

## **Life, thinking and phenomenology in the early Bergson**

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How should we appraise Bergson's relation to phenomenology? There are different ways to tackle this question. In the following my focus will be quite narrow. I will restrict myself to a close reading of Bergson's doctoral dissertation *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience*. The question I wish to ask is basically whether the analysis of consciousness that Bergson provides in the second chapter of the dissertation is phenomenologically convincing.

### 1. Time, space and language

A central tenet in Bergson's analysis is that our conscious states reveal themselves in two radically different ways depending on whether we perceive them directly or through spatial forms derived from the external world. Bergson argues that the spatial forms distort and conceal the real structures of consciousness, and that our philosophical task is to do away with the forms in question in order to allow for a disclosure of the true and ordinarily hidden nature of consciousness.

In order to understand Bergson's train of thought, his insistence that a spatialization of consciousness amounts to a complete deformation of its proper character and structure, we need to take a closer look at his discussion of the basic opposition between time and space.

On a common understanding, time and space are both homogenous mediums. The main difference is whether their contents co-exist or follow one another. On such an understanding, time can be viewed as a kind of line, and if we try to visualize our stream of consciousness, we frequently think of it as consisting of a temporal sequence of conscious states, ranged alongside one another so as to form a discrete multiplicity. This multiplicity will be very akin to the multiplicity of spatial objects. Spatial objects are also perceived as distinct, isolated entities, externally related to one another. But time understood in such a fashion is for Bergson something utterly distinct from and alien to the lived time that is unique to and distinctive of consciousness, and which he terms *true or pure duration*.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, time conceived of as a homogenous medium in which our conscious states are spread out so as to form a series composed of separate and distinct elements that stand in external relations to one another, like wagons in train, is for Bergson a spurious conception, one due to the transposition of the idea of space unto the field of consciousness (TFW 98-99).<sup>2</sup> To think of time as a line presupposes a view from above, a view that, so to speak, takes it in all at once, but this merely reveals that simultaneity and thereby spatiality pervades such a conception of time. In fact, for Bergson, this conception of time basically betrays what is essential to time in favor of space (TFW 91, 98).

If we through a vigorous effort manage to isolate consciousness from the external world in order to intuit its true character, we will according to Bergson soon realize that true duration has nothing in common with space (TFW 90-1). It is not quantifiable, and the moment we treat it as such and try to measure it, we will do violence to it (TFW 106). Indeed, in pure duration, conscious states are not distinct, but united. They are characterized by a

dynamical self-organization, where they melt into and permeate one another without precise outlines. In fact, on this level, there is no real difference between the persistence of one state and the transition to another state. They intermingle in such a way that we cannot tell whether they are one or several. We cannot examine or approach them from this point of view at all without altering and distorting them (TFW 137). To isolate one conscious state is consequently not like detaching one independent element from another, but rather like tearing off a fragment of material from a whole that is thereby left in tatters. Thus, rather than likening two conscious states to two wagons in the same train, it might be more appropriate to liken them to two waves in the same stream.

In reality, consciousness is nothing jointed; it simply flows. Rather than being a quantitative succession of separate bits, the stream of consciousness is a qualitative continuity without distinctions, where the different states are characterized by mutual penetration and interconnection (TFW 105, 107). However, unwittingly we will start to introduce spatial notions and categories into our understanding of experiential life. Distinction we find among objects in the external world will be transposed and introjected into subjectivity. In this sense there will be an exchange between the inner and the outer (TFW 126). To illustrate the problem at hand, Bergson asks us to consider the oscillations of a pendulum:

As the successive phases of our conscious life, although interpenetrating, correspond individually to an oscillation of the pendulum which occurs at the same time, and as, moreover, these oscillations are sharply distinguished from one another, we get into the habit of setting up the same distinction between the successive moments of our conscious life: the oscillations of the pendulum break it up, so to speak, into parts external to one another: hence the mistaken idea of a homogenous inner duration, similar to space, the moments of which are identical and follow, without interpenetrating one another. (TFW 109)

To sum up, according to Bergson we need to distinguish two ways of regarding conscious life; a superficial and a more profound. To a superficial inspection, consciousness consists of a sequence of distinct conscious states. To a more profound investigation, consciousness reveals itself as qualitative continuity of mutually permeating states that form an organic whole (TFW 128). Occasionally, however, Bergson also seems to suggest that there are superficial and more profound conscious states. The superficial are those through which the ego is in touch with the spatial world, i.e., states like perception or sensation, and since they tend to acquire and take on the structures of that which they are about, they can to some extent be described in terms of spatial structures. But as for the profound levels of consciousness, they cannot be quantified in any way whatsoever without altering their character drastically (TFW 90). We are here dealing with structures so unique that they cannot be grasped by means of language or through any form of intellectual cognition. Reason can isolate, immobilize, and spatialize the flow of lived experiences and thereby make them accessible to verbal description and analytic reflection. But the true life of consciousness cannot be caught in our conceptual network. It will always overflow our artificial demarcations and distinctions.

Let us take a closer look at this latter more radical claim. As it turns out, Bergson seeks to support his analysis of the twofold way in which conscious states can reveal themselves by considering the relation between mind and language. As he writes, our perceptions, thoughts, and emotions can occur under two aspects: one clear and precise but impersonal, the other confused, ever-changing and inexpressible. As soon as we try to describe our conscious states, as soon as we try to analyze and express them in words, the conscious states that by nature are deeply personal will change character. They will be transformed into impersonal elements that are externally related to one another (TFW 163). This problem is not merely due to the fact that language employs general concepts, denoting, and thereby missing, the

delicate shades of the ever fluctuating states with simple uniform words (TFW 164). The problem is also that language as a whole makes us operate with sharp and precise distinctions thereby imposing the same kind of discontinuities between our experiential episodes as exist between material objects (TFW xix). As soon as we introduce clear-cut distinctions, as soon as we isolate and identify a conscious state, we distort the processual character of our experiential life (TFW 132). As Bergson writes:

We must not forget that states of consciousness are processes and not things; that if we denote them each by a single word, it is for the convenience of language; that they are alive and therefore constantly changing. (TFW 196)

Language cannot get hold of consciousness without arresting its protean character and without fitting its irreducible individuality into a procrustean uniform of general concepts. Indeed, as Bergson writes, all that language is able to capture are lifeless shadows (TFW 132-3). At one point, Bergson considers the possibility that a novelist or poet by employing a far richer and nuanced language might be able to demonstrate that each and every conscious thought or feeling rather than being adequately expressed by simple terms do indeed harbor “an infinite permeation of a thousand different impressions”. But by naming and expressing this richness in words, the novelist or poet will in turn only offer us an impoverished substitute (TFW 134). Language is simply not able to convey or render the subtleties of our experiential life (TFW 13), and ultimately Bergson denies that there is any common measure between mind and language (TFW 165).

Given these limitations, given the distortions allegedly inflicted on consciousness by language, why do we nevertheless incessantly strive to describe and account for consciousness by means of language? Why are we constantly tempted into introducing distinctions taken from the external world into our inner life, thereby replacing the interpenetration of a constantly changing qualitative multiplicity for a fixed set of numerical distinct states?<sup>3</sup> As Bergson repeatedly asserts, when consciousness is broken into pieces that easily lend themselves to verbal expressions, it is far better geared and adapted to the requirements of *social life*. Given these demands, the self has everything to gain by assuming a form of self-forgetfulness (TFW 128). Or to be more precise, through socialization and language-acquisition a second self is formed, one that Bergson in turn characterizes as a colorless shadow, as superficial and parasitic, and one that by necessity will obscure the deep-seated self (TFW 138). As he writes,

We generally perceive our own self by refraction through space, our conscious states crystallize into words and our living and concrete self thus gets covered by an outer crust of clean-cut psychic states which are separate from one another and consequently fixed. For the convenience of language and the promotion of social relations we have everything to gain by not breaking through this crust and by assuming it to give an exact outline of the form of the object it covers. (TFW 167)

As time goes by – if such a phrase is permitted – the link to the external world is increasingly solidified, and as a result, our conscious states are not only broken off from one another and made into objects, they also break off from ourselves, that is, become alienated fragments (TFW 138-139). Thus on Bergson’s account, we would be in a much better position to attain a correct self-understanding if each of us lived a purely individual life with no interference from society or language – though even in such a condition we would have difficulties escaping the entrapment of spatial thinking (TFW 137).

## 2. A neo-Kantian digression

Before comparing Bergson's account with ideas found in phenomenology, let me briefly point to a different and perhaps slightly surprising convergence, namely the one existing between Bergson's view and the position we find in the neo-Kantian Paul Natorp.

According to Natorp, consciousness cannot be something with a temporal and spatial appearance, since only objects appear in space and time, and consciousness is not an object.<sup>4</sup> For the very same reason, it is a regular category mistake to describe consciousness with the help of those categories and concepts that have their legitimate use in the world of objects (AP 28). It would amount to a spatialization and exteriorization of something purely interior. Ultimately, Natorp radicalizes this point and argues that every description involving the use of language, involving the use of generalizing and subsuming concepts will merely estrange us from that which we seek to understand (AP 91-92, 190). Indeed, for Natorp every expression (*Äußerung*) involves meditation and externalization (*Entäußerung*). The moment consciousness expresses itself, be it in language or behavior, it will leave its own domain behind. Every expression isolates and fixates that which cannot be isolated and fixated (AP 99). This view is eloquently presented in the following passage:

If one were oneself to try, if it were at all possible, to somehow grasp the content of immediate experience purely as it is in itself – far from every expression, every judgment, every intention – would one then not somehow be forced, nevertheless, to delimit it, to raise it above the mesh of experiencing, be it with the pointing of a finger, with a blink of an eye; would one not be forced to artificially still and interrupt the continuous stream of becoming, which surely is how inner life presents itself, to isolate the individual finding, to fixate it with the isolation in mind, to sterilize it, like the anatomist does with his specimen? But doesn't one then detach it from the experienced, from the subjective, and doesn't one then, nevertheless, make it into an object? In the end, one apparently never grasps the subjective, as such, in itself. On the contrary, in order to grasp it scientifically, one is forced to strip it of its subjective character. One kills subjectivity in order to dissect it, and believes that the life of the soul is on display in the result of the dissection! (AP 102-103)

What are the implications of Natorp's view? Does he declare any systematic investigation of consciousness impossible in principle; is every description a falsification, every conceptualization a violation? Natorp has certainly strong misgivings about the reliability of reflection. On his account, reflection acts as a distorting prism and merely confronts us with a reified and petrified consciousness. But rather than investigating consciousness in a direct manner, Natorp proposes that we adopt an indirect approach and seek to recover pristine subjectivity through a neutralization of the effect of reflection. That is, after reflectively having analyzed and thereby destroyed the lived unity of consciousness, we should try to reverse the process, we should try to unite the detached elements and thereby restore the experiences to their original state through a kind of *reconstruction* (AP 192). We cannot investigate our own consciousness directly. But we can start with the objectified counterpart, and then proceed regressively in an attempt to recover the original subjective dimension. Ultimately, however, Natorp considers the dimension of pure subjectivity an unreachable ideal and limit-case (AP 233).

As Natorp himself points out, there are many similarities between his own position and that of Bergson (AP 319). As he observes, Bergson never describes pure consciousness positively, but only *ex negativo*, by denying it objective properties. In that sense, Bergson is also seeking to effectuate a „cancellation of the objectifying performance“ that is, he is also seeking to approach the immediate through reconstruction (AP 307). Ultimately, however, Natorp also insists on some important differences. To start with, Natorp argues that

Bergson's distrust of reason, his repeated contention concerning the intellect's rape and violation, is partly due to a mistaken view of analysis. The ultimate aim of analysis is not separation and disintegration, rather analysis is merely a means towards a better understanding of unity, connection and context. Indeed, by slighting analysis, Bergson is flirting with what Natorp calls an "arbeitsfeindlicher Mystizismus" (AP 308). Natorp also faults Bergson for operating with an unacceptable contrast between the concepts that are viewed as absolutely static, fixed and immobile, and the experiences that are seen as boundlessly streaming and variable (AP 323).<sup>5</sup> Finally, Natorp points out that whereas his own project remains within the framework of Kant's critical philosophy, Bergson claims that intuition can provide us with absolute metaphysical knowledge. It can give us access to the things themselves (AP 320).

### 3. Phenomenological misgivings

When coming to *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience* from phenomenology, it is easy to pin point the thought in Bergson's early work that would be of immediate appeal to phenomenologists. It is undoubtedly the idea that consciousness has its own unique structure and mode of existence; one we will utterly fail to grasp as long as we seek to describe and categorize consciousness as if it was merely a spatial object. There is far more to consciousness than what can be disclosed in an objectifying analysis. It is not surprising that it in particular was Bergson's notion of pure duration which attracted attention. If we for instance consider the way Bergson was read by Schütz, who certainly counts among the more approving phenomenological readers, Schütz repeatedly places Bergson's account of duration side by side with Husserl's analysis of inner time-consciousness, and even compares Bergson's description of how we through a strenuous effort can turn our attention away from the world of objects and towards our own inner stream of consciousness with Husserl's notion of phenomenological reduction.<sup>6</sup>

Are we here faced with a profound convergence of interest and orientation or rather with a superficial similarity? To answer this question, we need to take a closer look at an issue that was already briefly alluded to in the Natorp overview, namely the daunting methodological challenges that the Bergsonian project is faced with. First of all, there is the inevitable question regarding the coherence of the entire enterprise. According to Bergson, if we try to grasp consciousness through analysis and by means of discursive reason we will inevitably miss the target. We cannot grasp pure duration through intellectual cognition, we cannot conceptualize it. Any intellectual, reflective, or analytic attempt to comprehend pure duration will transform it into a sequence of static, immobilized elements. We will distort and petrify that which by nature is dynamic and processual (TFW 219, 229). But throughout the book, Bergson does precisely what he warns us against. He uses language and concepts in order to articulate and describe a dimension of consciousness that on his own account is inexpressible. He even admits to the problem himself, and the example he provides is illustrative since it touches on a quite central tenet of his theory. Bergson concedes that when describing how various conscious states organize themselves into a dynamic whole, where each of them permeates the others, he is already transgressing his own principles and doing violence to his subject matter, by introducing distinctions that tend to isolate and externalize the states in question (TFW 122). The dilemma is of course well known from the history of theology and monastic mysticism. One traditional option has been to proceed *ex negativo*, which to some extent is also what Bergson ends up doing. But given that *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience* is a work in philosophy, we are faced with a problem that puts pressure on the project.

It is informative to compare Bergson's suspicion of language, his conviction that the distinctions it sets up are misleading, with the rather different attitude that is expressed by Husserl in the very first paragraph of his introduction to the second part of *Logische Untersuchungen*. This is admittedly not Husserl's final words on the relation between language and phenomenology,<sup>7</sup> but that does not diminish their poignancy. Husserl writes,

Linguistic discussions are certainly among the philosophically indispensable preparations for the building of pure logic; only by their aid can the true *objects* of logical research – and, following thereon, the essential species and differentiae of such objects – be refined to a clarity that excludes all misunderstanding. We are not here concerned with grammatical discussions, empirically conceived and related to some historically given language: we are concerned with discussions of a most general sort which cover the wider sphere of an objective *theory of knowledge* and, closely linked with this last, the *pure phenomenology of the experiences of thinking and knowing*. [...] This phenomenology must bring to pure expression, must *describe* in terms of their essential concepts and their governing formulae of essence, the essences which directly make themselves known in intuition, and the connections which have their roots purely in such essences.<sup>8</sup>

One finds a comparable rejection of the kind of position espoused by Bergson in Heidegger's early lecture courses, in particularly in those places where Heidegger discusses the work of Natorp.<sup>9</sup> As Heidegger asks, is it really true that all language is objectifying, and that all concepts inevitably fragment a hitherto unfragmented totality? Is it really true that any description will always be foreign to that which is given?<sup>10</sup> For Heidegger, experiential life is not mute, chaotic and inexpressible.<sup>11</sup> Rather, experiential life is imbued with meaning, is intentionally structured, has an inner articulation and rationality and is comprehensible because it always spontaneously expresses itself; because experiencing is itself a preliminary form of understanding, it is itself what might be called a pre-understanding.<sup>12</sup> Thus, Heidegger basically argues that there is an intimate connection between *experience*, *expression*, and *understanding*.<sup>13</sup> It is also in this context that Heidegger quotes Dilthey – “Thinking is bound to life through an inner necessity; it is itself a form of life” – and speaks of philosophy as a continuation of the *reflexivity* found in life.<sup>14</sup>

In clear opposition to the view espoused by Bergson, Heidegger can consequently claim that an articulation and conceptualization of our experiential life can be something that belongs to life itself rather than being something that is imposed on life arbitrarily from without. A true phenomenological description does not constitute a violation, is not an attempt to impose a foreign systematicity on life, rather it is something that is rooted in and motivated by factic life-experience itself.<sup>15</sup> As Heidegger writes in the lecture course *Phänomenologische Interpretationen zu Aristoteles* from 1921/22:

The categories are nothing invented, no ‘framework’ or independent society of logical schemata; they are rather in an originary fashion *in life itself of life*; of life, in order to ‘cultivate’ it. They have their own mode of access which, however, is not such as would be foreign to life itself, imposed upon it arbitrarily from without, rather it is just the eminent way in which *life comes to itself*.<sup>16</sup>

The question to raise is consequently whether Bergson might be faulted for operating with too narrow an understanding of both conceptualization and language. This is admittedly a somewhat awkward accusation to make of someone who was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, but the question must be asked. Didn't Bergson underestimate the protean character of language? Does language not have a multiplicity of forms; does it not possess a force and mobility that enables it to articulate the subjective without necessarily violating it in

the process?

Let us be a bit more precise and let us distinguish a number of interrelated but ultimately different claims. Bergson is certainly right in claiming that language can mislead us. Consider for instance the three following statements: “I see the moon,” “I hear the violin,” “I feel a pain.” All three have the same structure. But whereas it in the two first cases makes good sense to distinguish the perceptual experience from the object of perception, it is far less obvious that we in the case of pain can make such a neat distinction between the experience and that of which it is an experience. Indeed, to attribute such a subject-object structure to pain-experience is arguably a serious mistake. So again, Bergson is right in claiming that language can mislead us – though we should obviously not forget that language also enables us to identify, articulate and criticize the mistake in question. Furthermore, Bergson is also right in claiming that language cannot replace intuition. There is indeed an irreducible difference between reading about Aurora Borealis and seeing and experiencing it in all its splendor, but one can concede this without endorsing the view that language rather than pointing us towards the phenomenon in question consistently points away from it, which seems to be Bergson’s view. Finally, while accepting the irreducibility and superabundance of intuition one should not overlook that there are forms of experience which rather than being deformed or corrupted by language are made possible by it. Think for instance on complex emotions like patriotism or repentance. It is hard to imagine the existence of either emotion in a creature living a purely individual life with no interference from society or language. Or to take a more mundane example, think of how language can enrich the appreciation of wine, think of how the proper concepts and terms can allow for the discernment of subtle flavors and aromas.

Let us for the sake of the argument, accept Bergson’s reasoning. Given that our social interaction and our worldly engagement distorts our self-understanding, given that the latter becomes deformed and contaminated through our language use, how are we to recover the pure inner self, how are we to acquire any insight into the true nature of consciousness? Bergson insists that a vigorous effort of reflection is necessary. We can reach the true self by means of a “deep introspection,” one that allows us to intuit our conscious states in their inner fluctuation (TFW 129, 231, 233). But rather than really solving the problem this suggestion immediately raises additional problems. To start with, Bergson is not consistent in his terminology. In some places he uses the terms “reflection” and “introspection” synonymously (TFW 233), in others he clearly insists on their difference and writes that reflective consciousness “delights in clean cut distinctions, which are easily expressed in words, and in things with well-defined outlines, like those which are perceived in space” (TFW 9), which obviously makes it incapable of revealing the true nature of consciousness. Bergson never makes the move of differentiating different forms of reflection, which would have removed the inconsistency, nor does he ever show why the introspection he favors, which supposedly makes us pay heed to something that we normally live through but fail to notice due to our absorption in the external world, doesn’t in the end amount to a kind of reflection.<sup>17</sup>

The basic issue at stake – is reflection trustworthy or rather a kind of falsifying telescope that transforms whatever it makes appear – is certainly one that has been discussed *in extenso* within phenomenology. In his debate with H.J. Watt in § 79 in *Ideen I*, Husserl provided a standard reply. According to Husserl, any skeptical claim to the effect that reflection falsifies the lived experiences and that they consequently elude it completely is self-refuting, since this very claim presupposes knowledge of those very same lived experiences, and how should one obtain that except through reflection?<sup>18</sup> At the same time, however, Husserl certainly did recognize that rather than merely copying or repeating the original experience reflection actually transforms it, or as Husserl explicitly admitted, *alters* it.<sup>19</sup> *Otherwise, there would be no need for reflection.* In a passage from *Zur Phänomenologie*

*des inneren Zeitbewußtseins*, Husserl described this transformation in more detail. He wrote that the experience to which we turn attentively in reflection acquires a new mode of being; it becomes accentuated (*herausgehoben*). He argued that this accentuation is nothing other than its being-grasped.<sup>20</sup> Husserl also spoke of reflection as a process that discloses, disentangles, explicates, and articulates all those components and structures that were implicitly contained in the pre-reflective experience.<sup>21</sup>

What is important, however, is that this articulation is not necessarily imposed from without; is not necessarily foreign to the experience in question. In fact, rather than representing a distortion, it may constitute a consummation of the experience.<sup>22</sup> As Husserl put it, in the beginning we are confronted with a dumb experience that through reflection must then be made to articulate its *own* sense.<sup>23</sup> Rather than adding new distorting components and structures to the experience reflected upon, a reflection might, at best, simply be accentuating structures already inherent in the lived experience. In this case, the persistent fear that reflection is somehow prevented from attaining true subjectivity seems unfounded.

One might see the phenomenological position as being situated between two extremes. On the one hand, we have the view that reflection merely copies or mirrors lived experience faithfully and on the other, we have the view that reflection distorts lived experience. The middle course is to recognize that reflection involves a gain and a loss. For Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, reflection is constrained by what is pre-reflectively lived through. It is answerable to experiential facts and is not constitutively self-fulfilling. At the same time, however, they recognized that reflection qua thematic self-experiences does not simply reproduce the lived experiences unaltered and that this is precisely what makes reflection cognitively valuable.

As Ingarden correctly points out in the dissertation he wrote under Husserl's supervision, and which was entitled *Intuition und Intellekt bei Henri Bergson*, even if an intuition of the kind envisaged by Bergson is attainable, its possession would hardly be sufficient for philosophers. If we want to do philosophy, it is not enough to intuit, we also need to grasp and know what we are intuiting, and this requires concepts.<sup>24</sup> But this brings us back to the earlier problem, namely Bergson's mistrust in concepts and language.

Nevertheless, when all is said and done, was Schütz not right in insisting on some striking similarities between the respective projects of Bergson and Husserl? Consider for instance that Husserl frequently distinguished between a *natural* reflection and a *transcendental* reflection.<sup>25</sup> When I grasp myself as a mundane object, I am given to myself as a constituted, objectified, and transcendent entity. When asked whether this provides me with adequate knowledge of myself, Husserl's answer is clearly negative, since I have still not attained an understanding of my own constituting, transcendental subjectivity. It is at this point that the transcendental reflection makes its entry, since its specific aim is to thematize a subjectivity purified and detached from all contingent, extrinsic, and transcendent contexts.<sup>26</sup> From the very start, Husserl emphasizes that this is a type of reflection which is not immediately available, and a central part of his writings is precisely dedicated to the task of developing a procedure that can make it accessible. I am, of course, referring to Husserl's account of the phenomenological reduction. But for anybody familiar with Husserl's ceaseless laboring over the question of how to effectuate the methodological step that will liberate us from a life lived in self-alienation and enable a form of reflection that removes the blinkers (*Scheuklappen*) that ordinarily conceals the full and concrete transcendental character of life.<sup>27</sup> the paucity of Bergson's considerations is remarkable and deeply dissatisfying. Bergson doesn't provide any instructions regarding how we are to liberate ourselves from the customs and conventions of ordinary social life in order to obtain an intuitive grasp of pure duration.

The same frustration regrettably holds for his analysis of time. It is true that Bergson's analysis of how the spatialized time of the clock conceals the distinctive temporality that constitutes the very interiority of consciousness antecedes the subsequent analyses of time to be found in Husserl and Heidegger.<sup>28</sup> But if one compares the painstaking analysis of temporality that one finds in Husserl's *Zur Phänomenologie des inneren Zeitbewusstseins*, say, his account of the relation between objective time, subjective time and the absolute pre-phenomenal flow of time-constituting consciousness or his analysis of the threefold structure of protention-primal impression-retention with what Bergson has to say about lived time, one will once again be struck by the negative character of Bergson's account. We get to know far more about what duration is not, than about what it is. Moreover, some of Bergson's fundamental assertions seem questionable. Consider for instance Bergson's claim that there are no distinct conscious states in lived time, but that they rather intermingle to such an extent that we cannot tell whether they are one or several. Imagine then the following situation. You are sitting and enjoying a glass of wine. Suddenly your reveries are interrupted by the phone. It is your mother asking whether you have remembered to buy a wedding gift for your nephew. You shamefully confess that you have forgotten all about it. Now, whereas it is quite right to stress the qualitative continuity of the temporal phases of an experience, say, the auditory experience of your mother's voice – it is just not right to divide the experience up into separate and externally related time-slices – more arguments need to be put on the table to make the case that the experience of wine-tasting and the experience of shame are not two different experiences. On the face of it, a denial of their distinctness just seems wrong.<sup>29</sup>

My initial presentation of the second chapter of Bergson's *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience* was quite concise, but even my brief overview unearthed several further aspects of Bergson's theory that one could take issue with. Let me very briefly list 3 additional topics for discussion.

- Bergson's opposition of space and time presupposes a rather specific understanding of space. One might question the phenomenological pertinence of the notion he employs. Is it for instance really true that spatial objects are perceived as distinct, isolated entities, externally related to one another, or does this rather reveal Bergson's own reliance on a derivative notion of space? As has been argued by many phenomenologists, the spatiality of our lifeworld is not a spatiality captured by geometrical measures, but one structured by contexts of use. Whether something is present or absent, near or remote is something that is determined by our practical concerns. Measured in centimetres I might be closer to the glasses I wear than to the picture I inspect, just as I might be closer to the phone I am using than to the person I am talking to. But phenomenologically speaking (in terms of meaning or significance) the relation is the reverse. This understanding of space is, however, very different from the one adopted by Bergson.
- Given Bergson's view on expressions – rather than revealing and articulating our conscious states, they falsify and distort them – it is hard to see how he will be able to come up with a satisfying account of intersubjectivity. Not only does his position lack the resources to tackle the problem of other minds in a convincing manner, but everything he says regarding sociality suggest a rather Cartesian view on the relation between self and other. On his account, social life is a danger to the integrity of subjectivity, rather than a natural prolongation and enrichment of the latter. This is hardly in accordance with the dominant view in phenomenology.
- Finally, one might ask whether Bergson's account of consciousness accords sufficient weight to intentionality. Does he fully recognize the self-transcending, world-involved, embedded and embodied character of the mind? As far as I can tell, the answer to these questions must be negative. Given Bergson's repeated emphasis on the importance of maintaining the difference between the outer and the inner world (TFW 154), one is again

struck by the Cartesian sounding character of his proposal.

#### 4. Conclusion

My focus has been quite restricted. I have only examined a single of Bergson's many works, and when comparing his account with analyses found in phenomenology, I have mainly focused on figures in the German tradition (Husserl, Heidegger, Ingarden and Schütz). Indeed, an in-depth investigation of how Bergson was received and interpreted by French phenomenologists would have proven a far more arduous task. As any reader of Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Henry and Ricoeur will know, their work contains multiple references to Bergson. The contrast is striking. Whereas none of Husserl's published writings on time, and this includes *Zur Phänomenologie des inneren Zeitbewusstseins*, *Die 'Bernauer Manuskripte' über das Zeitbewußtsein*<sup>30</sup> as well as the recently published *Späte Texte über Zeitkonstitution*<sup>31</sup> contain any reference to Bergson, Sartre devoted a substantial part of the second chapter of his *L'imagination* to a discussion of Bergson,<sup>32</sup> and according to his own testimony, it was *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience* that inspired him to study philosophy.<sup>33</sup>

Not only have my focus been narrow, perhaps it has even been a bit unfair. After all, I have been comparing a part of Bergson's doctoral dissertation with the mature work of phenomenologists such as Husserl and Heidegger. Had the comparison been between *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience* on the one hand and Husserl's *Beiträge zur Variationsrechnung* or Heidegger's *Die Lehre vom Urteil im Psychologismus* on the other, Bergson might very well have appeared as the more profound thinker. But despite these reservations the outcome of the present analysis should be clear. Bergson might be approached in various ways, but it does not seem advisable to read him as a (proto-) phenomenologist. Doing so is bound to lead to disappointment. His analyses are simply no match for what can be found in later phenomenology. Indeed, the account of consciousness that he offers us differs radically from the "one" we find in phenomenology. However, the lesson to learn from this might well be that it is more promising to read Bergson as somebody who challenges central doctrines in phenomenology rather than as one who anticipates them. As Lawlor and Moulard recently phrased it, "a revitalization of Bergsonism became possible because of Deleuze's insistence that Bergsonism is an alternative to the domination of phenomenological thought, including that of Heidegger. The revitalization of Bergsonism leads to a revitalization of the question of life itself."<sup>34</sup> It is interesting to note that Heinrich Rickert, under whom Heidegger wrote his habilitation and who was Husserl's predecessor, would have agreed with the latter appraisal. He viewed Bergson as the philosopher of life par excellence.<sup>35</sup>

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> H. Bergson, *Time and Free Will. An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*, trans. F. L. Pogson (Montana: Kessinger Publishing Company, original publication date 1910), 91. Hereafter cited parenthetically with the abbreviation TFW.

<sup>2</sup> Ultimately, Bergson will claim that science cannot deal with time without eliminating its essential element. For the very same reason, sequential time, time understood as a sequence of separate, distinct and externally related events or episodes, has nothing to do with real temporality.

<sup>3</sup> When reading Bergson's descriptions it is difficult not to be reminded of Heidegger's

discussion of *Ruinanz* or falling (Heidegger 1994, 119, 121), i.e., life's tendency towards self-forgetfulness, its inherent tendency to objectify and cover itself up.

<sup>4</sup> P. Natorp, *Allgemeine Psychologie* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1919), 151, 169. Hereafter cited parenthetically with the abbreviation AP.

<sup>5</sup> It is a bit puzzling that Natorp directs this specific accusation at Bergson, since the case can easily be made that his own position is vulnerable to the very same criticism.

<sup>6</sup> A. Schütz, *Der sinnhafte Aufbau der sozialen Welt. Eine Einleitung in die verstehende Soziologie* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991), 47, 55

<sup>7</sup> Cf., E. Fink, *Sixth Cartesian Meditation*, trans. R. Bruzina (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995).

<sup>8</sup> E. Husserl, *Logische Untersuchungen, II/1* (Tübingen, 1980); *Logical Investigations*, trans. J. Findlay (London: Routledge, 2001), 165-166.

<sup>9</sup> One of Heidegger's most extensive discussions of Natorp can be found in the lecture course *Phänomenologie der Anschauung und des Ausdrucks* from 1920. The first section of the second part of the lecture, which covers more than fifty pages, is entitled "Die destruiierende Betrachtung der Natorpschen Position."

<sup>10</sup> M. Heidegger, *Zur Bestimmung der Philosophie*, Gesamtausgabe Band 56/57 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1999), 111.

<sup>11</sup> M. Heidegger, *Grundprobleme der Phänomenologie (1919/1920)*, Gesamtausgabe Band 58 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1993), 148.

<sup>12</sup> M. Heidegger, *Phänomenologie der Anschauung und des Ausdrucks*, Gesamtausgabe Band 59 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1993), 166.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 169.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.

<sup>15</sup> M. Heidegger, *Phänomenologische Interpretationen zu Aristoteles. Einführung in die phänomenologische Forschung*, Gesamtausgabe Band 61 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1994), 87; M. Heidegger, *Grundprobleme der Phänomenologie (1919/1920)*, 59.

<sup>16</sup> M. Heidegger, *Phänomenologische Interpretationen zu Aristoteles. Einführung in die phänomenologische Forschung*, 88.

<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, the choice of term is hardly a lucky one in that it suggests that self-knowledge is a question of having an inner perceptual object. The spatial metaphor is quite tangible.

<sup>18</sup> E. Husserl, *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie I*, Husserliana III/1-2 (Den Haag: Martinus Nijhoff, 1976), 174; *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy. First Book*, trans. F. Kersten (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1983).

<sup>19</sup> E. Husserl, *Cartesianische Meditationen und Pariser Vorträge*, Husserliana I (Den Haag: Martinus Nijhoff, 1973), 72; *Cartesian Meditations*, trans. D. Cairns (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1997). See also E. Husserl, *Aufsätze und Vorträge (1911-1921)*, Husserliana XXV (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1987), 89.

<sup>20</sup> E. Husserl, *Zur Phänomenologie des inneren Zeitbewusstseins (1893-1917)*, Husserliana X (Den Haag: Martinus Nijhoff, 1966), 129; *On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time (1893-1917)*, trans. J. B. Brough (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991).

<sup>21</sup> E. Husserl, *Einleitung in die Logik und Erkenntnistheorie*, Husserliana XXIV (Den Haag: Martinus Nijhoff, 1984), 244. See also E. Husserl, *Analysen zur passiven Synthesis*, Husserliana XI (Den Haag: Martinus Nijhoff, 1996), 205, 236; *Analyses Concerning Passive*

and *Active Synthesis: Lectures on Transcendental Logic*, trans. A. Steinbock (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1997).

<sup>22</sup> M. Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945), 207; *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. C. Smith (London: Routledge and Keegan Paul, 1962).

<sup>23</sup> E. Husserl, *Cartesianische Meditationen*, 77.

<sup>24</sup> R. Ingarden *Gesammelte Werke - Band 6: Frühe Schriften zur Erkenntnistheorie* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1994), 146.

<sup>25</sup> E. Husserl, *Erste Philosophie I (1923-24)*, Husserliana VII (Den Haag: Martinus Nijhoff, 1956), 262; see also, E. Husserl *Cartesianische Meditationen*, 72.

<sup>26</sup> E. Husserl *Cartesianische Meditationen*, 117; see also E. Husserl, *Erste Philosophie I (1923-24)*, 267.

<sup>27</sup> E. Husserl, *Zur phänomenologischen Reduktion. Texte aus dem Nachlass (1926-1935)*, Husserliana XXXIV (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2003), 226, 233.

<sup>28</sup> Husserl's spare references to Bergson in other writings – mainly in various letters – are almost all references to Ingarden's dissertation, and given Ingarden's statement in the beginning of the dissertation where he thanks Husserl for having provided him with many important insights (Ingarden 1994, 1), it is probably not unreasonable to suppose that Husserl basically shared Ingarden's critical appraisal of Bergson.

<sup>29</sup> In his recent book, *Consciousness and Persons*, Tye has defended a view somewhat similar to Bergson's. Tye considers the problem of how a sequence of experiences is unified to be a pseudo-problem, since we on his account are never aware of our experiences as unified or as continuing through time or as succeeding one another. If I have an experience of a red flash followed by a green flash, I experience two colored flashes as occurring one after the other. I do not experience my experience of a green flash as succeeding my experience of a red flash any more than I experience my experience of a red flash as red. Continuity, change and succession are features of the items experienced and not features of the experiences. M. Tye, *Consciousness and persons. Unity and Identity* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), 96-97.

<sup>30</sup> E. Husserl, *Die 'Bernauer Manuskripte' über das Zeitbewußtsein 1917/18*. Husserliana XXXIII (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2001).

<sup>31</sup> E. Husserl, *Späte Texte über Zeitkonstitution (1929-1934) - Die C-Manuskripte*. Husserliana Materialien Band 8 (Dordrecht: Springer, 2006).

<sup>32</sup> J.P. Sartre, *L'imagination* (Paris: PUF. 1936).

<sup>33</sup> J.-P. Sartre, "Interview with Michel Rybalka, Oreste Pucciani and Susan Gruenheck," in P. Schilpp (ed.), *The Philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre* (La Salle: Open Court, 1981), 5-51, 6.

<sup>34</sup> L. Lawlor & V. Moulard, "Henri Bergson," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Spring 2008 Edition)*, E. N. Zalta (ed.), URL =

<<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2008/entries/bergson/>>

<sup>35</sup> H. Rickert, *Die Philosophie des Lebens: Darstellung und Kritik der philosophischen Modeströmungen unserer Zeit* (Tübingen, 1922), 22.