Bergson's Philosophy of Will and the War of 1914–1918

Mark Sinclair

A remarkable resurgence of interest in the philosophy of Henri Bergson has developed—in France certainly, but also in the Anglophone world—over the last few decades. A principal reason why the influence of his philosophy had previously declined, however, concerns his position regarding the Great War of 1914–18.[1] Bergson played a leading role in diplomatic missions that helped to bring the US into the war on the Allied side,[2] but he also characterized the conflict in a series of discourses that posterity often judged severely, and that still have the power to shock. In the first, presented shortly after the outbreak of hostilities—and Germany's invasion of Belgium

[1] On this point, see Vincent Peillon's preface to *Annales bergsoniennes: Tome 5, Bergson et la politique*, ed. Frédéric Worms (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2012) and the introduction to Philippe Soulez, *Bergson politique* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1989). The point remains largely unrecognized in English-language studies of Bergson, and Alexandre Lefebvre and Melanie White's *Bergson, Politics, and Religion* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), "the first volume in English dedicated to the political and religious aspects of his thought" (1), contains no essay directly on Bergson's discourses in 1914–18. For an account of the decline of Bergson's influence after 1918, see the final chapter of François Azouvi, *La gloire de Bergson* (Paris: Gallimard, 2007), and for general studies of the fate of Bergsonism in the twentieth century, see Giuseppe Bianco, *Après Bergson: Portrait de group avec philosophe* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2015) and Heike Delitz, *Bergson Effekte: Aversionen und Attraktionen im französischen soziologischen Denken* (Weilerswist: Velbrück, 2015).

[2] See Philippe Soulez, "Les missions de Bergson: Les paradoxes du philosophe véridique et trompeur" in Soulez, ed., *Les philosophes et la guerre de 14* (Saint Denis: Presses Universitaires de Vincennes, 1988), 65–81.

—on August 8, 1914, to the Académie des sciences morales et politiques, Bergson proclaimed:

> [t]he struggle begun against Germany is a struggle of civilisation against barbarism. Everyone feels this, but our Academy has perhaps a particular authority in order to say it. Dedicated, mainly, to the study of psychological, moral and social questions, it carries out its simple scientific duty in pointing out Germany's brutality and cynicism, and in its disdain for all justice and all truth, a regression to a state of savagery.[3]

In the name of science, and as president of the Académie, Bergson characterizes the conflict not as a clash of civilizations, but as a struggle between a bastion of civilization and savage barbarism. This "scientific" observation became a recurrent motif in French war propaganda, and it caused consternation among German intellectuals; with such a reductive view of the conflict, it was held, France's greatest philosopher had succumbed to "chauvinism."[4] That Bergson, a few months later, also claimed that if he had to choose between indignation and understanding in relation to Germany, he would prefer indignation, and that German philosophy was merely "the intellectual transposition of its brutality, its appetites and its vices,"[5] seems to provide further justification for this accusation, variations of which were made in France after the war, most notably by Julien Benda, Georges Politzer, and Paul Nizan.[6]

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[3] Bergson, "Discours prononcé à l'Académie des sciences morales et politiques, 8 Aout 1914," in *Mélanges*, ed. André Robinet (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1972), 1102: "La lutte engagée contre l'Allemagne est la lutte même de la civilisation contre la barbarie. Tout le monde le sent, mais notre Académie a peut-être une autorité particulière pour le dire. Vouée en grand partie à l'étude des questions psychologiques, morales et sociales, elle accomplit un simple devoir scientifique en signalant dans la brutalité et le cynisme de l'Allemagne, dans son mépris de toute justice et de toute vérité, une régression à l'état sauvage." Henceforth I refer to *Mélanges* with the abbreviation *M*.

[4] Wilhelm Wundt, "Besprechung von Bönke, Plagiator Bergson," *Literarisches Zentralblatt für Deutschland* 66 (1915): 1131–38, at 1137.

[5] Both quotations: "Discours en séance publique annuelle de l'Académie des sciences morales et politiques—samedi 12 décembre 1914," *M* 1107–29. This discourse has been translated as "Life and Matter in Conflict" in Bergson, *The Meaning of the War*, trans. H. Wildon-Carr (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1915), 15–40. I refer to it after a forward slash in the references to *Mélanges* with the abbreviation *MW*. For the two quotations, see *M* 1108/*MW* 17 and *M* 1113/*MW* 30 respectively.

[6] See Julien Benda, *La trahison des clercs* (Paris: Grasset, 1979 [1927]); Georges Politzer, *La fin d'une parade philosophique*: *Le bergsonisme*, in Politzer, *Contre Bergson et quelques autres: Ecrits philosophiques 1924–1939*, ed. Roger Bruyeron (Paris: Flammarion, 2013), 127–244 (originally published under the pseudonym F. Arouet in 1929); and Paul

Most French and German intellectuals adopted nationalist positions in 1914,[7] but what is interesting about Bergson's case is that he mobilizes the basic framework of his own philosophy to characterize France's struggle against Germany. In his 1907 *Creative Evolution*, and by analogy with an account of human creativity in art,[8] Bergson posits as the principle of all biological and psychological life an *élan vital*, understood as a power of creation that constantly has to overcome the mechanical inertia of matter in its production of new forms of life. Seven years later, in a discourse to the Académie in December 1914, this philosophy of art as a philosophy of life in general is transposed into the domain of international relations. France is characterized not simply as defending civilization, justice, and international law, but also as a dynamic and self-renewing power of creation, in opposition to the German *Reich*, which, as the force of a spiritless and static mechanism, is bound, for all its might, to wear itself out: "[o]n the one hand, mechanism, the manufactured thing unable to repair itself; on the other, life, power of creation, which makes itself and remakes itself at each instant."[9]

As Philippe Soulez has noted, despite their "polemical" and "partisan nature," "Bergson's wartime discourses share enough similarities with his previous philosophy for us to recognise 'Bergson' in them."[10] They clearly offer an account of the conflict between France and Germany that draws on Bergson's own philosophy of life as creation. Yet this gives rise to a question: what exactly is this doctrine of life as creation such that it can characterize now the production of artworks, now the process of psychological and biological life, now the French nation at war with Germany?

Nizan, *Les chiens de garde* (Paris: Rieder, 1932). I return to Politzer and Benda, but on all three thinkers as together marking a break with Bergsonism in the development of twentieth-century French philosophy, see Frédéric Worms, *La philosophie en France au XIX*ème *siècle: Moments* (Paris: Gallimard, 2009), 194–99.

[7] The literature on French and German intellectuals during the war is capacious, but see, for example, Roger Bruyeron, *1914: L'entrée en guerre de quelque philosophes* (Paris: Hermann, 2014); Frédéric Worms and Caterina Zanfi, eds., *Revue de métaphysique et de morale*, no. 84 (2014/4), *L'Europe philosophique des congrès à la guerre*, particularly in that the editors' introduction (459–66) contains important remarks on Bergson; Martha Hanna, *The Mobilization of Intellect: French Scholars and Writers during the Great War* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996); and Anne Rasmussen and Christophe Prochasson, *Au nom de la patrie: Les intellectuels francais et la Première Guerre mondiale, 1910–1919* (Paris: La découverte, 1996).

[8] I return to this point, but see also Caterina Zanfi, *Bergson et la philosophie allemande* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2014), 97.

[9] *M* 1116/*MW* 38.

[10] Soulez, *Bergson politique,* 266; Soulez, "Bergson as Philosopher of War and Theorist of the Political," in Lefebvre and White, *Bergson, Politics and Religion*, 99–125, at 99.

Only in responding to this question, I argue, is it possible to address adequately what Nadia Kisukidi has recently described as "two persistent difficulties" relating to Bergson's wartime discourses: "How is it that the philosophical concepts of *Creative Evolution* are merged into this war rhetoric?," and "Why do passages of the wartime discourses anticipate certain reflections" in Bergson's 1932 *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*?[11] I argue that Bergson is able to mobilize his philosophy of creation in 1914 because that philosophy is at bottom—as commentators are coming, once again, to recognize[12]—a philosophy of the will. In the idea of the *élan vital* as a dynamic, creative force there lies a conception of the will as a self-grounding, self-asserting, and self-augmenting voluntary force—and this becomes all the more evident in the way that Bergson mobilizes his philosophy. In order to justify and develop this thesis, however, it is necessary to examine Bergson's characterization of Germany at war, the voluntarist conceptions of life and creation that he mobilizes for the French war effort, and, finally, how this voluntarism informs his return to the central themes of the wartime discourses in *The Two Sources*.

I. GERMANY AND THE THREAT OF MODERN MACHINISM

Bergson's December 1914 Académie discourse contains his most concerted interpretation of the war, and within it he traces Germany's responsibility back to a fundamental "choice" it faced in its unification. Through an internal development, by a "natural effort of life," the sort of "unity in diversity, which is the distinguishing mark of organized beings" could have arisen among the politically backward but culturally rich German states. Instead, a power at once "interior" and "external (*à côté*)" to Germany forced it into becoming what it was not. This power was Prussia, where "everything

[11] Nadia Yala Kisukidi, "Bergson et la guerre de 1914–1918: Présentation du dossier," in *Annales bergsoniennes VII: Bergson, l'Allemagne, la guerre de 1914*, ed. Arnaud François, Nadia Yala Kisukidi, Camille Riquier, Caterina Zanfi, and Frédéric Worms (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2014), 101–13, at 105.

[12] For recent studies of Bergson and the will, see Arnaud François, *Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, Bergson: Volonté et réalite* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2009); Anne Devarieux, "Maine de Biran—Bergson: L'avenir de la volonté," in *Bergson*, ed. Camille Riquier (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 2012), 163–91; and Wahida Khandker's "The Idea of Will and Organic Evolution in Bergson's Philosophy of Life," *Continental Philosophy Review* 46, no. 1 (2013): 57–74.

tended to happen mechanically," which was itself constituted "mechanically by the simple addition of acquired and conquered territories,"[13] and which by brute, mechanical force imposed unity on Germany in a way that transformed its spirit:

> The time when her philosophers proclaimed the inviolability of right, the eminent dignity of the person, the duty of mutual respect among nations, is no more. Germany, militarized by Prussia, has cast aside those noble ideas. . . . She has made for herself a new soul, or rather she has meekly accepted the soul Bismarck gave her.[14]

The German states failed to resist a rapine, mechanistic Prussian spirit of conquest, and their soul has been wholly transformed as a result: respect for law and the dignity of the person has been replaced with the idolization of force and the crude doctrine that might is right.

Bergson considers the singularity of the new German nation-state since 1870 to result not simply from Prussian imperialism but rather from the conjunction of the latter with rapid scientific, technological, and industrial development.[15] Not only did the "idea peculiar to that century of diverting science to the satisfaction of men's material wants" evoke "a development of industry, and consequently of commerce, so extraordinary that the old conception of wealth was completely overthrown,"[16] but it gave birth to a new social form dominated by—as it would be named later in the century—a military–industrial complex. Although "industry was free to develop in all directions," "from the first, war was the end in view";[17] from the beginning, Bergson argues, technology and industry were in the service of Germany's pursuit of power and territorial expansion. Moreover, both modern industry in its gigantism and the commerce attendant upon it function in a military fashion: Germany "gave itself an industry and commerce no less formidable than its army, and that also function militarily."[18]

In the development of this military–industrial complex, Bergson senses

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[13] All quotations in this paragraph *M* 1109/*MW* 18–19.
[14] This is, in fact, a passage from Bergson's November 1914 text "La force qui s'use et celle qui n'use pas": *M* 1106/*MW* 45.
[15] On this point, see Florence Caymaex, "Les discours de guerre: Propaganda et philosophie" in *Annales bergsoniennes VII*, 143–66, at 156.
[16] *M* 1110/*MW* 23.
[17] *M* 1111/*MW* 24.
[18] *M* 1110/*MW* 22.

an unleashing of powers that transcend even the malign intentions of Prussian leaders. A mechanically minded, imperialist Germany may well have both desired and been suited to modern technological development, but it produces "automatically, a very different effect to what its constructors intended." Bergson invokes in this connection a version of Goethe's sorcerer's apprentice: the story of "the witch, who by a magic spell made her broom handle fetch water with a bucket from the river, but who, having no formula for stopping it, watched her lair fill up with water before she eventually drowned in it."[19] Analogously, Germany has set in motion a process that gets out of hand, one that, "sooner or later, was to escape all control and become a race to the abyss."[20] Full of frenzied ambition, Germany becomes bent on "world-domination" and stops at nothing short of total war in the pursuit of its imperialist expansion: "from the time when Prussian militarism, now turned into German militarism, had become one with industrialism, it was the enemy's industry, his commerce, the sources of his wealth, his wealth itself, as well as his military power, which war must now make the end in view," and to this end "it will massacre women, children and the elderly; it will pillage and burn; the ideal will be to destroy towns, villages, the whole population."[21]

This analysis of twentieth-century total war and of the imperialist nation-state as a war machine is important and perhaps prescient, but the ascription of these phenomena solely to Germany is, in short, propagandistic. Though clearly shocked by the real atrocities committed by German forces in Belgium, Bergson could have offered, as Roger Bruyeron has recently remarked, a similar sociological analysis with respect to France and Great Britain, nations that "invent globalisation, extend around the entire globe their industrial and commercial power, and colonise at will African and Asian countries."[22] In 1923, in fact, within a brief review of Alfred de Tarde's 1915 discourse "Le Maroc, école d'énergie," which attempts to ascertain the nature of France's spiritual mission in Morocco,[23]

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[19] Both quotations: *M* 1110/*MW* 22–23.
[20] *M* 1111/*MW* 25.
[21] *M* 1113/*MW* 31.
[22] Roger Bruyeron, *1914: L'entrée en guerre de quelques philosophes*, 116. In this connection, see also Georges Friedman, "La prudence de M. Bergson, ou Philosophie et caractère," *Commune* 30, no. 3 (1936): 721–36.
[23] See Alfred de Tarde, "Le Maroc, école d'énergie" (Rabat: Imprimerie du "Bulletin Officiel du Protectorat," 1915, available at http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k6265 2277) and particularly p. 7 for the questions that the discourse addresses: "Qu'est-ce que la France est venue apporter au Maroc de neuf et de fécond? Qu'est-ce que l'âme indigène, qu'est-ce que l'âme française elle-même gagnent à ce contact?"

Bergson recognizes "a secret force that since the war of 1870 has led us to colonize: a revolt of the frustrated energies of our race, a need to act and teach action."[24] It is not only Germany, then, that has been possessed by an imperialist drive since 1870.

Bergson is all the more capable of recognizing that the modern technological condition he describes is no mere national peculiarity in that he senses, as we have just seen, a momentum proper to modern technology per se: "on the morrow of the war of 1870," the German nation "had no alternative but to become industrial and commercial,"[25] and the military–industrial complex was *bound to* escape the control of its Prussian architects. Certainly, Bergson otherwise opposes any form of determinism in history, technological determinism included, and within an April 1915 talk on "War and the Literature of Tomorrow," he advances the voluntarist position that history is shaped not by "ineluctable laws," but rather by "unforeseeable flicks carried out by free wills, creative of their own destiny and of that of their own country, when they see fit, and in the direction chosen by them."[26] Ultimately, his position seems to be that Germany's responsibility for the war lies in its inability to master—due to its original choice—the self-propelling forces underlying modern technology. This is what makes its barbarism, rather than a simple return to a primitive state as he had previously suggested, a "scientific" or "systematic barbarism."[27] A "philosopher of the future," when the guns have fallen silent and there is opportunity for reflection, might speak of the meaning of the war thus:

> the idea, proper to the nineteenth century, of employing science for the satisfaction of material needs had . . . procured for man more tools than he had produced during the thousands of years in which he had previously existed on earth. Each new machine being for man a new organ—an artificial organ that comes to extend his natural organs—, his body found itself suddenly and prodigiously enlarged, without his spirit being able to dilate itself quickly enough to extend itself to the whole of this new body. From this

[24] "Rapport sur 'Le Maroc, école d'énergie' d'Alfred de Tarde," in *M* 1395–96, at 1396.
[25] *M* 1110/*MW* 23.
[26] "La guerre et la littérature de demain," *M* 1151–56, at 1152. On this point, see also Jean-Benoît Ghenne and Louis Groarke, "The Political Commitment of the Philosopher: Henri Bergson's Wartime Discourses: Paradox or Ambiguity?," in *Ideas Under Fire: Historical Studies of Philosophy and Science in Adversity*, ed. Jonathan Lavery, Louis Groarke, and William Sweet (New Jersey: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2012), 193–316, at 200.
[27] See Soulez, *Bergson politique*, 140.

> disproportion are born moral, social and international problems which most of the nations endeavoured to solve by filling up the soulless void in the body politic by creating more liberty, more fraternity, more justice.[28]

Instead of moderating modern technology by pursuing more freedom and justice—as has France, Bergson implies, in its pursuit of *liberté*, *égalité*, *fraternité*—Germany threatens to enslave humanity to the powers it has helped to unleash; "instead of a spiritualisation of matter" it threatens "the mechanisation of spirit."[29]

Germany, then, must be opposed as a rapacious, imperialist nation-state, certainly, but given that its technological capacities have escaped its control, it is also a victim of dangerous historical forces that threaten, it would seem, all developing nations. Wildon-Carr was right to remark in 1915 that there is "much more" in Bergson's discourse "than the utterance of a philosopher stirred by deep patriotic feeling to uphold his country's cause and denounce his country's foes," much more than an "indictment of modern Germany's rulers or people."[30] It is such an indictment, but it is more than this insofar as it concerns the future of humanity in the face of technological development.

II. FRANCE, WILL, AND THE WAR EFFORT

Against a Germany instantiating the unfettered mechanistic forces of modernity stands France, which embodies a force of another order:

> [o]n the one side, there is force spread out on the surface, on the other, force in depth. On the one hand, mechanism, the manufactured thing unable to repair itself; on the other, life, power of creation, which makes itself and remakes itself at each instant. On the one hand, that which wastes; on the other hand, that which does not.[31]

France is a nation able to replenish itself in its war effort because it is a nation embodying life and creation; whereas Germany is unable to because

[28] *M* 1114–5/*MW* 34.
[29] *M* 1115/*MW* 35.
[30] *MW* 12.
[31] *M* 1116/*MW* 38.

it is a merely mechanical force. These claims subtly displace Bergson's ideas concerning France's internationalist and moral mission in his two earlier war discourses. According to the November 1914 discourse "The Force that Wastes and the Force that Does Not," France could replenish itself because it has access to higher supra-national moral principles, principles above self-interest,[32] whereas now the claim is that the nation can replenish itself *by itself and from itself*. Life, as Bergson has it, "makes itself and remakes itself," and rather than *discovering* moral principles that exist beyond it, it is a power of *creation*. Bergson does not now deny that France has an elevated and internationalist moral mission, and the opposition of life and mechanism implies a kind of moral evaluation: the living is supposed to be higher than the mechanical, and thus France superior to Germany. Yet his position now in December 1914—one that will reappear in 1932—seems to be that moral principles are produced, created by a vital force, and this is the reason why "life" can stand as the motive force and ultimate justification of France's war effort.

From this perspective, the claim that in December 1914 "Bergson now insists that vital energy can only be sustained by ideals of freedom and justice higher than the life force itself" seems to get things the wrong way round.[33] It seems more apposite to say, as Georges Politzer put it in his 1929 polemical pamphlet *La fin d'une parade philosophique: Le bergsonisme*, that Bergson had come to decide that "sanctifying the war in the name of freedom was already quite good, but sanctifying it in the name of life is better."[34] This "*mise en scène*" of Bergson's "own philosophy"[35] on the stage of international relations may certainly appear unconvincing, particularly in the light of his later claim, to which we will return, that all societies share in the two principles of the "open" and the "closed," but his argument is not absurd: France's supposed respect for international law and genuinely moral principles, together with its supposed concern for spiritualizing modern technology, derives from a different spiritual source than that governing an alleged German pursuit of power for its own sake.

It is, however, necessary to determine how Bergson's philosophy of creative life makes its own mobilization in 1914 possible. What sort of force is creative life such that it can be opposed not just to an imperialist nation-state but also to the unbridled technological forces of modernity?

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[32] See *M* 1106/*MW* 45.
[33] Donna V. Jones, "Mysticism and War: Reflections on Bergson and his Reception during World War I," in *Annales bergsoniennes VII*, 167–79, at 178.
[34] Politzer, *La fin d'une parade philosophique*, 230.
[35] Ibid., 233.

An answer to this question, as I have suggested, resides in the recognition that Bergson's philosophy of life is at bottom a philosophy of will. This voluntarism has not always been clearly recognized principally because, as Arnaud François has remarked, Bergson develops this philosophy of will in the most deliberate fashion in essays and lectures rather than in his principal works.[36] Nevertheless, chapter three of *Creative Evolution* contains a statement of the importance of an idea of will:

> For our consciousness to be able to coincide with something of its principle, it would have to detach itself from the *readymade* and attach itself to *being-made*. The faculty of *seeing*, twisting and turning back on itself, would have to become one with the act of *willing* [*vouloir*]. . . . In free action, when we contract the whole of our being to project it forward, we have the more or less clear consciousness of the motives and of impelling forces [*motifs et mobiles*], and even, at a push, of the becoming through which they organize themselves into an act; but the pure will [*le pur vouloir*], the current which traverses this matter in communicating life to it is something that we feel only with difficulty.[37]

The understanding or the intellect—as Bergson has argued earlier—is equipped to deal only with that which is static, material, and spatial, whereas our conscious existence is dynamic, spiritual, and temporal. The faculty through which we have access to the principle of our conscious existence, then, is not the intellect, but the will. Voluntary action offers the possibility of an intuition—however indirect and obscure it may be—of the principle of consciousness and life more generally. Yet we can access this through an act of will because, as Bergson contends, the "principle of all life" is a "pure will."[38]

"Will" can mean many things. For Bergson, will is not merely an executive faculty responsive to the proposals of the intellect; it is more original and primitive than the intellect, and it transcends anything the latter can propose to it. Bergson considers voluntary action in general in terms of what he seems to take as one of its particular forms, namely artistic creation: "[i]f I deliberate before acting, the moments of the deliberation offer

[36] See François, *Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, Bergson*, 40–60.
[37] Bergson, *L'évolution créatrice*, in *Œuvres*, ed. André Robinet (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1959), 696–97; *Creative Evolution,* trans. A. Mitchell (New York: Henry Holt, 1913), 237–38.
[38] *Œuvres*, 697; *Creative Evolution*, 238.

themselves to my consciousness as the successive sketches, each particular in its own way, that a painter would draw of his painting; and the act itself, in being carried out, may well realize something desired and consequently foreseen, but it has nonetheless its own original form."[39] Just as—according to a modern, Kantian conception of genius, at least—there is something that goes beyond the realization of conceptual intentions in the production of an original artwork, so too, for Bergson, veritable action contains an element that transcends deliberate, reflective intention. This, of course, was Bergson's position in his first published book on the "immediate data of consciousness," whose title is liberally translated into English as *Time and Free Will*: time thought in a nonlinear and thus non-spatialized sense as duration (*durée*) is the principle of human freedom, a form of freedom irreducible to the power of a *libre arbitre* to decide on the proposals of the intellect from on high. Yet by the time of *Creative Evolution*, the essence of time as "duration" is itself explicitly conceived according to an idea of will: "[w]hen we put our being back into our will, and our will itself back into the impulsion that it extends, we come to understand, we feel that reality is a continual growth, creation that develops without end."[40]

These passages indicate, then, that Bergson conceives of "creation," as much as "life," according to an idea of will. He will assert this explicitly, although not without some hesitation and still inchoately, in his later work. After having asserted in the first of two discourses in Madrid in May 1916 that "we cannot be artistic merely by wanting to be so [*n'est pas artiste qui veut*],"[41] in his 1930 essay "The Possible and the Real," Bergson claims that we are "artistic when we want to be [*quand nous le voulons*]."[42] He goes further in this direction: if the principle of all creation is *génialité*, as he supposes in 1907,[43] in 1932 he argues that genius is itself voluntary. There exist "*volontés géniales*," genial acts of will, volitions that are acts of genius; "the will has its genius as does thought, and genius defies all prevision."[44] Such a voluntarist conception of genius is certainly perplexing, in that genius is often thought to involve inspiration and thus to transcend the powers of the individual artist; "where an author owes a product

[39] Bergson, "Le possible et le réel," in *La pensée et le mouvant*, in *Œuvres*, 1331; *The Creative Mind,* trans. Mabelle L. Andison (New York: Philosophical Library, 1946), 91–92.
[40] *Œuvres*, 698; *Creative Evolution*, 239.
[41] "Conférence de Madrid sur l'âme humaine," in *M* 1200–1215, at 1214.
[42] *Œuvres*, 1334; *Creative Mind*, 93–94.
[43] *Œuvres*, 634. Arthur Mitchell's translation of this as "fervor" obscures its derivation from an idea of genius; *Creative Evolution*, 173.
[44] Bergson, *Les deux sources de la morale et de la religion* in *Œuvres*, 1023; *The Two*

to his genius," as Kant put it, "he does not himself know how the *ideas* for it have entered into his head, nor has he it in his power to invent the like at pleasure."[45] On this account, the artist cannot invent her products at *will*, and one wonders how Bergson's voluntarism could account for an artist's inability to create despite her best efforts—for, say, "writer's block."

Bergson's failure to elaborate on the issue suggests that he is led to his voluntarist conception of genius indirectly, as a result of other commitments; from, in fact, the conjunction of two theses: an idea of life as will, a version of which Bergson had doubtless found in the early nineteenth-century philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer,[46] and an attempt in 1907 to conceive of the non-finalistic development of biological life—and, consequently, of life as a whole—by analogy with a broadly Kantian conception of the genial, non-conceptual and non-intentional production of novelty in art. This is precisely what is at stake in Bergson's extension of an idea of "creation" and "genius" to biological life. Yet the conjunction of this voluntarism and this creationism leads to a voluntarist conception of artistic creation, which contrasts sharply with the more Kantian, non-voluntarist position that Schopenhauer had advanced concerning art. It is important to note this contrast, since Bergson's wartime discourses had in Germany earned him accusations of plagiarism as well as chauvinism. It was alleged that Bergson had borrowed the principal ideas of his philosophy from Schopenhauer, but it is clear that the French philosopher's voluntarist account of art and creation is one way in which his philosophy contrasts sharply with that of his German predecessor.[47]

This voluntarist conception of art production also suggests, however, that Bergson has developed from Schopenhauer the particular idea that the will is a principle of spontaneity not entirely controllable by the agent, that it is, if the traditional terms can be applied here, passive as well as active. Indeed, as Arnaud François has argued, Bergson comes to think the essence of will in *The Two Sources* as emotion, and not simply as that which acts

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Sources of Morality and Religion, trans. R. Ashley Audra and Cloudesley Brereton (South Bend, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977), 44.

[45] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, rev. and ed. Nicholas Walker, trans. James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 137.

[46] See Arnaud François, "Bergson plagiaire de Schopenhauer? Analyse d'une polémique," *Etudes germaniques* 60, no. 3 (2005): 469–91.

[47] See, again, François, "Bergson plagiaire de Schopenhauer?," but François does not elucidate Bergson's voluntarist philosophy of art, which distinguishes his position so clearly from that of Schopenhauer. For Schopenhauer's philosophy of art, see, for example, Christopher Janaway, "Knowledge and Tranquility: Schopenhauer on the Value of Art," in *Schopenhauer, Philosophy, and the Arts*, ed. Dale Jacquette (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 39–61.

on or restrains emotion; in this sense it is possible to think of will, at once active and passive, as "desire" or even as "love."[48] Yet it is not this version of his philosophy of will that Bergson mobilizes in 1914. There is no question of loving the enemy, and Bergson does not send out a nation of creatives in search of inspiration, unable to marshal their creative powers by their own effort against the massed ranks of the modern German war machine. Instead, to Germany, Bergson opposes a force that can be controlled, mastered, mobilized at will, in and for the war effort. This conception of will as self-mastery never leaves the horizon of Bergson's thinking, as can be seen in the conclusion to the "The Possible and the Real," which outlines the ethical import of a doctrine of "creative novelty." In recognizing the novelty in our experience and actions,

> [w]e will, above all, be stronger, for we will feel ourselves participating, creators of ourselves, in the great work of creation, which is there from the beginning and which continues before our eyes. Our capacity to act, in grasping itself, will be intensified. Humiliated heretofore in an attitude of obedience, slaves of all kinds of natural necessities, we will lift ourselves up, masters associated to a greater Master.[49]

Bergson speaks in this passage of personal experience, but given that in the second of his 1916 Madrid discourses he claims that there exist national personalities, the position can be developed in relation to the nation:[50] leading France to apprehend itself in 1914 as a living force of creative novelty would allow it to intensify its own power, to assert itself against the base, mechanical forces of the German empire that oppose it. Such an intensification of the French war effort would allow the nation to approach the heights of mastery, and to achieve a kind of "sacred union" with a divine principle thought of as a "great Master."

The tension in Bergson's philosophy of will between a conception of command and control, on the one hand, and an idea of desire or love, on the other, seems to be reflected in his conception of creation itself. On the one hand, he often uses "creation" as a synonym of maturation;[51] and "creation" cannot, in any sense, be *ex nihilo* or *de novo*, deriving from nothing but the present act of creation itself, if the idea of a creative *evolution* is

[48] See François, *Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, Bergson*, 70–73.
[49] *Œuvres*, 1345; *Creative Mind*, 105–6.
[50] "Conférence de Madrid: la personalité," in *M* 1215–35, at 1232.
[51] See *Œuvres*, 503; *Creative Evolution*, 11–12.

not to amount to a contradiction in terms. Accordingly, his affirmations of "absolute" or "radical" novelty in 1907 are to be taken merely in an epistemological sense: an event is "radically new" if it is unforeseeable. Nevertheless, Bergson is attracted to an idea of absolute novelty in a metaphysical sense, by an idea of absolute beginnings; and as Newton Stallknecht put it in 1934, "Bergson's philosophy really contains two accounts of creation."[52] In 1932, for example, he will return to the idea of a creative evolution by describing "the unforeseeability of forms that life creates from scratch [*de toutes pieces*], by discontinuous leaps, all along its evolution."[53] Here Bergson entertains the apparently contradictory idea of a *discontinuous* evolution. Arguably, one of Bergson's motives for gesturing towards creative discontinuity is his philosophy of will as mastery: creation can genuinely be self-creation, and the intensification of power at its most intense, when the (will)-power of creation derives solely from itself in the present, without being weighed down by the past. Bergson's "voluntarism," in the sense of a philosophy placing the will at the origin of consciousness, seems to lead him towards a "voluntarist" theory of time and history, according to which creation derives from nothing but the creative volition in the present. This sense of creation may well contradict much that Bergson says about time as duration in his principal works, but it nevertheless stands as an ideal in his reflection on "radical" and "absolute" novelty from 1907 onwards, and it seems to be what he has in mind when he claims in 1914 that the power undergirding the French nation can "make and remake itself" at every instant.

III. BERGSONISM AND IMPERIALISM

Politzer's *La fin d'une parade philosophique*—in which Bergson is denounced as a "lackey" and "puppet" of the French bourgeoisie, as a "traitor" and "agent provocateur"—offers one of the most virulent and influential critiques of Bergson's mobilization of his philosophy in 1914. The effect of this pamphlet has recently been compared to a fragmentation bomb destroying the possibility of any serious return to Bergson's philosophy not only during the 1930s, but also after the Liberation, when a "new generation will be indelibly marked by Politzer's heroic death during the

[52] Newton Stallknecht, *Studies in the Philosophy of Creation with Especial Reference to Bergson and Whitehead* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1934), 53.
[53] *Œuvres*, 1072/*Two Sources*, 95.

Resistance."[54] Certainly, not everyone now will accept Politzer's Marxist certainty that the Great War was to be opposed as a clash internal to capitalist imperialism. Still fewer will subscribe to his view that Bergson's spiritualist philosophy, in the name of life and immediacy, was an ideological ruse obscuring the significance of dialectical materialism as the sole genuinely concrete philosophy of life—and that Bergson's political engagement in the service of capitalist imperialism was the "application" of his philosophy "to a purpose for which it was made."[55] Nevertheless, it is fair to say that there is a direct relation between Bergson's philosophy and its expression in his wartime discourses; "some might say that Bergson had lost his mind or that he had succumbed to a 'social pressure' foreign to his philosophy,"[56] but, for Politzer, these discourses express an essential element of Bergson's thinking. It is also true that these wartime discourses bring to light the "real character of Bergson's enterprise,"[57] the real meaning of his philosophy that might otherwise remain obscure. Politzer was right on both counts, however, for reasons that he did not quite suspect, reasons that are independent of his Marxist politics and his demand for a "concrete" philosophy: Bergson's philosophy of life as creation is—at bottom, or at least in one of its versions—a philosophy of the will as a self-propelling and self-constituting power, a power wholly at one's command, a power that can and should be intensified. This is why Bergson is able to mobilize his philosophy of creative evolution for the French war effort; and it is the *philosophical* basis of Bergson's somewhat *unphilosophical*—that is, unreflective, partisan, and chauvinist—response to the outbreak of war. Bergson's interventions may have been driven by other political and personal factors—by, in particular, a desire to resist the ambient anti-Semitism of the French Third Republic, as Johann Chapoutot has noted[58]—but the philosophical basis of his interventions lies in his philosophy of the will. At the same time, the nature of this philosophy of will is brought into sharper focus by its mobilization. The *discours de guerre* can certainly be characterized, following Philippe Soulez, as a kind of "doubling [*dédoublement*]"[59] of the philosophical work that Bergson, in his testament, chose to separate from his more circumstantial writings, but in the heat of the moment they

[54] Bianco, *Après Bergson*, 169.
[55] *La fin d'une parade philosophique,* 238.
[56] Ibid., 236.
[57] Ibid.
[58] See also Johann Chapoutot, "La trahison d'un clerc? Bergson, la grande guerre et la France," *Francia* 35 (2008): 295–316, at 297.
[59] See *Bergson politique,* 31–36, for Soulez's presentation of this problematic of "doubling."

distill a fundamental position in that philosophical work. Without the war discourses, it would be much easier to pass over the problematic voluntarism in Bergson's vitalism.

Politzer perhaps had some idea of this voluntarism, particularly when he cites the following passage from Bergson's 1915 essay on "French Philosophy," an essay that, as Soulez puts it, is only an "apparent exception"[60] to the rule that every discourse presented during the conflict should be treated as belonging to the *discours de guerre*, since it presents evidently partisan readings of the history of philosophy: "Less famous than Nietzsche, Guyau held, before the German philosopher, in more measured terms and in a more acceptable form, that the moral ideal is to be sought in the highest possible expansion of life."[61] This, as Politzer claims, "reveals to us what Bergson thinks of himself" as much as his estimation of his predecessor, Jean-Marie Guyau.[62] Yet what Politzer does not state is that if the essence of life is will, and if the moral ideal is the expansion of life, then the *summum bonum* is the expansion and intensification of the will. Will, if it wills well, wills its own expansion. The will wills dominion and power, but the principle of power is not external to the will; will, thus, is and should be a *will to will*. Bergson may well consider the form of Nietzsche's philosophy to be unmeasured and unacceptable, and recent German philosophy in general to be the expression of its appetites and vices, but the French philosopher's own ideas have more than a passing resemblance to the Nietzschean doctrine of the will to power.[63]

In France, Nietzsche's philosophy was often characterized as a "doctrine of war," as the theoretical basis of German imperialist expansion.[64] In his December discourse, Bergson appears to offer a similar characterization when he describes a Germany whose sole principle is that might is right:

> The people to whom this power [*élan*] had come were the elect, a chosen race by whose side the others are races of bondmen. To such a race nothing is forbidden that may help in establishing its dominion. Let none speak to it of inviolable right! Right is what is written in a treaty; a treaty is what registers the will of a

[60] Soulez, *Bergson politique*, 128.
[61] *M* 1180.
[62] *La fin d'une parade philosophique*, 225. On Bergson's relation to Guyau, see Keith Ansell-Pearson, "Morality and the Philosophy of Life in Guyau and Bergson," *Continental Philosophy Review* 47, no. 1 (2014): 59–85.
[63] I make no claims here concerning the true content of Nietzsche's doctrine.
[64] See, for example, Gabriel Huan, *La philosophie de Frédéric Nietzsche*, vol. 1, *Les doctrines de guerre en Allemagne* (Paris: Fontemoing, 1917).

> conqueror—that is, the direction of his force for the time being: force, then, and right are the same thing.[65]

Bergson will make clear later in *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* that he is attributing these ideas to Nietzsche.[66] Yet what exactly is it that the French philosopher opposes in 1914 to the *élan* of an imperialist Germany, which believes itself to be a nation of masters, but which is enslaved to the technological powers that have overwhelmed it? More mastery, more power, a stronger force of a different and supposedly authentic kind. It was obvious from the title of the 1914 discourse, "The Force that Wastes and the Force that Does Not," that Bergson considered the conflict as a clash of forces, but now it becomes evident that to a decaying and decrepit German will-to-power, Bergson opposes a self-revitalizing willpower, whose end lies no less in its intensification and expansion. France is the nation of real mastery and it must impose its dominion on its sclerotic European enemy. It is no surprise to see that Bergson was congratulated in the French press in 1914 for having served the cause of "national expansion."[67] His philosophy of will was well suited for it.

Bergson returns to this issue of imperialism, and to many of the concerns that animated the wartime discourses, in *The Two Sources*, the book on morality that had been expected from him for over twenty-five years.[68] Here he writes as the actual "philosopher of the future" about whose views of the war he had previously speculated; and it is necessary to consider what this older and perhaps wiser philosopher can tell us about his intervention in the Great War. First, the philosopher of 1932 has clearly recognized that what he now terms the "open" and the "closed" are two tendencies inherent to all societies, and that no particular nation-state can be wholly determined by either one. All societies are, to a degree, closed in on themselves, and, standing in opposition to others in a world of scarce resources, are moved by a war instinct. At the level of discourse, Bergson notes, this war instinct expresses itself in the demonization of the enemy "other": "The two opposed maxims *Homo homini deus* and *Homo homini lupus* are easily reconcilable. When we formulate the first, we are thinking of a compatriot. The second applies to foreigners."[69] Together with his evocation of the "exaltation of a people at the outbreak of war," which could

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[65] *M* 1112/*MW* 28.
[66] See *Œuvres*, 1212; *Two Sources*, 240.
[67] Gaston Rageot, *La revue de Paris*, 1 February 1918, as cited by Politzer, *La fin d'une parade philosophique*, 230.
[68] On this point, see Soulez and Worms, *Bergson* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2002), 239.
[69] *Œuvres*, 1219; *Two Sources*, 247.

"perhaps" be explained as a "defensive reaction against fear,"[70] Bergson is here clearly engaging in an implicit, and probably painful, auto-critique: the mobilization of his philosophy in the service of the French war effort—*and this in the name of openness, in the name of a concern for humanity in general*—was to a degree a function of a bellicose, perhaps fearful, but certainly partially closed mind.

Yet if France can no longer be opposed to Germany as a universalist and open society to one that is self-isolating and closed, the very real social and philosophical issue of modern technology remains. In the final chapter of *The Two Sources,* entitled "Mechanism and Mysticism," Bergson addresses this issue in almost identical terms to the December 1914 discourse. New technologies have "imparted to our organism an extension so vast, have endowed it with a power so mighty," but in this enlarged body our sprit "remains what it was, too small to fill it, too weak to guide it." This disproportion produces "social, political and international problems which are just so many definitions of this gap, and which provoke so many chaotic and ineffectual efforts to fill it."[71] In fact, "humanity stands half-crushed by the progress it has made," and is perhaps on the verge, as Bergson remarks presciently, of developing military technologies that may lead to its total annihilation. Our enlarged physical capacities, the machinism that seems to have developed with its own momentum beyond any original intention, requires "a supplement of spirit." It requires a spiritual expansion enabling a return to a more austere, spiritual simplicity, one able to resist the commercial production of new, unnecessary "needs" in the machine age. Only with such an expansionary purification can we ensure, Bergson argues, that the basic, alimentary needs of all, rather than of just a few, can be met. Mechanism "requires a mysticism,"[72] which by no means entails that the former is to be vanquished by the latter, since mysticism itself requires mechanism in order to gain the requisite freedom from immediate material needs.

It is in this context that, in the final pages of *The Two Sources,* Bergson responds briefly to Ernest Seillière, fellow member of the Académie de sciences morales et politiques, who—"in a long series of writings, which, for depth and forcefulness are beyond praise"[73]—attempts to illuminate the sense and sources of imperialism.[74] Imperialism understood as a political

[70] *Œuvres*, 1218; *Two Sources*, 246.
[71] *Œuvres*, 1239; *Two Sources*, 267–68.
[72] *Œuvres*, 1239; *Two Sources*, 268.
[73] *Œuvres*, 1239; *Two Sources*, 268.
[74] See, in particular, Ernest Seillière, *La philosophie de l'impérialisme*, 4 vols. (Paris: Plon, 1903–8).

reality, as the tendency of social groups and modern nation-states to expand into foreign territory, is to be accounted for not economically, but metaphysically, according to a philosophy of life: for Seillière, life is essentially imperialist in that its forms need to exploit and overcome their surroundings in order to survive and develop.[75] In the human being, this vital reality expresses itself in a desire to dominate oneself, things, and other people. As naming such a vital, personal, and social reality, the term "imperialism," for Seillière, does not have an intrinsically pejorative sense. Nevertheless, imperialism becomes problematic when it loses its moorings in reason grounded in experience and becomes guided by improper forms of "mysticism," whose principal modern forms are: a Rousseauian belief in the essential goodness of humankind, romantic beliefs in human genius, democratic beliefs in the essential goodness or rightness of the people, and doctrines of racial supremacy.

It is in this light that Seillière had approached Bergson's philosophy, which he takes, like that of Nietzsche, to be one of the recent philosophies of imperialism. In an article published in German in 1913, and reproduced as chapter three of his 1917 *L'avenir de la philosophie bergsonienne*, Seillière wondered whether Bergson's philosophy of life could provide the grounds for a moral doctrine contrasting with Nietzsche's supposedly irrationalist, individualist, and ultimately violent imperialism.[76] Bergsonism is a "new mysticism," one that is "marvelously adapted . . . to the present state of human knowledge" and that is "the most useful tonic for the sort of action to which those of good will should rally." Yet this mysticism carries the risk of abuse by an "excessive will to power," and without a moral doctrine Bergson has nothing that he could "oppose, as a brake, to the temptations already assailing so visibly some of his readers." It is probable, supposes Seillière, that *sympathy* will occupy an important position in a Bergsonian moral doctrine, even though Bergson himself, so far at least, has placed "the Will to power, much more insistently than sympathy, at the origin of active life."[77] Seillière, then, claims that Bergson's philosophy is a philosophy of the will to power, but he also sees the need for this philosophy to be tempered by a moral doctrine of sympathy.

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[75] For this definition, see Seillière, *L'avenir de la philosophie bergsonienne* (Paris: Alcan, 1917), 37.

[76] Seillière, "Welche Moralphilosophie lässt Bergson erwarten?," *Internationale Zeitschrift für Wissenschaft, Kunst und Technik* 8, no. 2 (1913): 191–209, and *L'avenir du la philosophie bergsonienne*, 34–50.

[77] All citations in this paragraph: Seillière, *L'avenir de la philosophie bergsonienne*, 34–35.

Now, without referring to this article in particular, Bergson responds to Seillière by claiming that once genuine mysticism is distinguished from its improper forms in the imperialism of modern nation-states—which merely amount, one might say, to ideological mystification—we will recognize that mysticism is *not* bound up with imperialism. Even though he adds in a footnote that his remarks do not address the full senses of both terms in Seillière's work, Bergson's first point is that if "we keep to true mysticism, we shall judge it incompatible with imperialism."[78] Bergson's philosophy of mystical openness in 1932 is not imperialist, if by that we mean empire and dominion over other human beings and societies; instead of empire in this ordinary sense, he now promotes international law and the nascent League of Nations.[79] Although Bergson holds that a "mystical" concern for humanity in general is a product of the "mystic genius,"[80] of genial acts of *willing*, he distinguishes his account of sympathy and openness from any notion of imperialism. This position contrasts, it should be noted, with the apparent justification of French colonialism in the 1923 review of de Tarde's "Le Maroc, école d'énergie": a developed "philosophy of colonialism" is still required, Bergson wrote there, but France needed to unleash its power of action, and Morocco needed to be awakened from its slumbers.[81]

In any case, no sooner has Bergson made this remark, distancing his own position from a "philosophy of imperialism," than he qualifies it:

> At the most, we will have to admit, as we just put it, that mysticism cannot be expanded without encouraging a certain, very particular 'will to power'. It is a question of having dominion, not over men, but on things, precisely so that man should no longer have it so much on man.[82]

So Bergson admits—echoing Seillière's analysis—that his philosophy of mystical openness presupposes an expansionary and imperialist principle, a will to power, insofar as the natural world, by means of modern technology, is to be dominated, its resources fully exploited, so that humanity as a whole can live without want and thus in peace. Julien Benda was not

[78] *Œuvres*, 1240; *Two Sources*, 269.
[79] On Bergson's work at the head of the International Commission for Intellectual Cooperation, an advisory organization for the League of Nations, see chapter 9 (written by Worms) of Soulez and Worms, *Bergson*.
[80] *Œuvres*, 1240; *Two Sources*, 269.
[81] See the conclusion of "Rapport sur 'Le Maroc, école d'énergie' d'Alfred de Tarde," *M* 1396.
[82] *Œuvres*, 1240; *Two Sources*, 269.

wrong, therefore, when he wrote in 1927 that "it is man" that Bergson "exalts for his genius in making himself master of the earth."[83] Bergson's 1932 position is what we might call metaphysically expansionary and imperialist, but not imperialist in a narrowly political or social sense; if dominion there must be, this concerns the human being's relation to the tools it has created and thus to nature as a whole, but not the relation of person to person or group to group.[84] Nevertheless, it is the metaphysical imperialism of the will to power underlying Bergson's later philosophy of mystical sympathy and openness to humanity that is precisely what enabled his philosophy to be mobilized in a time of war to advance the interests of one imperialist nation-state against another. This imperialism had only to change its object.

To conclude, it remains to determine whether this voluntarist and metaphysically imperialist philosophy of the will can respond adequately to the problems of modern technology that Bergson brings to light. His philosophy of technology may well, as Frédéric Worms has suggested, represent "a veritable alternative to the most well-known metaphysical interpretations of this dimension of our history,"[85] but from the perspectives opened by the present essay, a full assessment of this alternative will turn on two issues. The first is whether Bergson helps us to understand the manner in which modern technology has a social and historical momentum that, at least in certain historical conjunctures, transcends human will. The second concerns the possibility of getting technology back under control, of subjecting it to human dominion by an intensified, expanded, and purified will. A century after Bergson, we may be more ready to entertain the idea that the problems of modern technology may actually derive from the same source as the desire for mastery that is supposed to solve them.

Manchester Metropolitan University.

[83] Benda, *La trahison des clercs*, 228.

[84] In 1937 Bergson returns to the necessity of "dominating" modern technology in his "Message au Congrès Descartes": *M* 1579. In this connection, see Worms and Zanfi's "Présentation" to *Revue de métaphysique et de morale*, no. 84 (2014/4): 464.

[85] Worms, "Présentation," in *Les deux sources de la morale et de la religion*, ed. Worms (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2008), 14.