical philosophies of mind. We are still in many ways coming to grips with Bergson's novelty.

The reason memory is contrasted with action here is to break down the boundary separating representation and represented. What is most interesting from a New Materialist standpoint is that Bergson does not delimit the scope of perception. If we read Bergson diffractively, this entails a new interpretation of the body's parallel centrality and decentrality. While embodiment is key for representation and memory, the same does not apply to perception, the latter defined as the preparation of movement. The body is a limitation of perception, a narrowing and concentration of consciousness: “unlimited *de jure*”, perception “confines itself *de facto* to indicating the degree of indetermination allowed to the acts of the special image which you call your body” (Bergson, 1991 [1896], p. 40–1). From the standpoint of common-sense, the result is truly bizarre. As Dorothea Olkowski stresses, “for Bergson, any unconscious material point has greater

perception than an entity with consciousness” (Olkowski, 2021, p. 85). The audacity of Bergson's move retains its radicalness over a century later. Ordinarily, it would seem all but certain that consciousness is concentrated within supposedly “intelligent” organisms, replete with highly organized nervous systems, displaying many neural connections. A dolphin is more intelligent than a fly, so we are told by biologists, because the latter's brain contains fewer neural pathways. And so on. Reducing consciousness to brain states alone would be, for Bergson, a bad way of going beyond dualism.<sup>5</sup> On the one hand, materialists cannot explain manifestation, *how* something comes to represent something else. Idealists, on the other hand, are incapable of coming to terms with how material changes always exceed our consciousness of these changes.

*Matter and Memory*, by extending consciousness beyond the body, seeks a middle way between materialism and idealism: “we maintain, as against materialism, that perception overflows infinitely the cerebral state; but we have endeavored to establish, as against idealism, that matter goes in every direction beyond our representation of it, a representation which the mind has gathered out of it, so to speak, by an intelligent choice” (Bergson, 1991 [1896], p. 181). Because change is not instantaneous, every alternation has a history, so to speak, a durational thickness. By consequence, there is no meaningful qualitative difference between a “merely” material movement and behaviors exhibited by a living body: “concrete movement, capable, like consciousness, of prolonging its past into its present, capable, by repeating itself, of engendering sensible qualities, already possesses something akin to consciousness, something akin to sensation” (Bergson, 1991 [1896], p. 245–6). Joel Dolbeault is entirely correct in characterizing *Matter and Memory* as in essence constituting a panpsychist

---

<sup>4</sup> This dualism is especially emphasized by Gilles Deleuze, whose work *Bergsonism* contributed immensely to Bergson's reception. The association of the actual vs virtual duality with action vs memory is somewhat complicated by the fact that action too can come in virtual forms. Bergson declares at one point that “consciousness means virtual action” (Bergson, 1991 [1896], p. 50). Similarly, memory in turn actualizes during the act of recall.

---

<sup>5</sup> For adherents of eliminativism, consciousness is merely an illusion of „folk psychology,” a product of language and conventions. Of course, an important issue with all eliminativist positions is how to account for the ontological status of subjective phenomena such as illusions and delusions. How can something be real, yet not real simultaneously?

cosmology<sup>6</sup> (Dolbeault, 2018, p. 555–6). Intelligence emerges when organisms learn to canalize consciousness, reducing its extension and upgrading its intensity in the process. Movement is already behavior.

Bergson's metaphysics attempts an overthrow of what we may call "ordinary dualism" by displacing the duality of mind and body (or mind and matter) with the new dualism of perception and memory. What Deleuze writes of the present is actually true of all durations: "it is pure becoming, always outside itself" (Deleuze, 1991 [1966], p. 55). By extending perception far beyond the confines of either brain or body, Bergson elaborates a view of materialization as ceaseless self-actualization. If perception is boundless and contains all power, memory is the relative absence of change, the ebb within the flow: "sensation is, in its essence, extended and localized; it is a source of movement. Pure memory, being inextensive and powerless, does not in any degree share the nature of sensation" (Bergson, 1991 [1896], p. 140). It is erroneous to equate the Deleuzian position with the Bergsonian one.<sup>7</sup> The performativity of matter demands that we take change seriously. Bergson's own use of language is rather deceptive regarding past and present. "Practically, we perceive only the past, the pure present being the invisible progress of the past gnawing into the future" (Bergson, 1991 [1896], p. 150). From this, Deleuze and commentators influenced by the Deleuzian reading extract the conclusion that the present, for Bergson, is nothing and that which is past (concretized in memory) everything. But let us not forget: a material image is always more than any perception of it! Hence, what Bergson is really saying is that the immediacy of the present flows profusely, in excess of any consciousness of said

<sup>6</sup> That being said, I believe that more esoteric descriptions of Bergson's philosophy as somehow advocating for "pantheism" or "panentheism" (the belief that all exists within God) are somewhat exaggerated (see Leung, 2022). No positive ontological conception of God ever really emerges from Bergson's philosophy.

<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, Dolphijn and van der Tuin do precisely this, for instance when quoting Deleuze on the following point: "the negation of one real term by the other is only the positive actualization of a virtuality that contains both terms at once" (Deleuze, 1991 [1966], p. 40, quoted in: Dolphijn and van der Tuin, 2011, p. 399). A diffractive reading, while generating mutual interferences among different thinkers and schools, ought to also respect their differences.

change. A movement-image, to borrow Deleuze's expression, is one and the same thing as the ceaseless gnawing of the actualizing powerful present, washing away the sedimentations of the virtual, powerless past. Irrespectively of whether we ourselves notice it or not, "the movement-image passes" (Olkowski, 2021, p. 90). New Materialism is born the moment we learn to take novelty seriously.

## Bergson Beyond Eurocentric Modernity

Is Bergson's metaphysics relevant for the emancipatory politics proposed by New Materialism? The latter positions itself as a consciously emancipatory discourse. In the words of Dolphijn and van der Tuin, "new materialists have set themselves to a rewriting of all possible and impossible forms of emancipation" (Dolphijn and van der Tuin, 2012b, p. 86). Elizabeth Grosz has claimed that "Bergson may help us to articulate an understanding of subjectivity, agency, and freedom that is more consonant with a feminism of difference than with an egalitarian feminism" (Grosz, 2010, p. 142). Therefore, the question of whether Bergson's philosophy does indeed lead to emancipatory conclusions is pertinent. As mentioned, feminist theorist Rebecca Hill for one, has diagnosed a latent "phallogocentrism" at work beneath Bergson's affirmation of the *élan vital*, or creative life force. More substantial are the accusations coming from postcolonialist scholars regarding Bergson's last book, *Two Sources of Morality and Religion*. There Bergson equates "open", indiscriminating morality with Christianity, albeit a universalized and abstract concept of Christian mysticism that bears little resemblance to the historical form of that religion. Is Simon Glezos correct in the radical assertion that Bergson's "religious universalism (backed as it is by a racist and Eurocentric world view) ultimately contradicts his vision of an open society?" (Glezos, 2021, p. 772). Certainly, *Two Sources* abounds in degrading second-hand anthropological descriptions of "primitive" natives, but it must also be recognized – and Glezos also does so – that mysticism and the Bergsonian concern with dynamism can be divorced from their



specific cultural contexts. We can even experiment with observing moments of openness in non-European cultures, for openness is nothing else than the opening of a soul to the alternation of the world, and as such must be considered independent of cultural context. The specific, at times problematic equation of open morality with Christianity, at the expense of other traditions, must be separated from the possibility of rediscovering a non-teleological conception of universal dynamic openness that is capable of drawing from a variety of cultures and traditions. Indeed, Glezos recognizes the rich possibilities inherent within such a dissociation between open religion and Bergson's unfortunately excessive reliance on one specific religious tradition<sup>8</sup> (Glezos, 2019, p. 774-5). The issue of whether Bergson succumbed to certain cultural prejudices differs from the broader question relating to the status of universal openness to change.

At this juncture, I believe that returning to Bergson's metaphysics, as explicated primarily (but, as we shall see, by no means exclusively) in *Matter and Memory*, may help diffract the culturalism and racism undoubtedly present within the scope of *Two Sources*. Alia al-Saji in a recent paper has done important work deconstructing several of Bergson's assertions. According to al-Saji's diagnosis, one that is unfortunately accurate, Bergson in *Two Sources* seems to slip back into a teleological conception of social evolution, one that constructs "a hierarchy of societies" centered around their supposed degrees of openness (Al-Saji, 2019, p. 15).<sup>9</sup> The focus of al-Saji's critique is the central distinction mobilized in *Two Sources*: closed and open (static and dynamic) morality, as well as closed versus open society respectively. Al-Saji proposes that due to the unreflected culturalist and racist assumptions contained in this work, we must proceed with

"decolonizing Bergson" via "a critical and a creative reconfiguration of Bergsonian philosophy" (Al-Saji, 2019, p. 14). Our task, in other words, is to remain true to the central metaphysical insight of Bergsonian thought (the permanency of change and invalidation of dualism) while identifying those areas where Bergson as author failed to live up to this principle. Despite the apparent blending and mixture of openness with closure, at the end of the day it remains evident that for Bergson European society and the Christian religion are most open, while other cultures fail to approximate the abstract ideal of universal love to nearly the same extent. Indeed, not even Buddhism is adequate: in Bergson's view, Christian mysticism, through its supposed combination of contemplation with active love, is the sole authentic representative of open, dynamic spirituality (Bergson, 1935 [1932], p. 191). Open, dynamic religion would be a love that brooks no bounds, so it strikes the reader as peculiar why Bergson chooses to anchor this attitude within a specific tradition. Even more troubling though is the denigration of small, closed, static, "primitive" societies. The problem with a "primitive" society based upon tribal affinity is that it cannot "advance": being "contaminated by the products of its own laziness", it supposedly persists in a paranoiac distrust of the outside world, unable to open itself up to the outflowing of love (Bergson, 1935 [1932], p. 145). Static religion, because of its intolerance and tribal closure, moves around in circles, shutting itself off from the vital impetus (Bergson, 1935 [1932], p. 178). It is no wonder that Al-Saji identifies a highly problematic culturalism at work here, which resembles "contemporary cultural racism, where discrimination against so-called illiberal cultural-religious minorities (in particular, Muslims, but often also Hasidic Jews) is justified based on their supposed intolerance and closure to change" (Al-Saji, 2019, p. 15). Bergson does not seem to extend the scope of tolerance to those perceived as less tolerant than the modern, liberal, secular, progressive cultural "majority". Tolerance does not apply to those outside of Eurocentric modernity.

A compelling argument can be made against readings that would overemphasize Bergson's pacifism (Dombrowski, 1991). Everybody,

<sup>8</sup> Without of course denying that authors are unavoidably situated. Knowledge production is site- and place-specific, a key insight of postmodern feminist epistemologies.

<sup>9</sup> This despite Bergson's clear and evident rejection of Herbert Spencer's idea of teleological evolution in *L'évolution créatrice (Creative Evolution)* (Verdeau, 2007). Its importance notwithstanding, due to various constraints I will not reflect upon that particular work in this paper, as it does not add much of metaphysical substance to *Matter and Memory*, while only connecting tangentially to Bergson's social philosophy.

after all, desires peace, but more often than not exclusively on their own terms. We could certainly read the following statement as an implicit critique of France's imperialism: "a country considers itself incomplete if it has not good ports, colonies, etc. All this may lead to war" (Bergson, 1935 [1932], p. 250). However, al-Saji argues that "while imperialism and colonialism are often thought to be coextensive, this cannot be assumed in Bergson's theory (...) Bergson remains uncritical of French colonial politics, even while he condemns German imperialism" (Al-Saji, 2019, p. 17).<sup>10</sup> From the privileging of supposedly more universalist, open Christianity and European civilization, the legitimation of colonialism is but a small step: if we ourselves are genuinely open, should we not export our indiscriminating love of change to as many parts of the globe as possible? There certainly is not much to commend Bergson's rigidly dualistic contrast between dynamic, open societies and those which have solidified into stagnation (Bergson, 1935 [1932], p. 102). As Al-Saji explains, "while mystics emerge in all societies, according to Bergson, the mystic call will find an easier foothold and greater receptivity in societies that are already in movement; there will be a more fluid acceptance of changing habits" (Al-Saji, 2019, p. 25). Because of its culturalist bias, one could easily draw the conclusion that *Two Sources* in itself is untenable as a social philosophy, and we ought to abandon any idea of a specifically Bergsonian mysticism. It is simply too compromised, dated and culturalist to be of any use.

However, it should also be emphasized that the aspiration towards universality is just that: a tendency, a movement that is never resolved once and for all. Paola Marrati recognizes something that seems to have escaped al-Saji's reading, namely the absolutely empty nature of Bergson's universalist "mysticism". The universal can pertain to absolutely nothing, for "the universal has no figure, the universal is empty.

---

<sup>10</sup> Indeed, in a disgracefully nationalist pamphlet during World War I, Bergson equated the Western Allies with spontaneity and life, while equating the German Empire with mechanism, a remarkable feat considering that the conflict was fought on an industrial scale by colonialist powers, none of which displayed much care for life (Bergson, 1915).

(...) The universal is a movement, a movement without preestablished direction and without continuity" (Marrati, 2006, p. 600). In this context, what Marrati means is that open societies and open systems of morality represent an emergent case of social evolution: they cannot be traced back to prior social forms. There is, in other words, a break in the continuity of evolution, openness being a revolution in morality. We also do not have to define its content too precisely. By extracting and purifying, so to speak, the Bergsonian emphasis upon spiritual change, we can make Bergson's social philosophy applicable to a New Materialist emancipation of materiality too, provided that we work with a suitably liquified and non-teleological conception of "emancipation". This is especially relevant when it comes to the relative lack of engagement of New Materialist scholarship with spirituality. As John Ó Maoilearca correctly points out, "the possibility of a nontranscendent (or immanent) spirit is rarely, if ever, entertained" in New Materialist scholarship or, for that matter, within contemporary philosophy as a whole (Ó Maoilearca, 2023, p. 13). Returning to Bergson could help us reenvision a continuity between spirit and material becoming, without reducing the spiritual to an epiphenomenon of materiality.

Taking change seriously means questioning the static elements still present within Bergson's philosophy. Al-Saji correctly diagnoses *Two Sources* as constituting a theoretical regression: "*Les deux sources* inscribes a teleology of life, which the rest of Bergson's philosophy had disavowed" (Al-Saji, 2019, p. 26). Her solution, one that accords strikingly with the focus of New Materialist readings of Bergson, is to read Bergson diffractively by returning to the metaphysics of *Matter and Memory*. Instead of discontinuity, including cultural imperialist scissions between supposedly superior and inferior cultures, the Bergsonian embrace of permanent novelty dissolves stasis and discreteness. Even matter "resolves itself into numberless vibrations, all linked together in uninterrupted continuity, all bound up with each other, and traveling in every direction like shivers through an immense body" (Bergson, 1991 [1896], p. 208). This shows us the possibility of a "spiritual matter", conceived of

as the creative self-actualization of reality (Schelling, 2019 [1811], p. 91).<sup>11</sup> Remaining true to this abyssal vision demands a continuous embrace of change. By using the methodology of 1896 Bergson against 1932 Bergson, al-Saji performs a decolonialization: “tendencies are extended according to their curves (differentially by taking the tangent), and not in a geometrical projection from two points. To follow through the movement of a tendency, its directionality must be grasped in process, neither at the beginning nor at its end, if end there be” (Al-Saji, 2019, p. 27). Instead of openness or closure, we are left with half-openness, the indeterminacy of the in-between. While generally I am in agreement with such a conclusion, the political difficulties of maintaining a state of cognitive, spiritual and affective openness ought not to be overestimated, not to mention the problematic of appropriation.<sup>12</sup> Against the distinction open/closed, Al-Saji focuses upon the concept of tendency, which connotes “the continuous immanent transformation of directionality” (Al-Saji, 2019, p. 29). Puzzlingly, no mention is made of Bergson’s other main work in the field of social philosophy, *Laughter*. Alongside *Matter and Memory*, I believe this book contains another kernel of the decolonialized, fluidified Bergsonism which Al-Saji is searching for.

J. W. Scott, an early critic of Bergson, argued that *Laughter* contains a negative, even nihilist moral teaching, with pessimistic implications. As Bergson writes toward the end of *Laughter*, “the more society improves, the more plastic

is the adaptability it obtains from its members” (Bergson, 1914 [1900], p. 199). It does seem as if Bergson is attempting to excuse society and life of their crimes against the human spirit. In *Laughter*, we learn that the comic phenomenon is a tool of society which serves to maintain social cohesion. We laugh at those who are clumsy, individuals who behave mechanically. The butt of a joke must suffer, because this is what guarantees the plasticity of society. Scott takes the equation of social life with adaptability to be corrosive of all moral systems, alleging that by representing the goal of social integration in dynamic terms, Bergson opens the door to unrestrained “moral relativity” (Scott, 1914, p. 164). For Bergson, the idea of the good would consist in the permanence of change. This does not mean any particular society has a permanent monopoly upon malleability, just as no existing society has actually achieved the openness posited in *Two Sources*. A good Bergsonist would be somebody willing and able to modify their own positions, often in extreme ways, abandoning, if need be, even sacred ideals or moral principles, so as to guarantee the persistence of changeability. A Bergsonian morality, if it were to exist, would consist in a single principle: “be adaptable.” *Always modify yourself*. Scott does not essentially dispute Bergson’s equation of humor with social pressure, instead taking issue with the positing of maximum changeability as the ultimate goal of social life. As a critic of Bergson’s supposed nihilism, Scott cannot imagine how anybody could believe in a moral code which is grounded upon impermanence, including the malleability of its own principles (Scott, 1914, p. 165). Scott’s critique could arguably be applied to New Materialism as well. The embrace of the continuity of change seems to commit us to a moral relativism, an uncritical acceptance of change. Does incorporating impermanence into our morality make living well impossible? Is the ceaseless shifting of moral standards capable of “squandering” all ethical values, as Scott suggests? Not if we remain true to the self-actualization of the present moment. One could state the following moral injunction, originally formulated by John Dewey, pragmatist philosopher and contemporary of Bergson: “act as to increase the meaning of *present* experience” (Dewey, 1922, p. 283 –

<sup>11</sup> Further on, Schelling notes regarding matter that “inwardly, it is the purest spirituality, even though outwardly it is complete passivity” (Schelling, 2019 [1811]). This non-dualist immanentism is not lost on some contemporary New Materialists. Iain Hamilton Grant for one has elaborated a New Materialist reading of Schelling’s works (Grant, 2006).

<sup>12</sup> It is far from trivial whether a male author has the right to even use feminist conceptual methodologies. Jacques Derrida, for example, regularly spoke of female positionality and of the need for “invagination” of the dominant white Eurocentric metaphysical tradition. One could level the charge of appropriation against Derrida. Whatever we think of the inhabitation of feminine or subaltern positionalities by white male authors, deconstructive reading often necessitates “staying with” the author, at least for a while, and if the performer of a theoretical “invagination” happens to identify as a male of any persuasion, this in itself is not automatically problematic, except perhaps when done to gain credibility and score ideological points. However, this risk is far from exclusive to male authors alone (Armour, 1999, p. 81).

emphasis mine).<sup>13</sup> Accepting reality as the continuity of change does not necessarily commit us to abandoning the “good” versus “evil” distinction altogether. If we accept the Deweyian imperative, then a New Materialist or Bergsonian must act so as to make possible further changes. Evil, on such a reading, on both an individual or societal level, would reside in the inhibition of change, whereas good could be defined as the construction of possibilities for further alterations of the present state. It would be a grave error to reject an ontological position because of its commitment to change. Perhaps it is time that we learn to imagine the unimaginable and free ourselves of our inveterate desire for permanent fixtures and universal truths.

### Conclusion: Newness After Dualism’s Demise

New Materialism seeks to construct a new form of ontology and, from that, an emancipatory politics of change. As I see it, Bergsonian philosophy, when taken seriously, allows us to elaborate an affinity with change. While Bergson never elaborated anything like a system of morality, or any systematic philosophy for that matter, its emphasis on the permanency and unavoidability of change is undoubtedly radical, without being teleological, deterministic, or uncritically progressive. What is needed is an elaboration of what newness means for New Materialism. In my view, criticisms of the vacuous or implausible status of the “new” component in New Materialist scholarship badly miss the mark. Novelty is something that demands repetition. The new is always commencing again, hence it should come as no surprise that serious attention to change recurs throughout the history of philosophy and

---

<sup>13</sup> Here I do not wish to delve deeper into what Dewey understood under “increasing” the scope of “experience.” As an anthropocentric author, Dewey presumably meant expanding human possibilities through education. However, if we conceive of reality as being inherently composed of both perception and memory, as Bergson and other panpsychist-oriented thinkers do, then this would entail an ethical commitment to allowing as many varieties of becoming as possible to make themselves manifest. The imperative to allow the self-fulfilment of human and nonhuman entities alike is a frequent theme of post-anthropocentric ecological thought.

theory. Instead of being merely an academic fad, New Materialism is an engagement with the reality of change. Newness here would denote the indeterminate, open nature of all becomings, material and social alike. Indeed, the generality of change means that there is no all-encompassing ontological gulf between the sum of images in the world (“matter” or “nature”) and representation (“society” or “culture”). Feminist methodologies, in turn, help us decolonize and “invaginate” Bergson’s ideas, renewing a shared, engaged commitment to change, without necessarily adhering ourselves to a single, universalist, static conception of emancipation, progress or, worse, the “good.”

A recent highly compelling experiment in an emancipatory reading of Bergson is that of Heike Delitz. Drawing upon the portrayal of materiality in *Matter and Memory*, Delitz makes the case that a “Bergsonian theory of society could (...) be regarded as a New Materialism, in different ways: on the one hand, in regarding living (Bergson) or non-living (Simondon) matter as having its own potentials of meanings and forms – or seeing matter as ‘alive’ – these authors share a literal materialism” (Delitz, 2021, p. 110). I am doubtful about the description of Bergson as a “literal” materialist. Rather, following Ó Maoilearca’s lead, we may speak of a reanimation or “ephemeralization” of matter itself in process philosophies such as that of Bergson: “the spiritualization of matter is not its transubstantiation (the insertion of a ghost into another substance), but its ephemeralization – seeing matter as moving, traceless, evanescent, and *thereby* real” (Ó’Maoilearca, 2023, p. 131). This is the “newness” New Materialism aims for. Not only does such a New Materialist position commit us to an open view of matter as indeterministic, but also this makes possible a new view of society and human history too. Because of its rejection of all teleologies, “a Bergsonian social theory always stresses the openness of human history, its unforeseeable becoming-another” (Delitz, 2021, p. 110). Delitz forcefully rejects Marxist historical materialism and other teleologically-influenced strands of deterministic social theory.<sup>14</sup> If we

---

<sup>14</sup> This accords with Bergson’s rejection of Herbert Spencer’s teleological idea of social progress. Evolution for Bergson is creative precisely because it introduces

think of change in terms of teleology, we fail to take into account its creativity. For the Bergson of *Matter and Memory*, “the distinguishing ontological feature of all matter is continuous and unforeseeable becoming-another” (Delitz, 2021, p. 111). Of course, memory as virtuality plays a role in keeping the entirety of the universe together, but for Bergson, actualization is the most fundamental aspect. Without the creativity of be-ing, no duration could persist. Cornelius Castoriadis writes in a similar vein, how “the social-historical is perpetual flux of self-alteration”, which can only persist by “providing itself with ‘stable’ figures” (Castoriadis, 1998 [1975], p. 204). This has important spiritual ramifications. Following Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling, one could state that “expansion is spiritualization while contraction is embodiment” (Schelling, 2019 [1811], p. 95). Instead of mutually exclusionary dualities, spirit and corporeality on this view would constitute two inextricably linked tendencies within the broader evolutionary process of matter’s evolution. Such a non-dualist and non-reductivist insight is not alien to the spirit of this discussion.<sup>15</sup> Bergsonian philosophy, through its meta-normative commitment and post-critical embrace of change, is one of those fabulations that can help maintain societal openness to alternation. New Materialism rejects historical determinist constructs of finality which reduce social evolution to narrowly defined material factors (Delitz, 2021, p. 119). New Materialism is also a recognition of matter as creative, not yet complete. Before us stands a revelation of living and non-living matter alike, both verdantly shot through with movement.

---

discontinuity and novelty into the flow of a broader evolutionary continuity (the *élan vital*).

<sup>15</sup> Indeed one could posit a Schellingian influence at work in Bergson. The goal of both philosophers was remarkably similar: to go beyond the tired dualism of „idea” or „spirit” versus „matter.” Of course, I do not wish to claim that Bergson was a Schellingian. Rather, the metaphysical problem the two philosophers grapple with is the same. For more on the Bergson-Schelling connection, see: Hamrick, 2011, p. 123–153.

## Bibliography

- Al-Saji, Alia (2019). Decolonizing Bergson: The temporal schema of the open and the closed. In: Andrea J. Pitts & Mark William Westmoreland (Eds.), *Beyond Bergson. Examining Race and Colonialism Through the Writings of Henri Bergson* (pp. 13–37). State University of New York Press.
- Armour, E. T. (1999). *Deconstruction, feminist theology, and the problem of difference: Subverting the race/gender divide*. University of Chicago Press.
- Barad, Karen (2003). Posthumanist performativity: Toward an understanding of how matter comes to matter. *Signs: Journal of women in culture and society*, 28(3), 801–831.
- Bergson, Henri (1914 [1900]). *Laughter*. Trans. Cloudesley Brereton & Fred Rothwell. Macmillan.
- Bergson, Henri (1915). *The meaning of the war: Life and matter in conflict*. Trans. H. Wildon Carr. T. Fischer Unwin.
- Bergson, Henri (1935 [1932]). *Two sources of morality and religion*. Trans. R. Ashley Audra & Cloudesley Brereton. Macmillan.
- Bergson, Henri (1991 [1896]). *Matter and memory*. Trans. Nancy M. Paul & W. Scott Palmer. Zone Books.
- Braidotti, Rosi (1994). *Nomadic subjects: Embodiment and sexual difference in contemporary feminist theory*. Columbia University Press.
- Braidotti, Rosi (2022). *Posthuman feminism*. Polity.
- Braidotti, Rosi, & Hlavajova, Maria (Eds.). (2018). *Posthuman glossary*. Bloomsbury.
- Castoriadis, Cornelius (1998 [1975]). *The imaginary institution of society*. Trans. Kathleen Blamey. MIT Press.
- DeLanda, Manuel (1997). *A thousand years of non-linear history*. Zone Books.
- Deleuze, Gilles (1991 [1966]). *Bergsonism*. Trans. H. Tomlinson & B. Habberjam. Zone Books.
- Delitz, Heike (2021). Life as the subject of society: Critical vitalism as critical social theory. In: Hartmut Rosa, Christoph Henning & Arthur Bueno (Eds.), *Critical theory and new materialisms* (pp. 107–123). Routledge.
- Dewey, John (1922). *Human nature and conduct: An introduction to social psychology*. Henry Holt.
- Dolbeault, Joël (2018). Bergson's panpsychism. *Continental Philosophy Review*, 51(4), 549–564.
- Dolphijn, Rick, & van der Tuin, Iris (2011). Pushing dualism to an extreme: On the philosophical impetus of a new materialism. *Continental Philosophy Review*, 44, 383–400.
- Dolphijn, Rick, & van der Tuin, Iris (2012a). Interview with Rosi Braidotti. In: Rick Dolphijn & Iris van der Tuin (Eds.), *New materialism: Interviews & cartographies* (pp. 19–38). Open Humanities Press.
- Dolphijn, Rick, & van der Tuin, Iris (2012b). Introduction: A "new tradition" in thought. In: Rick Dolphijn & Iris van der Tuin (Eds.), *New materialism: Interviews & cartographies* (pp. 85–93). Open Humanities Press.
- Dombrowski, Daniel (1991). *Christian pacifism*. Temple University Press.

- Ferrando, Francesca (2019). *Philosophical posthumanism*. Bloomsbury.
- Glezos, Simon (2021). Bergson contra Bergson: Race and morality in *The two sources*. *European Journal of Political Theory*, 20(4), 761–781.
- Grant, Iain Hamilton (2006). *Philosophies of nature after Schelling*. Continuum.
- Grosz, Elizabeth (2010). Feminism, materialism, and freedom. In: Diana Coole & Samantha Frost (Eds.), *New materialisms: Ontology, agency, and politics* (139–158). Duke University Press.
- Grusin, Richard (Ed.). (2015). *The nonhuman turn*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Guerlac, Suzanne (2020). Bergson, the time of life, and the memory of the universe. In: Alexandre Lefebvre & Nils F. Schott (Eds.), *Interpreting Bergson: Critical essays* (pp. 104–121). Cambridge University Press.
- Hamrick, William S., & van der Veken, Jan (2011). *Nature and Logos: A Whiteheadian key to Merleau-Ponty's fundamental thought*. State University of New York Press.
- Haraway, Donna J. (2004 [1992]). The promises of monsters: A regenerative politics for inappropriate/d others” in: Donna J. Haraway, *The Haraway reader* (pp. 63–125). Routledge.
- Hartshorne, Charles (1937). *Beyond humanism: Essays in the new philosophy of nature*. Willett, Clark & Company.
- Herbrechter, Stefan (2021). *Before humanity. Posthumanism and ancestry*. Brill.
- Hill, Rebecca (2008) Phallogentrism in Bergson: Life and matter. In: Claire Colebrook & Jami Weinstein (Eds.), *Deleuze and gender* (123–136). Edinburgh University Press.
- Krzykawski, Michał (2019). Why is new materialism not the answer? Approaching hyper-matter, reinventing the sense of critique beyond “theory”. *Praktyka Teoretyczna*, 34(4), 73–105.
- Leung, King-Ho. (2022). Bergson, pan(en)theism, and “being-in-life.” *Sophia* 62, 1–15.
- MacCormack, Patricia (2020). *The ahuman manifesto: Activism for the end of the Anthropocene*. Bloomsbury.
- Marrati, Paola (2006). Mysticism and the foundation of the open society: Bergsonian politics. In: Hent de Vries & Lawrence E. Sullivan (Eds.), *Political theologies: Public religions in a post-secular world* (pp. 591–602). Fordham University Press.
- Nail, Thomas (2019). *Being and motion*. Oxford University Press.
- Olkowski, Dorothea (2021). *Deleuze, Bergson, Merleau-Ponty: The logic and pragmatics of creation, affective life, and perception*. Indiana University Press.
- Ó Maoilearca, John (2023). *Vestiges of a philosophy: Matter, the meta-spiritual, and the forgotten Bergson*. Oxford University Press.
- Plumwood, Val (1993). *Feminism and the mastery of nature*. Routledge.
- Schelling, Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph (2019 [1811]). *The ages of the world*. Trans. Joseph P. Lawrence. State University of New York Press.
- Scott, J. W. (1914). Ethical Pessimism in Bergson. *The International Journal of Ethics*, 24(2). 147–167.
- Sinclair, Mark (2020). *Bergson*. Routledge.
- van der Tuin, Iris (2011). A different starting point, a different metaphysics: Reading Bergson and Barad diffractively. *Hypatia*, 26(1), 22–42.
- Verdeau, Patricia (2007). Bergson et Spencer. *Annales bergsoniennes*, 3, 361–377.

Worms, Frédéric (1997). *Introduction à Matière et mémoire de Bergson*. Presses Universitaires de France.

### Author information

Adam Lovasz (0000-0003-1422-0381)

Email: [adam.lovasz629@yahoo.com](mailto:adam.lovasz629@yahoo.com)

Adam Lovasz is a philosopher and researcher affiliated with Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest. Adam's research interests center around posthumanism, post-anthropocentrism, process philosophy, object-oriented philosophy and nihilism. Among Adam's most notable works to date are the following monographs: *H. P. Lovecraft: Poszthumanista olvasatok* (2022, with Márk Horváth and Márió Z. Nemes, Kijárat); *Updating Bergson. A Philosophy of the Enduring Present* (2021, Lexington Books); *A valóság visszatérése. Spekulatív realizmusok és újrealizmusok a kortárs filozófiában* (2019; with Márk Horváth and Márk Losoncz, Forum); *A poszthumanizmus változatai. Emberi, embertelen és ember utáni* (2020 with Márk Horváth and Márió Z. Nemes, Prae). Adam is presently working on a monograph entitled *On Nature*. Adam's work has appeared in a number of peer-reviewed journals, including the following: *American, British and Canadian Studies (ABC)*, *Chiasma*, *Cosmos & History*, *Horizon*, *Horror Studies*, *Identities*, *Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies*, *Open Philosophy*, *Rhizomes*, *Textual Practice*.