

## INTRODUCTION

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# JANKÉLÉVITCH ON BERGSON: LIVING IN TIME

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Just twenty-one years old and a doctoral student of the École Normale Supérieure, Vladimir Jankélévitch met Henri Bergson at his Paris home. This was a big moment for the young student. France's greatest living philosopher was not only a hero to him but, on top of that, also the subject of his very first article, which only weeks previously had been accepted for publication.<sup>1</sup> Keen to speak with the master himself, the two met for an hour and a half. These are the first impressions he noted down for a friend:

Speaking of Bergson: last Sunday, I finally saw the great man at his home; we chatted for a good hour and a half. His is a charming simplicity, and I beg you to believe that one feels much more at ease with him—great man that he is—than with that fussy B[réhier]. Picture a little bony fellow (and I imagined him to be tall) whose 65 years show, with very round blue eyes that seem to latch onto something in the distance when he speaks. His speech is slow (an academic's deformation!) but very simple and without affectation, despite some surprising images that, bursting into the conversation with abrupt impertinence, remind the listener that it is Bergson he's listening to.<sup>2</sup>

This meeting took place in 1923 and, over the years, a close intellectual friendship blossomed between them that would last until the end of Bergson's life.<sup>3</sup> The pattern of their exchanges was for Jankélévitch to send an article that he had written on Bergson's philosophy for comment, and, in turn, receive a warm and encouraging reply. So, for example, in 1924 Jankélévitch passed along his "Two Philosophies of Life: Bergson, Guyau" and in 1928 sent "Prolegomena to Bergsonism" and "Bergsonism and Biology."<sup>4</sup> Thanks to the reputation gained from these early writings, not to mention the high esteem Bergson held him in, Jankélévitch

was soon asked by a former student of Bergson's if he would write a short book. He accepted enthusiastically. "Delacroix has asked me for a book on Bergson for the 'Great Philosophers' series (to be published by Alcan)," he told his friend. "I accepted. I can say that the book is almost done. All that's left is to write it. It's a one- or two-year job."<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps this statement was a little brash on Jankélévitch's part. But, then again, it didn't prove untrue. The first edition of *Henri Bergson* was published in 1930 and to acclaim. It received very positive reviews.<sup>6</sup> And, most impressively, it included a fulsome preface in the form of a letter by Bergson himself.

Dear Sir,

You have done me the honor of dedicating a work to the whole of my writings. I have read it closely, and I want you to know the interest I took in reading it and the delight it has given me. Not only is your account exact and precise; not only is it informed by such a complete and extended textual study that the citations seem to answer, all by themselves, the call of ideas; above all, it also demonstrates a remarkable deepening of the theory and an intellectual sympathy that led you to discover the stages I went through, the paths I followed, and sometimes the terms that I would have used if I had expounded what remained implicit. I add that this work of analysis goes hand in hand with a singularly interesting effort of synthesis: often my point of arrival was for you a point of departure for original speculations of your own.

Allow me to send my compliments and thanks for this penetrating study, and please trust, dear Sir, in my highest regard.

H. BERGSON.<sup>7</sup>

These glowing lines are helpful to introduce the flavor of Jankélévitch's reading of Bergson. First of all, it is clear that Bergson did not see this book as merely an exegesis of his work. Neither did he think of his relationship to Jankélévitch as a one-way street where the master would simply lead his disciple. His preface points instead to a mutual enrichment of young and old philosopher. And this wasn't mere politeness or fine words on Bergson's part. The proof is that several of his own key later essays—most notably, "The Possible and the Real" and the "Introductions" of *Creative Mind*—would be devoted to amplifying themes from his own work that Jankélévitch had originally highlighted in his study, such as the critique of retrospection and the categories of the possible and nothingness.<sup>8</sup> Truly, what higher praise is there?

Another notable feature of Bergson's preface is his gratitude to Jankélévitch for treating his oeuvre as a living doctrine, as something that was unpredictable in its development and that continues to grow in new directions. This is significant in light of the reception of Bergson at the time, which was undergoing a major shift. Prior to the First World War, Bergson had been the philosopher of the avant-garde par excellence. True, he was world famous. And yes, the educated public and high society flocked to his lectures. But he was also the vital point of reference for leading artistic and political movements of the day, no matter how diverse. Cubism, symbolism, literary modernism, anarchism, and many others, all took their cue from him.<sup>9</sup> Yet despite this tremendous success and effect—or likely, because of it—Bergson remained a relative outsider in academic philosophy.<sup>10</sup>

After the Great War, however, all that changes. On the one hand, the onetime patron saint of youth, art, and culture is dismissed as a dated establishment figure. And, on the other hand, the onetime renegade philosopher is elevated to the position of a historical “great,” one perfectly at home on a shelf with Descartes, Pascal, and Kant.<sup>11</sup> Raymond Aron, a classmate of Jankélévitch's, sums up Bergson's reversal of status particularly well: “Bergson is someone everyone knows, to whom some people listen, and who nobody regards as contemporary.”<sup>12</sup> A great merit of Jankélévitch's book for Bergson, then, is to resist this rather unhappy experience of being embalmed alive, of being canonized and shelved all at once. By plumbing the undiscovered depths of his works, and by glimpsing the paths by which it could be renewed and extended, Jankélévitch reinvigorates the élan of a doctrine that was at great risk of becoming a classic.<sup>13</sup>

Bergson thus praises Jankélévitch for representing a vital doctrine still in the making. This, however, is itself a tricky point; and, after Bergson's death in 1941, things get more complicated. The reason is that Jankélévitch will write not just one but two versions of *Henri Bergson*. There is the first 1930 edition, and then another in 1959. It is this second edition that we have prepared for the present volume. What is the difference between the two? The 1959 edition has three more chapters.<sup>14</sup> By and large, these extra chapters treat Bergson's final work, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, which had not yet appeared when the first volume was published in 1930. Thus, Jankélévitch adds one chapter on heroism and sainthood, another on simplicity and joy, and an appendix on Bergson's thought and Judaism. He also writes a new introduction and conclusion.

Stated in these terms, however, the difference between the two editions appears to be merely quantitative: the 1930 edition has five chapters, the 1959 edition has eight. But, in truth, there is a more basic and yet less tangible difference. It relates to the lavish praise given by Bergson in his preface to the first edition. What he admires in Jankélévitch is his ability to place the reader within a process of philosophical creation, one in which the doctrine is in the midst of working itself out and with all the risks and unpredictability that this involves. But the situation is different, of course, in 1959. Then, nearly twenty years after Bergson's death, the object of Jankélévitch's commentary effectively changes. No longer working on a philosophy that is flying and running, he is, instead, writing on one that has flown its course and run its race. He is, in other words, addressing a completed doctrine. The result is a fascinating overlay. By necessity, Jankélévitch's second edition (1959) combines the original commentary of the first edition (1930)—which, as Bergson said, does its utmost to honor a living and breathing philosophy—together with a later perspective that now has the whole and complete philosophy before it.

The marvelous texture of Jankélévitch's book can be put in other, more Bergsonian terms. At its most basic level, Bergson's philosophy boils down to an awareness (or perhaps better, a perception) that the past and the present are very different from one another. The past is time that is done and gone, and, because of that, can be analyzed, broken down, and reconstructed in a great many ways. But that's not the case for the present. Because it is in the making, the present is open-ended, unpredictable, and resistant to analysis. Seen from the perspective of this difference, then, Jankélévitch's *Henri Bergson* is something more than a substantively rich commentary on Bergson. Thanks to its creation in two different editions, it is also a work that uniquely presents—or rather, that uniquely *is*—the temporalities that Bergson had labored his whole life to present and distinguish: a living present, thick and unforeseeable; and an accomplished past, available to analysis and retrospection.

### *Why Read Jankélévitch's Henri Bergson?*

Here, then, is one tempting reason to read Jankélévitch's *Henri Bergson*: its composition exhibits the very temporalities that Bergson sought to represent. But there are, of course, other reasons. Some, we might say, concern Jankélévitch's own philosophical development; others concern

his interpretation of Bergson and the features that distinguish it from existing commentaries.

Let's begin with the first point: *Henri Bergson* is not only a great book *on* Bergson; it is also a great book *by* Jankélévitch in his own right and a key point of reference for his oeuvre. Here a remark of Bergson's is particularly apt. In "Philosophical Intuition," he claims that any great philosopher has, in all honesty, only one or two "infinitely simple" ideas that are elaborated over the course of his or her life.<sup>15</sup> Taking up the suggestion, what would we say is Jankélévitch's "big idea"? What single idea could possibly span a most prolific and diverse oeuvre, one that includes over forty books in philosophy and musicology?<sup>16</sup> The answer is given in his letters: irreversibility. "Irreversibility," he says, is "the primitive fact of spiritual life . . . [it is] the very center of moral life."<sup>17</sup> What does he mean by irreversibility? Nothing other than the fact that we live in time and that we cannot, in a literal sense, undo what has already been done:

It strikes me that irreversibility represents *objectivity* par excellence. Objectivity, experientially speaking, is that on which we can't do anything. . . . The will can do anything—except one thing: undo that which it has done. The power of undoing is of another order: of the order of grace, if you will. It is a miracle. Orpheus could have not looked back. But the moment he did, Eurydice is lost forever. God alone could do it, if he wanted. The mind [*l'esprit*] thus carries in itself the supreme objectivity, and yet it is true, as idealism tells us, that this objectivity depends on us. It would take too long to tell you how this can be confirmed in all the domains of spiritual life.<sup>18</sup>

When we scan the titles of Jankélévitch's oeuvre we see that they revolve around the problem of irreversibility. His works on forgiveness, bad conscience, the instant, nostalgia, evil and harm, and above all, on death, are all meditations of how moral, aesthetic, and religious life responds to and accommodates, for better or worse, the basic fact of irreversibility.<sup>19</sup> It is for this reason that Jankélévitch's writings on Bergson have a very special place in his corpus.

Put it this way: if we were to turn the tables on Bergson and ask him to identify his own big idea, an excellent candidate would be irreversibility. Underlying Bergson's conception of lived and effective time (what he calls "duration") is an awareness that it cannot be broken down, reordered, and reconstructed without distortion, without betraying its nature

as time and turning into something else (that which he calls “space”). As one commentator puts it, “Bergson will affirm a dynamic ontology of irreversible time.”<sup>20</sup> In this respect, we might say that Jankélévitch is a Bergsonian moralist (and, in another register, a Bergsonian musicologist). His writings recast a range of moral problems and topics through Bergson’s appreciation of the irreversibility of time. His book on Bergson, then, could rightfully be called the ground zero of his own philosophical project. Not just because it is his first work, but more importantly, because it is his original (and with the second edition following later, a renewed) attempt to formulate what will become the defining theme of his philosophy.

Let’s turn now to his reading of Bergson. What makes it special? To my mind, its great virtue is to present Bergson as a philosopher of existence. By this, I mean that the defining feature of Jankélévitch’s exposition is to consistently couple Bergson’s insights on the nature of time, memory, evolution, and morality, together with Bergson’s (and also his own) reflections on a concrete way of life that would be in harmony with these realities. Understood in this way, the great end of Bergson’s philosophy is to present a mode of living that would be more intensely present, receptive, loving, and ultimately joyful. That is Jankélévitch’s accomplishment. He convincingly portrays Bergson as a philosopher who strives to effect a personal or “existential” transformation in his readers just as much as he seeks to furnish a theoretical discourse to explain reality.

My introduction to this volume will flesh out this line of interpretation. Right away, though, I should say that Jankélévitch is not alone in reading Bergson this way. Just recently, for example, I was happy to discover a volume on Bergson in the popular “Life Lessons” book series.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, two of Bergson’s greatest readers—William James and Frédéric Worms—place a philosophy of existence at the center of their respective interpretations of Bergson. James, for his part, affirms that Bergson exacts a “certain inner catastrophe”—that is, a reorientation of perception and attitude—in each of his readers.<sup>22</sup> Likewise, Worms argues, “It is as if Bergson’s philosophy rediscovered from the outset the most ancient task of philosophy, which is not to distinguish between concepts, but between ways of conducting oneself, not only to think, but also to intervene in life, to reform or transform it.”<sup>23</sup> Other readers have also been drawn to Bergson for this reason. Pierre Hadot, the contemporary thinker who more than anyone has revived an appreciation of philosophy “as a way of life,” describes his

attraction to Bergson and Bergsonism precisely in these terms. “For me,” he says in an interview, “the essential of Bergsonism will always be the idea of philosophy as transformation of perception.”<sup>24</sup> For Hadot as well, the basic aim of Bergsonism is to transform our everyday orientation or way of life.

Although such interpretations of Bergson abound, Jankélévitch’s book is the most determined and comprehensive effort in that direction. This makes it an especially important text for an English-speaking audience. Why? Because the English-language reception of Bergson’s philosophy has been dominated by another great work of interpretation that sidelines the philosophy of existence: Gilles Deleuze’s *Bergsonism* (1966). This book almost single-handedly revived interest in Bergson in the English-speaking world. But it is interesting in light of Jankélévitch’s efforts that it deliberately underplays the psychological, spiritual, and existential aspects of Bergson’s thought. I would like here to briefly turn to Deleuze’s interpretation and mark out its basic differences from that of Jankélévitch’s.

### *Deleuze’s Bergsonism*

It is not at all controversial to claim that Deleuze effectively revived interest in Bergson for English speakers. Indeed, the “Henri Bergson” entry for the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* begins on just this note: “While such French thinkers as Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, and Lévinas explicitly acknowledged his influence on their thought, it is generally agreed that it was Gilles Deleuze’s 1966 *Bergsonism* that marked the reawakening of interest in Bergson’s work.”<sup>25</sup> Consider too that most of the recent major works on Bergson in English are guided by Deleuze’s interpretation, such as John Mullarkey’s *Bergson and Philosophy* (1999), Keith Ansell-Pearson’s *Philosophy and the Adventure of the Virtual* (2002), and Leonard Lawlor’s *The Challenge of Bergsonism* (2003).

Why is Deleuze’s interpretation so prominent? Certainly Deleuze’s status and the key role that Bergson plays in his own thought is a significant reason, along with the fact that *Bergsonism* is a short book and that it was translated into English relatively early in relation to his other works. But most importantly, *Bergsonism* is an indisputably powerful work of interpretation. It is tremendously systematic, tightly presented, and speaks in a commanding no-nonsense tone. For all its strengths, though, balance



is not one of them. Deleuze is highly selective in terms of the concepts he chooses to exposit. And he is determined to demonstrate a clear-cut progression in Bergson's thought.

It's helpful here to draw out these two features in order to contrast Deleuze's and Jankélévitch's respective interpretations. First, Deleuze interprets Bergson's philosophy in terms of a progression, wherein the insights of his early writings are fully realized only in his later work. And it's not as if Deleuze is coy about this feature of his interpretation. To the contrary, he couldn't be more up front about it! Just look at the famous first lines of *Bergsonism*: "Duration, Memory, *Élan Vital* mark the major stages of Bergson's philosophy. This book sets out to determine, first, the relationship between these three notions and, second, the progress they involve."<sup>26</sup> With his talk of stages and progress, this is a bold opening move. Indeed, it is a highly—an incredibly!—anti-Bergsonian gambit. No doubt, it buys Deleuze a sharp and systematic presentation; but it comes at the price of faithfulness to precisely what Jankélévitch labored hard to capture: the real duration and lived development of Bergson's philosophy. Or, to put the point in more technical terms, at the outset of his interpretation of Bergson, Deleuze avowedly (I am tempted to say, brazenly) occupies the very standpoint that Bergson had spent a lifetime problematizing: a retrospective vision that sees movement only in terms of the destination it reaches.

What is that destination according to Deleuze? It is Bergson's eventual realization of the ontological, and not merely psychological, nature of duration. Bergson's trajectory, in other words, is said by Deleuze to trace a progressive realization that the notion of duration he uncovers in his early work cannot be confined to merely psychological or subjective experience. Duration, instead, comes to be recognized as the very substance of life and being. As Suzanne Guerlac states, for Deleuze it is as if Bergson's thought "self-corrects" as it moves away from "the phenomenological cast of the early work, toward the purely ontological character of *Creative Evolution*."<sup>27</sup> At every point in his interpretation Deleuze is keen to push past Bergson's analysis of subjective experience toward an ontological—or, as he puts it, an "inhuman" or "superhuman"<sup>28</sup>—register of duration.

This brings us to the second feature of *Bergsonism*: Deleuze's select concentration on themes and concepts from Bergson's philosophy. Because Deleuze is keen to demonstrate that psychological duration is only a particular case of ontological duration, he systematically underplays



the subjectivist, spiritualist, and phenomenological dimensions of Bergson's thought. Here again, Guerlac is helpful to characterize this bent of Deleuze's interpretation: "It is as if, in *Le bergsonisme* (1966), Deleuze had carefully edited out all those features of Bergson's thought that might appear 'metaphysical' (the soul, life, value, memory, choice), all those features that distinguish the human being from the machine, that suggest an appeal to experience and a phenomenological perspective. It is perhaps this gesture that most clearly delineates the contours of the New Bergson."<sup>29</sup> In Deleuze's interpretation, then, there is a studied avoidance of precisely those psychological and existential features of duration that Jankélévitch foregrounds.

This tendency to avoid the psychological and subjective has consequences for which texts Deleuze decides to focus on. In a nutshell, the more ontological works (especially *Matter and Memory* and *Creative Evolution*) are in; the more psychological (or "phenomenological" or "existential") texts are out. Deleuze, for example, largely restricts his discussion of Bergson's first work, *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness* (1889), to its mathematical theory of multiplicities. He also makes no reference to Bergson's essay on laughter and the comic. Yet by far the most significant omission of Deleuze's text concerns Bergson's final great work, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* (1932). In *Bergsonism*, Deleuze devotes a scant seven pages to it. And it's not difficult to see why given that *Two Sources* is, in large measure, a book on the emotions and has as its centerpiece an account of the pressure and pull of obligation and the aspiration to love.<sup>30</sup> Clearly, for Deleuze, this feature of *Two Sources* does not sit well within a narrative that recounts Bergson's career as progressively moving away from a theory of subjective experience toward an ontological account of duration.<sup>31</sup>

Did Deleuze read Jankélévitch's book on Bergson? It is hard to believe he didn't. The second edition of *Henri Bergson* was published well before Deleuze would have begun writing *Bergsonism*. Yet there is not a single mention of Jankélévitch's book.<sup>32</sup> In light of their basic differences of approach, this is perhaps not so surprising. In terms of style and composition, and also with respect to their substantive and textual focal points, the two books are at opposite ends of the spectrum. First, Jankélévitch writes out Bergson's philosophy from the perspective of the lived present, whereas Deleuze explicitly adopts a retrospective position. Second, Jankélévitch privileges the psychological dimensions of Bergson's work that Deleuze eschews. And third, Jankélévitch gives special attention to

those texts that Deleuze downplays (namely, *Time and Free Will* and *Two Sources*). But while these differences may once have marked a contest over Bergson's philosophy, today they are a genuine boon. For as Nietzsche said with respect to the ancients, "we will not hesitate to adopt a Stoic recipe just because we have profited in the past from Epicurean recipes."<sup>33</sup> So too with us. English readers of Bergson have long enjoyed Deleuze's interpretation. Jankélévitch's book will hopefully provide just as rewarding fare. To continue Nietzsche's metaphor, we could say that by holding the divergent but not incompatible perspectives of *Henri Bergson* and *Bergsonism* in mind, we have the unique chance to have our Bergsonian cake and eat it too.

### *Jankélévitch on Bergson*

Jankélévitch's *Henri Bergson* is a comprehensive commentary on Bergson's philosophy, with chapters devoted to all four of his major books. But, as is the nature of Jankélévitch's writing, it also includes a series of what one might call improvisations on Bergsonian themes, such as life, embodiment, and joy. At times this interweaving of interpretation and improvisation makes it difficult to keep the principal lines of the book in sight. To conclude this introduction I would like to briefly sketch its structure and a few of its animating problematics.

The structure is relatively straightforward. Jankélévitch lays it out early in chapter 1:

The experience of duration determines [the] true and internal style [of Bergson's philosophy]. Duration is what we find in the "infinitely simple" image at issue in the lecture "Philosophical Intuition," and it is really the lively source of Bergson's meditations. Before we follow its successive incarnations by way of four problem-types—the *effort of intellection, freedom, finality, heroism*—we have to go back to the "primitive fact" that, in matters of the soul, governs all of Bergson's ascetic approach. (4)

Duration and the experience of duration is the core (or "primitive fact") of Bergson's philosophy according to Jankélévitch. As such, chapter 1 is dedicated to an exposition of its three modalities: past (which he calls "succession"), present (which he calls "coexistence"), and future (which he calls "becoming"). From there, as Jankélévitch says, he takes up the theme of duration within the context of four "problem-types" that map,

with some degree of overlap, onto each of Bergson's major works. Thus, chapters 2 and 3 treat duration in relation to intellection and freedom in *Time and Free Will* and *Matter and Memory*; chapter 4 addresses duration with respect to finalism and teleology in *Creative Evolution*; and chapter 5 addresses the temporality of heroism and love in *Two Sources*. The final two chapters work a bit differently. Here Jankélévitch's aim is to make explicit certain understated motifs that traverse Bergson's philosophy. In this vein, chapter 6 (which, in the 1930 edition, was the final chapter) extracts Bergson's tacit critique of the categories of "nothingness" and "possibility."<sup>34</sup> Chapter 7 does the same but this time with positive concepts: the presence of joy and the imperative of simplicity that imbue all of Bergson's writing. Finally, as a kind of coda, the book compares conceptions of time in Judaism and Bergson.

As I've suggested, Jankélévitch interprets Bergson in terms of a philosophy of existence: namely, as a doctrine that sets out a way of life attuned to the nature of duration. But why is a life lived in sync with time, so to speak, so important for Bergson? What are the stakes? Jankélévitch identifies them straightaway in chapter 1: human beings, and us moderns in particular, have an inveterate tendency to deny and repress time and movement, such that we both misapprehend the world and also close off pathways of self-understanding and experience. He calls this tendency the "illusion" or "idol" of retrospectivity (16).

Like the devil it is, this idol has many guises. Truth be told, it takes a different form for each facet of human life, whether it is our self-understanding, our conception of freedom, our appreciation of nature, our depiction of morality, or how we envisage the future. As Jankélévitch puts it, "Bergson for his part never relented in denouncing, more or less implicitly, this idol in all problems of life" (16). But underlying all of its manifestations, the core of the illusion of retrospectivity is to reconstruct any event or phenomenon as a modification of already given parts. Its essence, in other words, is to deny novelty in favor of an explanation that represents any process of change either as an increase or decrease of existing elements or else as a rearrangement of them. From the perspective of this illusion, then, a new sensation or feeling is seen as an intensification or diminution of a previous one; freedom is envisaged as a deliberation between alternatives; an organism is comprehended as the product of its combined parts; all-embracing love is grasped as the expansion of exclusive attachments; and the future is seized as the predicted outcome of a reshuffled present. Jankélévitch will track down all of these

permutations. But again, if we can set aside the details of his reading, the overarching point is that for Bergson the illusion of retrospection isn't just an error of understanding. Its failing is not simply that it gets the world, or ourselves, or the nature of change "wrong." Its effects, rather, are practical. The distortion we suffer is not merely cognitive but also existential.

Here we can speak concretely. One way to approach Jankélévitch's *Henri Bergson* is as a treatise on the different dispositions or moods that are vitiated by the retrospective illusion. He highlights three in particular: naivety, wonder, and simplicity. Indeed, the threatened loss of one of these dispositions is at the heart of each of his readings of Bergson's major works: naivety in *Time and Free Will* and *Matter and Memory*, wonder in *Creative Evolution*, and simplicity in *Two Sources* and *Creative Mind*. In each case, Jankélévitch demonstrates that for Bergson the retrospective illusion confounds our knowledge of the world and of ourselves, that it undermines particular experiences, and most disastrously, that it blocks joyful and intense modes of life. I will briefly summarize each in turn.

#### NAIVETY

"Naivety" is a keyword in *Henri Bergson*, especially in the early chapters on *Time and Free Will* (chapter 2, "Freedom") and *Matter and Memory* (chapter 3, "Soul and Body"). With it, Jankélévitch marks Bergson's goal to "place us, once again, in the presence of *immediately perceived qualities*" (29). But for Jankélévitch this term is also an exegetical device. He uses it, on the one hand, to mark the fundamental continuity between Bergson's first two books in that both seek to recover a capacity for unprejudiced and immediate perception. But he also uses it, on the other hand, as a foil to contrast these same works and show genuine evolution—in the sense of an unplanned and innovative development—in Bergson's oeuvre.

Let us consider the contrast. Jankélévitch says that Bergson seeks "immediately perceived qualities." But perceived qualities of what? What is the "object," for lack of a better word, that Bergson seeks a naive perception of? Jankélévitch observes that it changes over the course of the two books. In *Time and Free Will*, Bergson seeks an unmediated perception of spiritual life and consciousness. The problem in this text, according to Jankélévitch, is how to regain a naive (or pure, or exact) perception of ourselves in light of the abstract and distancing nature of intellection. *Matter and Memory*, by contrast, has a slightly but significantly different

goal. Certainly, the desire for naive perception remains; but, at the same time, Jankélévitch notices that its object changes. Whereas before in *Time and Free Will* it was a question of perceiving ourselves, now, in *Matter and Memory*, it becomes a question of how to perceive things in the world (“images,” as Bergson would say) outside the associations, opinions, and prejudices we foist on them. As Jankélévitch puts it, Bergson’s thrust in *Matter and Memory* is “to dissociate the immediate given from the ‘suggestions’ of habit and association” (88). The conclusion Jankélévitch draws from this comparison is brilliant. He demonstrates that the very reality Bergson uncovers in his first book (i.e., the rich thickness of spiritual life and the deep self) becomes a key obstacle to confront in his second book: namely, how the wholeness of the person obtrudes his or her past (i.e., his or her memory) on the world, such that, in the end, true knowledge and experience of things fall into mere recognition and familiarity.

In one sense, then, Jankélévitch’s analysis of naivety shows variation in Bergson’s work. Yet to fixate on this variation is to miss the forest for the trees. We must not forget that Jankélévitch is equally keen to prove just how steadfast Bergson is in his search for lost naivety and unprejudiced perception. This is, indeed, the ambition that links *Time and Free Will* and *Matter and Memory*. Driving the critique of intellection and retrospection in *Time and Free Will*, Jankélévitch returns time and again to Bergson’s concrete ambition: to show the possibility of a pure perception of the self so that we may become fully present to our own experience. His aim, in Jankélévitch’s words, is to release us from the state of living as a “posthumous consciousness [that] lets the miraculous occasions of contemporaneity pass by forever” (17). The same holds, *mutatis mutandis*, for *Matter and Memory*. While Bergson’s critical apparatus may take aim at a different target, Jankélévitch is clear that his goal remains constant: to regain an immediate perception of the world—a “learned naivety”—that is nothing short of a mode of life, a way of being that is more receptive, sensitive, and present. “No other theory has ever shown more forcefully and more lucidly to what extent learned simplicity, which separates us from our dear and old superstitions, in reality brings us closer to the center of the mind. Those who recollect too much will always remain ignorant of the innocence of life. But those who know how to renounce memory will find themselves, and in themselves, reality” (105). “That,” he concludes, “is what Bergson’s philosophy asks of us.”

## WONDER

Jankélévitch's commentary on Bergson's most famous book, *Creative Evolution*, begins with an examination of a particularly entrenched idol of retrospection: finalism or teleology. Finalism is the doctrine that natural processes and evolution are directed toward a goal. Or, in Jankélévitch's more pointed definition, its essence is to "subject life to the execution of a transcendent program." Its principal sin, he elaborates, is "to exhaust the unforeseeable movement of life in advance, in a fictitious future that is not 'to come' (except on paper) and that, mentally is already past" (110). In chapter 4 ("Life") Jankélévitch enumerates the manifold errors of understanding that finalism commits. These include misrepresenting immanent or vital causality, not acknowledging discontinuity in evolution, and failing to grasp the pluri-dimensional character of evolution.

But along with these errors of understanding, Jankélévitch also diagnoses a moral (or rather, an existential) failing that stems from finalism and retrospection. He calls it, borrowing from Schopenhauer, "teleological astonishment" (114). Such astonishment happens, according to Jankélévitch, when finalism is combined—as it almost always is—with a conception of nature as created by a demiurge or creator. The result is the discourse of creationism: a view that evolution is purposive and that biological life is made the same way that an artisan produces his work, namely by crafting parts into a whole. Creationism is thus, for Jankélévitch, a striking case of the retrospective idol. Or more exactly, it is a species of that idol: it is the form retrospection takes when confronted with the plurality and movement of life. Creationism both eliminates the creativity of time by turning evolution into design and also portrays vital creation in terms of an unfathomably complicated combination of parts. For these reasons, Jankélévitch charges it with the errors of retrospection. Fair enough. But why, then, does he see in it a moral failing as well? Because it is narcissistic. "In thus reducing the operation of nature to a procedure of the mechanical type," writes Jankélévitch, "our intellect in a way admires itself. It is in fact one of the intellect's most absurd manias to thus create within things a certain complicated order in order to enjoy the spectacle. It is perpetually lunatic and loses itself in the ridiculous contemplation of its own image" (114).

The casualty of this kind of astonishment is wonder. For when we gape at the so-called complexity of this kind of artisanal creation, or when we reel at the so-called greatness of the craftsman behind it, what

we really opt for is admiration of feats drawn from our own likeness. This is why, according to Jankélévitch, Bergson's efforts in *Creative Evolution* seek to regain a disposition of wonder: "For the one who adopts an entirely different scale from the beginning, who from the outset conceives an entirely different metempirical and supernatural order, stupid *amazement* would no doubt make way for *wonder* and veneration of the sublime thing" (116). No doubt, inculcating a disposition of wonder is difficult. It requires us to swim against a very strong current. For to do so we must resign ourselves to remain contemporary with the history of vitality and not subject it to a transcendent plan. Or positively speaking—and in a line that might as well have come from the pen of Deleuze—we must reorient ourselves according to a "nominalism of the virtual," in which open-ended tendencies are acknowledged as the genuine realities of life (181). But the upshot of an attunement to duration is to attain an adequate comprehension of life as process and movement and, in so doing, rescue wonder—that existential attitude at the heart of philosophical inquiry—from its degradation into a merely astonished contemplation of ourselves.

#### SIMPLICITY

In French as in English, the word "simplicity" has several meanings. It can designate something that is undivided and unalloyed. And it can also refer to a way of being that is plain, unpretentious, and uncomplicated. For Jankélévitch, the virtue of Bergson's work—the "beautiful aridity" of his philosophy (203)—is that it combines these different meanings. And in the three concluding chapters of *Henri Bergson*, he sets out to show how Bergsonian simplicity can infuse all the different dimensions of our life: moral (chapter 5, "Heroism and Saintliness"), intellectual (chapter 6, "The Nothingness of Concepts and the Plenitude of Spirit"), and affective and aesthetic (chapter 7, "Simplicity... and Joy").

Consider intellectual simplicity. Like so many other major philosophers of the twentieth century—such as the later Wittgenstein, J. L. Austin, Stanley Cavell, John Dewey, Jacques Derrida, and Richard Rorty—Bergson advances a method (he calls it "intuition") to release us from long-standing but ultimately fruitless problems of philosophy. These problems include, for example, Zeno's paradoxes on movement, the Kantian relativity of knowledge, as well as vexing concepts of possibility and nothingness. But while there are innumerable pseudo-problems and



idle concepts according to Bergson, for him they all stem from one and the same fault: our inveterate tendency to confuse time with space and quality with quantity. What is the solution? A critical method able to distinguish these categories and analyze each on its own terms, pure and unalloyed. That, as Jankélévitch explains at length, is precisely what Bergson's philosophy provides: a means to think "quantity quantitatively" and "quality qualitatively" (152). Or, to revert to the language of simplicity, Bergson's achievement is to furnish a way of thinking of time, space, quality and quantity "simply" (i.e., as unalloyed with one another) in order to attain a tranquil or "simple" mind.

Readers steeped in interpretations of Bergson will know that this aspect of Jankélévitch's analysis is not unique. Other commentators stress the link between Bergson's method of intuition and simplicity of mind. It is, for example, a staple of Deleuze's first chapter in *Bergsonism* ("Intuition as Method"). However, Jankélévitch goes a step further in positing that for Bergson intellectual simplicity cannot be isolated from simplicity in other walks of life. He recognizes, in other words, the internal connection between intellectual simplicity on the one hand, and moral, affective, and aesthetic simplicity on the other.

These latter kinds of simplicity go by different names in Jankélévitch's interpretation: love, grace, and charm. And his passages on these distinct virtues are among the most moving in the book. But if we view them together, it becomes clear why Jankélévitch represents Bergson's philosophy as renewing *l'esprit de finesse* and culminating in a great "thawing of the soul" (201). For the simplicity sought by his philosophical method aims, in the final analysis, at the simplicity of what ancient philosophers would have called a "philosophical" way of life: a mode of being that upends not just our mental habits but also our moral and affective constitution. "Perhaps," Jankélévitch proposes, "there is even only one Simplicity, or rather one single spirit of simplicity... There is thus no difference whatsoever between the pure movement that swallows up all Zeno's aporias and the ascetic who leaps over [merely material] well-being in a single jump. For intuition is the asceticism of the mind; and asceticism, in turn, is nothing but intuition become the diet, *catastasis*, and permanent exercise of our soul" (165). Put this way, the simplicity that Bergson urges is comprehensive. Indeed, it is more than that. In touching the different areas of our life, and in urging a change in all of them, it might be called maximalist.

## BERGSON'S MAXIMALISM

If we were to boil down Jankélévitch's reading of Bergson to its essence, we could say that for him Bergson's philosophy rests on the affirmation—and not just the recognition—that we live in time. As he states in the appendix, “There is no other way of being for man than becoming. Becoming, namely being while not being, or not being while being, both being and not being (is this not the way it is conceived in Aristotle's *Physics*?)—this is the only way man has of being a being! Man, turning his gaze away from the mirage of the timeless, put down roots in the joyful plenitude” (223–24). Now, when we hear a line like this today our first reaction may be to think we already know the lesson. Yes, yes: movement and flux is our own reality. We've heard it before and since Bergson! But to read Jankélévitch's interpretation of Bergson may raise a nagging sense that our assent to this proposition is only notional or theoretical. Because what Jankélévitch is talking about is something different. It is real assent. It is an awareness that assenting to this proposition—that is, that our mode of being is becoming—involves our entire being and that to adhere to it will change our entire life, right down to our habits and ethos. It involves, to use a term Jankélévitch raises time and again, a conversion.

Speaking at a gathering to commemorate the hundred-year anniversary of Bergson's birth, Jankélévitch begins his address by adapting Kierkegaard's observation that the least Christian person in the world is, in fact, not the atheist or pagan but instead the satisfied soul who goes to church once a week on Sunday and forgets about Christ the rest of the time. The same goes, Jankélévitch says, for Bergson and Bergsonism.

We know that at the end of his life, Bergson preached the return to simplicity. One may wonder whether what we're doing here tonight is very Bergsonian. One may wonder whether it is very Bergsonian, generally, to commemorate Bergson. There are two ways not to be Bergsonian. The first is to be Bergsonian only on anniversaries, as if that exempted us from being Bergsonian all the other days, as if we had to square accounts once and for all. On that account, we may say, we might be better off being anti-Bergsonian. This anniversary must not resemble the all soul's days that the living invented in order to think of their dead only once a year and then to think of them no more. I hope, therefore, that it is about a renewal of Bergson's thought and that we won't wait for the second centenary to talk about it again.

The second way not to be Bergsonian is to treat Bergson like a historical sample, to repeat what he said instead of acting the way he did, or to “situate” Bergson’s philosophy instead of rethinking Bergson the way Bergson wanted to be rethought. These two pseudo-Bergsonisms, that of the anniversary Bergsonians and that of the historians, bring me to the two main points of this speech.<sup>35</sup>

*Henri Bergson* takes aim at these kinds of “holiday” Bergsonians. In this category are those who think of Bergson only now and again, but it also includes professional philosophers and philosopher tourists for whom Bergson’s work would be just another doctrine or method among others—as if his insights could be hived off to a specialist set of questions on time, memory, or life. It is to this casual reader—whether lay or professional—that Jankélévitch opposes his maximalist interpretation. For what drives his book is the attempt to interpret each line Bergson wrote as if it could invite or initiate, as he puts it, “a conversion that implies a reversal of all our habits, of all our associations, of all our reflexes” (239). Or, in the more laconic phrase of his 1930 preface, Jankélévitch seeks “less to give an exposition of Bergson’s philosophy than to make it understandable.”<sup>36</sup> Those are, for him, related but distinct tasks.