

## Stanton Lecture 2: Immanence and Life

By John Milbank

In the last lecture, I concluded that the whole of modern philosophy is based upon the linked notions of univocity of being in ontology and priority of possibility over actuality in modal theory. These twin aspects, I further contended, constitute the presuppositions of a philosophy separated from theology: of an immanentist philosophy which may be agnostic, atheist or pantheistic. However, I also argued that to begin with, both univocity and possibilism were especially promoted by certain, often Franciscan, currents within medieval Christian thought and for reasons that were still more theological than they were philosophical. It is this genetic circumstance that in part raises the spectre (benign or otherwise) of a 'theological critique of philosophy'.

I further intimated that possibilism could take and has taken three distinct forms. There is the epistemological question of the conditions of possibility of our understanding, as explored by Kant. Then there is the question of logical possibility and of seeing how many inherited philosophical problems can be solved in its terms. Finally, there is the full-blown thesis that possibility really precedes actuality in the ontological realm. Such a thesis comes in many guises, but it always concerns the possible rather than the potential in the sense that, as for Aristotle, a potential is a potential for *something*, for some state or other, which is always primarily defined in terms of its actuality. But to say that the possible comes first is to say either that defining essence precedes existence or that a defining *force* precedes relatively static states of existence.

The first lecture also briefly traced the way in which both Kantian epistemological possibility and either analytic or else phenomenological logical possibility have equally come into crisis. In the first case it has proved impossible to isolate the given conditions of understanding from the contents of understanding. In the second case it has turned out that when logical or grammatical distinctions are clear they do not tell us very much, while when they claim to tell us a great deal about how the external world must appear to us and how our minds must operate, these claims always prove logically or semantically debatable.

For this reason, in recent philosophy, whether analytic or continental in style, we see a certain recovered interest in *ontological* possibilism which is the third option. Because this is a claim about being and not just about knowledge or logic, such an approach necessarily appears either to make dogmatic claims about the whole of reality, or to be self-confessedly speculative. This abandonment of finitism seems to break with the critical bent of specifically modern philosophy as such. However, that conclusion would be premature.

For it ignores the double option that is provided by the adoption of the thesis of the univocity of being. If being and not God is our primary and self-sufficient object of both semantic sense and ontological reference because it is, for a new Scotist understanding (as explained last time), the empty 'transcendental' condition of both, then we can nevertheless give relative favour to either reference or sense. In the latter case we can identify the non-ambiguity of univocal being with the way in which we understand or 'represent' it. This is the Kantian option, which restricts being to

*knowledge* of being because it restricts our knowledge of *being* to our finite circumstances of understanding. But in the former case, if we privilege reference, then we will say that, without the mystifications introduced by transcendence and claims to revelation, our knowledge is capable of grasping the whole of reality, since univocity guarantees rational comprehensibility making existence coincide with a 'sufficient reason' for existence. This is the Spinozistic and to a lesser extent the Leibnizian option. It suggests that our minds are equal to the infinite.

Now it is totally unclear that Kantian finitism is more modern and critical than Spinozistic infinitism. One can argue, to the contrary, that all modern thought, once it has lost transcendence, is problematically split between modesty and hubris, between dogmatic limit and dogmatic non-limitation, between epistemology or logicism on the one hand and immanentist ontology on the other. To speak of the whole may seem to be to speak without warrant, yet one can equally claim that, to refuse to do so is to remain shadowed by transcendence, suppressing the fact that, long before Kant, modernity first embraced the infinity of the universe and then, with the mathematical calculus and later developments, discovered unexpected ways of thinking infinitude. In any case, the problem of finitism has turned out to be the sheer impossibility of isolating cognitive or logical borders both discrete enough and of wide enough scope to be of any use in the business of searching for truth. This is why 21<sup>st</sup> century philosophy has launched itself once more upon the speculative seas of totality or the infinite; this is why both the Pope and atheists are newly at one in proclaiming the 'Grandeur of Reason' in terms of its real access to the truth of reality. However reckless both parties may appear, the only alternative option would now seem to be outright scepticism.

But what I want to edge towards, throughout these lectures, is the implication that by losing the polestar of transcendence we also lose a kind of natural, even common-sensical oscillation between the finite and the infinite, which one can dub 'participation in the infinite'. Without this sense of participation whereby one mysteriously claims somewhat to know the unknown, one is left with the yet more exorbitant complexities of trying either to absolutise the finite or of claiming fully to know the infinite. I shall therefore try to deny that modern philosophy can really keep scepticism at bay.

But what is more, once modern philosophy, for good reasons, has returned to the path of unlimited speculation, it faces a kind of *aporia* as to just how this speculation is to proceed. *Should* it necessarily take the path of ontologising the possible? If it does so, it may well have to conceive of the possible not as a kind of logical *repertoire* that would be mysteriously detached from immanent temporality – risking a theistic essentialism -- but rather as a kind of creative force, a set of loose structuring powers which engender the actual through a series of options which are not simply determined in advance. It is for this reason that Henri Bergson did not call such a force 'the possible' but rather 'the virtual' -- something as equally 'real' as the sedimented states of 'actual existence' to which it gives rise.

This option clearly gives primacy to *time* and *movement* over space and stability. It is a philosophy of *process*, of the type which we see in Whitehead as well as in Bergson and in another fashion in Heidegger. But is it inevitable that, once one has denied eternity, one will enthrone process as king? This is not the case for, as Alain

Badiou has argued against the Bergsonian legacy, the virtual force directing evolution sounds itself all too like a deity, and moreover one which subordinates all variety to a mystically integrated absolute unity, albeit processual in character. Should not an atheist, immanentist philosophy begin instead, as Alain Badiou himself and David Lewis have recommended in different ways, with the *spatial* idea of multiply different mathematical or logical possibilities which one can even see as themselves possessing a kind of ideal actuality? A form of immanentised Platonism then results. But even more radically, can one really account for actual arising events entirely in terms of ‘what went before’ without secretly invoking a kind of providence? For this reason, Alain Badiou and then more drastically François Laruelle, have suggested that an arising event is somehow self-instigating – and in Badiou’s case that it is not constrained by the mathematical *repertoire*, whose chronic paradoxes it rather exploits in order to escape into a path of unique singularity. So it can seem that in order to perfect atheism one has to return to the priority of the actual after all. But is that priority not the strongest suit of premodern philosophies of transcendence? That question will be returned to in a later lecture.

First of all, we need to examine in turn the two main options of immanence. The options for time or else for space, which we can also describe as the options for life or alternatively for number. And we could note here the crucial irony that a kind of Aristotle versus Plato alternative that we associate with philosophies of transcendence seems to be inescapable also for philosophies of immanence. For what I want to keep insinuating is that the latter faces really the same conundra as the former – yet without the same capacity for resolution.

First of all then, the option for time and life. For the rest of the lecture my argument will proceed in three stages. Initially I shall argue that there are reasons to switch from mechanism to vitalism. Then I shall consider the immanentist account of vitality. Finally I shall try to suggest why the irreducibility of the category of life requires a derivation of life from transcendence. Another way of putting this would be to say that the idea of evolution in time is not only compatible with, but actually requires, the doctrine of creation.

Yet ever since Darwin, at a popular level, the terms 'creation' and 'evolution' have been set against each other. On the one hand there is the legacy of post-Newtonian Christian natural theology; on the other hand there is the explanation of the phenomena of life in terms of the operation of the law of natural selection.

In the first case one has to do with 'creation' only in a bastardised sense. Newton no longer, like Aquinas, conceived of God as Being as such, and so his God was an idolised God: an absolute entity who had shaped alongside himself other entities with whom he communicated through a shared dimension dubbed his 'sensorium', manifest to us as absolute space and absolute time. According to Newton's, as it were, 'old covenant' of the laws of motion, celestial as well as terrestrial bodies travel in infinite straight lines unless otherwise interrupted, a movement that is perfectly reversible. But according to his, as it were, 'new covenant' of gravity, celestial bodies are regularly bent back from this course to move cyclically in relation to each other. In the case of both 'covenants' one has, on the one hand, an absolutely regularly operating and universal law. On the other hand, as Simon Oliver well explains in his book *Philosophy and Motion*, one has also the direct presence of God, however

precisely conceived, whether in the one case as the absoluteness of space and time, or in the other case as the attractive and repelling force of gravitation.

This ‘designing’ God, as Amos Funkenstein has recognised, is not the God of classical Catholic theology because his causality operates on the same plane as finite causes even though it is all-powerful. One can trace the beginnings of such a way of conceiving of divine causality as far back as the Franciscans Bonaventure and Duns Scotus, but it displaced an older and essentially neoplatonic way of looking at things, still holding good for Aquinas, in which the divine cause was a higher ‘influence’ which ‘flowed into’ finite levels of causation, entirely shaping them from within, in a combined efficient *and* formal *and* final manner, but not ‘influencing’ them or conditioning them on the same plane of univocal being, as a less metaphorically-rooted meaning of ‘influence’ tends to imply. Put briefly, the qualitative difference between primary and secondary causality was lost sight of, and so divine and created causality came to be in ‘zero-sum’ competition: the more God is at work, the less can immanent causes be operative and vice-versa. This *concursum* or ‘covenantal’ model of causality is in fact a fifth mark of the modern ‘Franciscan’ *episteme*, alongside univocity, possibilism, representationalism and transcendentalism which we discussed last time.

It is still this post-Scotist and Newtonian God who is invoked by advocates of ‘creative design’ all the way from Paley through to recent evangelical biologists working in places with names like Dune University, 666 Arid Desert Street, Nirvana, Arizona. Just as motion and the planetary system appeared to be organised like clockwork in the Newtonian universe, so likewise Paley saw in organisms far more

complex mechanisms whose instance could only be explained by the notion of direct and continuous divine causal influence. The scandal of 'creationist science' is indeed the idea that the notion of God could become an empirical hypothesis, experimentally verifiable, but the scandal is still more theological than it is scientific.

In the second case, one has the Darwinian tradition itself. It is, of course, not at all the case that Darwin displaced the ancient monotheistic doctrine of creation with the thesis of evolution by natural selection. To suppose that it is, would be to remain within the terms of the bastardised theological assumptions of Paley and the divine design tradition. Yet within the terms of this tradition, it is possible also to argue that Darwin was in one respect modifying received natural theology rather than simply standing it on its head. His project shares an important feature in common with the Christian apologetic *Bridgewater Treatises* (particularly the section by the great Cambridge philosopher William Whewell) which he indeed cites positively in *The Origin of Species*. For both works, the Paleyite perspective on life is insufficient in terms of its Newtonian analogue. For in the latter case, while absolute space and time and the force of gravity represent the direct divine presence, this is still manifest in a totally regular fashion expressible by comprehensible laws. There appeared to be no biological equivalent to this regular divine governance. So both treatises are interested in compensating for this lack in terms of discovering more regular immanent processes at work in features exhibiting apparent organic design. This included processes leading to the constant creation of new species, such that *both* treatises exhibit a break with the Aristotelian focus upon fixity of species and the search for explanation of variation within species only, in favour of the attempt to account genetically for the variation of species itself. The difference is that in the case of *The*



*Bridgewater Treatises* divine design ultimately explains the mutual adaptation of species and environment, while in the case of *The Origin of Species* the immanent law of one-way selective adaptation of species to environment becomes a sufficient *explanans* unto itself.

Nevertheless Darwin, if no doubt for largely expedient reasons, still left open the possibility that he had discovered a ‘law of creation’. More decisively, the phrases in which he does so at the end of the *Origin* manifestly echo the design tradition in terms of its conviction that the pain and struggle of natural selection is justified by the beneficial ‘good’ of later outcomes. A crucial aspect of the latter was theodicit: local and temporary ills were explained as necessary for the emergence of long-term or higher goods – indeed in Paley’s case the divine ethics are wholly utilitarian. And for Paley already, long-term or higher goods are conceived in highly ascetic and stoic terms: ‘a family containing a dying child is the best school of filial piety’ as he joyfully informs us. (But similar kinds of theodicit theoretical atrocities still get perpetrated by the likes of Richard Swinburne today.) This same emphasis is consummated by the work of Malthus: the latter is quite misread if we suppose that he thought his gloomy demographic conclusion posed a problem for theology which he then had to solve. To the contrary, it is more as if the dire conclusion is uncritically embraced by a natural theology which thinks of virtue as emerging from a cosmic training in hardship.

Darwin’s central move was to extend Malthusian political economy to the economy of life as such. In doing so, he at last completed the Newtonian ambitions of the English design tradition – which one might describe as a bizarre fusion of a rather

tame, pastoral picture of nature with one of nature as a 'school of hard-knocks'. On the one hand.....watercolours, on the other hand cross-country runs.....For now one had the equivalent of Newtonian motion in a straight line in the form of the *glissando* of constant variation of species – something altogether prior to natural selection, as Conor Cunningham has rightly insisted in his superb new book, *Darwin's Pious Idea*. And one *also* had the equivalent of Newton's law of gravity in terms of the law of the survival of the fittest, as Darwin expressed it after Spencer. Historians of science have now established that Darwin tended to shy away from French biological theories of a 'self-creating' force at work in nature, as in the work of Geoffroy de St-Hilaire, to a large extent because of their association with politically revolutionary atheistic or pantheistic materialism. In England mechanism remained more metaphysically and socially respectable, even for the religious.

To what extent can one say that not just Darwin, but the entire Darwinian tradition remains informed by the Newtonian-Malthusian amalgam? In the case of the latter component, the law of struggle in the face of scarcity, it is not difficult to produce quotations from Richard Dawkins which show that he is essentially a Malthusian: every genetic or phenotypic success will eventually engender a further increased general scarcity to ensure the continuity of refinement produced through competition. Without some continuous dimension of radical shortage rendering terrestrial reality less than infinitely shareable, natural selection could not be the basic process at work.

In the case of the former component, ceaseless chance variation of species, the situation is more complex. Quickly after Darwin came the thermodynamic and probabilistic revolutions in 19thC physics. Darwin's friend William Herschel had

already pointed out that Darwin's selective mechanism could not, like Newtonian law, be deployed to make clear advance predictions, nor be experimentally manipulated – for this reason he described the Darwinian natural norm as 'the law of higgledy-piggledy'. Thus it appeared to many that Darwinianism could be more naturally correlated with the new probabilistic scientific paradigm. However, this immediately suggested that 'natural selection' was something more diverse than originally intended, and perhaps not exclusively focused upon the law of struggle – nor something which clearly concerns the individual primarily rather than the group or else, later on, the gene. As Conor Cunningham again points out, the most *radical* evolutionism is non-reductive, since it refuses to grant primacy to any single biological vehicle.

This later set of developments has then bequeathed a huge and often suppressed ambiguity to modern biology: insofar as Darwinism remains pure, it belongs to old-fashioned, possibly outmoded Newtonian science; insofar as it can be correlated with modern physics, it ceases to remain, exactly, Darwinism. And when these new perspectives were combined with the newly discovered science of genetics, Darwin's obscure pre-selective 'organic variation' could now be understood in terms of genetic drift, as random bundles of genes exhibiting collectively certain tendencies measured in terms of statistical probability.

Lack of any understanding of heredity had clearly been a weakness in Darwin's theory. The hypothesis of genes can be seen as shoring it up by providing a precise physical location for organic variation. However, this only helps to confirm the first

‘Newtonian’ element of *glissando*, it does not necessarily confirm the second ‘Newtonian’ element, which is the law of survival.

It only unambiguously does so if, as with Richard Dawkins, one seeks to show natural selection at work fundamentally on the genetic level. Yet it is in fact far more likely that natural selection works at every level – genotypic, phenotypic, species-wide -- and indeed, contrary to what Dawkins would have the British population believe, the overall tendency of genetic theory from its origins until now has actually been to modify orthodox Darwinism. And it is for just this reason that one *can*, I think, claim that mainline Darwinism is Newtonian-Malthusian and therefore is in a strange collusion with its Christian fundamentalist enemies. For genetic theory, by positing the idea of an anarchic drift of mutation suggests, first of all, that the *glissando* of continuous variation is essentially vital rather than mechanically physical. Secondly it suggests that this can result in genetic mutations that are not expressed at the phenotypic level and are therefore never subject to the tests of natural selection, while further on down the generational line they will of themselves issue in phenotypic alterations. At the macro-level of the scale, attention to the properties inherent only in populations, as with the great inter-war Russian-American (and Eastern Orthodox) biologist Theodosius Dobzhansky has long granted much importance to auto-affective and internal shifts in animal constitution that are more to do with adaptation to an environment than with struggle for scarce terrain. Indeed, such a perspective has brought to the fore how species (both plant and animal) actively modify their own environment and can sometimes modify it in harmony with other species with whom they form a yet larger quasi-grouping.

What is more, one can go beyond Dobzhansky's nominalism which defined a species in terms of a local inter-breeding population. For after all, do we not first of all only *recognise* such a self-generating group because of an inescapable shared likeness? Yet perhaps such recognition only records an 'accidental' not essential resemblance between members of a single biological lineage? This would suggest that the basic unit of the processes of evolution and natural selection is the individual. But then the question arises: what makes this individual *biological* in nature? The answer must have to do both with the inner inertial drive to organic self-development, and the drive to reproduce within certain regular parameters. Yet in that case, if one is to evade the most nakedly teleological construal of the biological individual (granting it a kind of 'quasi-intention'), then an entire gene population and sequence, or else an entire population group or sequence becomes the more likely subject of the evolutionary plot. But if the group assumes priority in this way, then resemblance between individuals reverts from accident to essence, and biological existence must still be construed in metaphysically realist terms. And the possibility of extending a realism of 'universal' forms from the species to a cross-species level exists in terms of the disputed phenomenon of independent lines of development converging towards isomorphic ends, as with the structure of the eye. If biologists like Simon Conway-Morris are right to claim the reality of such processes, then this suggests that nature is 'attracted' by certain forms in an irreducible manner.

In any case, it seems that we must still think of the living individual as in some sense instantiating a formal essence. A question of the mystery of the source of *ordering*, if not of designed order (since no order at all may be unimaginable) still remains, especially once it is realised that the operation of 'natural selection' is, as

once more Conor Cunningham points out, a contingent, ‘emergent’ process that *has itself evolved*. And how are we to explain why this contingently-arising ‘drive to survival’ -- which sounds just as anthropomorphic as the drive to appear or to appear as beautiful – is then sustained into the future? One might say, that, of course, nothing is seeking to survive, it is just that certain random mutations turn out, within given equally accidental conditions, to be able to persist. But this still leaves begging the question of the ontological character of the living unit, because the totality of such conditions is itself, as Bergson pointed out, the subject of change, and therefore one cannot appeal to ‘conditions’ as though these belonged generically to a kind of universally-given ‘conditioning factor’ and were not themselves totally subject to endless variation in seemingly contingent relationship to everything else. And why does a ‘single’ gene or pool of genes remain single such as to ‘underlie’ (‘substantively’) a process of mutation? Still more, why do genes and animals self-replicate over time and for-a-time in an organic way that produces constantly new individual instances of a recognisably ‘same’ species? These questions mean that one cannot stop asking exactly what it is that in some sense seeks to survive and to increase, or simply to sustain an inertia beneath variety? Why are there any consistent living things at all? For if variation were more absolute, if no continuities in growth and reproduction were readily discernible, then there would be no reason whatsoever to speak of ‘life’ in any sense whatsoever. Not, of course that ‘we’ would be here to be able to do so.

This consideration suggests that a ‘vitalist’ view (for want of a better word) of the evolutionary process makes more sense than does the Darwinian one. For it appears that life is not exhaustively subject to mechanical or to even merely physical and

chemical laws, but is instead a kind of self-organising force or *habit* grounded in nothing before itself. Life endlessly engenders life and does not *as* life die – for if death cannot generate life, then the priority of life over death renders it immortal; there is no life without resurrection, as Russian philosophy has often argued. Nor is it born, as Michel Henry today points out, since it is not caused.

But there is no need here to imagine some sort of implausible rift between physical, chemical and biological reality. Rather, we need to put bad mental habits of reduction into reverse: life is not built-up from the pre-living; instead, if we free ourselves of the anthropomorphic delusion that physical reality from the outset ‘obeys laws’, then we shall see that it is more likely that something like a ‘living’ impulse, a totally unpredictable auto-creative force underlies all of physical nature, with a rising hierarchy of complexity and capacity for self-casuation.

This force is, of course, what Henri Bergson once famously named the *élan vitale*. And the sorts of considerations which I have just tried to summarise have rightly tended to render his thought just as current in the early 21<sup>st</sup> C as it was in the early 20<sup>th</sup>. One could read him as offering a double criticism both of orthodox scientism and of deistic and idolatrous theology, which pinpoints their hidden collusion. For in seeking to monopolise all vital mystery for God such theology ensures that eventually God will be dismissed as superfluous, and that all we shall be left with is a dead cosmos, grinding out its cogs in all perpetuity.

As against this, Bergson reasonably suggested that life and consciousness themselves offer the highest manifestation and clue to the nature of the forces that

drive all immanent reality. When we gather up our forces to will and to create, we obscurely fuse past, present and future in a logically impossible yet really enacted ecstatic coincidence, and directly intuit something that, in striving to bring about, we already in some measure see. That which our mind seizes most fundamentally is curiously at once *in motion*, ‘tending’ always to something else, and yet is also an ineffable and not fully-expressible *unity* which we at once both contrive and receive. In this fashion we directly experience in temporal *durée* (or ‘duration’) the fundamental work of the *élan vitale* as the heart of ‘self’ which is yet always before and after our merely punctual presence. Human art and action is not then an epiphenomenal illusion, but neither is it a sudden alien intrusion upon reality. The consequence of this view – drawn by many of the greatest modernist artists, and perhaps supremely (as Catherine Pickstock has pointed out) by the Catholic composer Olivier Messiaen and his pupils, who included both Boulez and Xenakis – is that the artist may realise in the act of free creation also the most crucially revealing experimental work of science.

But Peter Hallward, in a truly penetrating summary, has shown just how many contemporary so-called ‘postmodern’ French philosophers still play variations on these themes of Bergson. They tend to identify the absolute as a creative force which consists in a *glissando* of constantly altering vibration which is a perpetually non-identical repetition. In the case of Gilles Deleuze, this is an immanent absolute that is named variously ‘a life’ or ‘pure composition’ or ‘the plane of immanence’ or ‘the abstract machine’, but is in every case a virtual force rather than an actuality. What results is a dualism between a ‘good’ transcendental creative factor on the one hand and a ‘bad’ static and representable created element on the other: the spatial realm of



sedimented 'sets', fixity, merely relative movement of one thing in relation to another (as opposed to the movement of a whole) and merely identical repetition. This dualism becomes virulent in Deleuze's nihilistic scheme where the virtual creative factor is only actualised or self-realised in terms of the static element which inevitably obfuscates (both in terms of being and of knowing awareness) the very forces which sustain and always exceed it.

And already, in Bergson himself, the vital impulse did not truly exist apart from its tendency constantly to run into reverse, to degenerate, to look backwards, laying out time as merely compartmentalised memory and thereby engendering the exterior spatial field that is studied by physics. (There is clearly a kind of 'idealism of life' involved here.) Habit, as Bergson's great teacher Félix Ravaisson had already explained, developing the insights of Aristotle concerning *hexis*, is at once the source of creative discipline capable of exercising non-identical repetition – as in musical improvisation -- and of mechanical degeneration into identical repetition that soon consumes its victim through inertia: as in the case of a 'drug habit'. Both good and bad habits are equally *formed* – for Bergson as much in the extra-human as in the human. Picking up on post-thermodynamic notions of evolution, Bergson saw biological life as reverse entropy, temporarily recuperating its diminishing series, though also as that which constantly expressed the self-renewing ultimate source of being – *transcendental* life -- beyond the grasp of physical science as such. One could say that for him (as arguably not for Ravaisson) the good and the bad aspect of habit are ontologically indissociable.

But this means that immanentist vitalism, by rejecting transcendence and embracing an apparently purer monism, ironically does not get rid of dualism at all, but rather augments it by rendering it aporetically irresolvable. For it effectively posits a hypostasised double negation whereby the fixed and apparent is merely the phenomenal guise for the virtual and dynamic which nevertheless itself only 'is' at all through its phenomenal self-occlusion. It is all rather like Thomas Carlyle's proto-postmodern deconstructed account of German idealism and romanticism in *Sartor Resartus*: the phenomenal world is only the 'clothing' of the real ideal world; and yet the examination specifically of human *culture* reveals that the entire realm of thought – which idealism projects onto ultimate reality -- is itself but a matter of 'fashionable clothing', or temporarily preferred image and metaphor. Hence, for Carlyle, by implied analogy, the cosmic clothing conceals not impermeable 'ideas', but rather a null energy which is merely the power to clothe and so to disguise itself.

Any immanentism whatsoever (as I shall eventually argue) tends to succumb to this model of double disguise – of the real by appearance, but more fundamentally of appearance by the supposed real. In constantly 'uncovering' this second illusion of uncovering itself – or the illusion that there *can be* illusion -- postmodernism does little more than expound the grammar of an immanentism that it never calls into question. For in the case of virtualist immanentism at least there is director of the whole which is the truly real as the *élan vitale* that is only truly existent as 'actual' in another subordinate realm that it ceaselessly erects and dismantles. In Bergson's case this is the realm of space or spatialised clock-time which is all that ordinary cognition ever represents to itself.

It can certainly be objected here that, for Bergson, there is more of a hierarchical continuum than a duality, since he represents reality as a huge cone with pure duration at the pinnacle (which he more or less identified with God), and the most static, mutually externalised physical space at the circular base. This continuity had for Bergson its cognitive equivalence insofar as he thought (rather like the later Husserl) that the highest physical science is nearer philosophy since it both begins with a holistic intuition and intuits a moving process rather than a fixed spatial reality: he cites the example of the invention of the infinitesimal calculus. And even in the case of spatial realities Bergson considered that science must aspire to grasp a more fundamental 'interior' aspect which involves an interactive change of all elements with each other and so of an entire reality at once. In his famous illustration -- which surely betrays, like his remarkably lucid prose concerning the Gallicly ineffable, the fact that he had a Yorkshire mother -- when we dissolve sugar in a cup of tea, it is the entire contents of the tea-cup that undergo a transformation. Gilles Deleuze has usefully gone on to point out how cinema uniquely captures this phenomenon: for it does not just portray things as moving across a fixed space, but images space itself as moving. Indeed, it even images time as moving.

But this raises a problematic issue for Bergsonianism, which Deleuze does not recognise. This is that even if, for Bergson, a spatial reality is formed in a holistic way, it still is so formed to a rather lesser degree than the pure temporal reality which is 'mind'. It is for this reason that he denied that the pure intuition of what goes on inside us requires any symbolism, diagrams or language. But here surely a Wittgensteinian protest is in order: just try for a moment performing this mental experiment and one will see that it is impossible. Bergson himself claimed that the

primacy of *durée* did not negate the reality of substance, since duration is never sheer Heraclitean flux, but rather the constant generation of forms which fall into consistent hierarchical and narrative patterns, albeit ones that are dynamic and open-ended. Yet there can be for us no ‘imagining’ of these forms as duration without the fantasising invocation of shape and sign.

And this fact suggests that spatial matter is *not* simply subordinate to temporal mind: instead it would seem that the ‘simultaneity’ offered by space offers us a kind of holistic work of ‘picturing’ that time cannot achieve, however much it is equally true that space cannot achieve the synthesis of memory and expectation provided by narrative. The two aspects are surely complementary for reflection – as I think cinematic film well illustrates. To inhabit the world humanly human beings require both image and sequence, both depiction and story. Thus Catherine Pickstock has shown how Messiaen sought in his musical practice a ‘Thomistic’ modification of Bergson that would exhibit *durée* as a rhythmic pattern that advances horizontally through time only ‘diagonally’ through the constant detours of the vertical simultaneities of space.

So it would seem that if, as Bergson crucially (and I think rightly) suggests, the *way* we think rather than *what* we think gives us a clue to the nature of physical reality, then this suggests that the temporal and the spatial are always held in an equal balance. But that may mean that nothing *within* immanence reigns *over* immanence and that to sustain the appearances of this balance one must appeal to a transcendent height, in which both equally participate. The supremacy of the virtual which Bergson himself offered as ‘height’ was not, indeed pantheistic, but almost (despite his disdain

for Plato) neoplatonic – since a God who is pure duration tends to imply that the relatively spatial below him represent a ‘deviation’ from true insight, rather than mere finitude. But in the case of Deleuze virtual duration has become a mere dynamic void, aporetically at once superior to the fixities which it instantiates, and yet only existent through those very fixities which it ceaselessly sets up and destroys.

In this way immanentism, in refusing a transcendent God, always winds up by deifying an impersonal process and ontologically subordinating those concrete situations within which alone human beings can truly dwell as human.

Despite this conclusion, there remains much to be learnt from Bergson. He represents a crucial third current in 20<sup>th</sup> C philosophy that half-anticipates the philosophy of the 21<sup>st</sup>. It is true that like Frege and Husserl he was a positivist in the sense that he sought the immediately and ineluctably ‘given’ -- in his case *les données immédiates de la conscience*. Like them also he sought to end metaphysical wrangling between realism and idealism -- in his case by defining the metaphysical as the spiritual and mental (the literally meta-physical) which he thought could be objectively seized. But unlike the basically still Kantian framework of analysis and phenomenology which could still harbour scepticism about both the external world and the interior soul, Bergson inherited a Cartesian ‘spiritual realism’ through Malebranche, Maine de Biran and Ravaisson, which acknowledged the full reality both of matter and spirit, while seeking to temper a Cartesian duality between the two. Again, unlike Husserl and Frege, Bergson did not seek to distinguish thought from feeling, but rather saw all thinking as a species of internal emotion. In this way he sustained the true opinion of David Hume, as against both Husserl who

transcendentalised and rationalised this interior Humean process, and analytic philosophy which first misread Hume as basing all thought on sensory ‘given’ information and then rightly rejected this supposed view as untenable. In fact both the two main lines of 20<sup>th</sup> thought are in one respect based on the misreading of Hume, as I shall elaborate in a later lecture.

Here Bergson is the exception. He realises that the true Humean ‘empiricism’ suggests that the route to know the exterior realm is not to *represent* it, or to grasp it *a priori*, but rather to *think with it*, on the assumption that the way things ‘go’ inside us may well be the best clue as to how everything else in reality sustains itself. All thought therefore, again in the longterm wake of Hume, is fundamentally *sympathy*. After this fashion, Bergson restores in a new register the notion of Aristotelian knowledge by identity: literally for him to know things is to be aware of the work of things themselves continued as *ourselves* and as our mental processes.

But his mistake, shared with Deleuze, was not fully to allow that internal and auto-generative habit is more than simply *monadic*, and *windowless* in a Leibnizian sense, only indirectly related in its inner core, through its vertical belonging to the whole of reality, to other lesser wholes. Rather the habit of *durée* is always constituted through actual exchange on a spatial level. Our ideas are *not* just ‘parts of things’ as Bergson suggests, for this would indeed collapse the participation of our minds in things into being literally ‘parts’ of wholes. For genuine cognitive ‘participation’ (which Bergson extends beyond Lévy-Bruhl’s primitives to human nature as such) a thought must rather balance internal partition with external ‘diagrammatic’ *mimesis* which does not *necessarily* dilute the thing thought, but may further expand its inherently open and

connected reality in the mode of 'intellectual existence', which Bergson (Like Aquinas) rightly saw to be fully real in nature.

This further implies that relationality is itself fundamental: it does not lie *within* a determining virtual whole as with Deleuze, for whose nominalism all relations are exterior to their terms. Relations instead *are* the ontological whole. Yet if they are such, and if there is a constant play between time and space, then such connections are only possible if they constitutively modify the terms which they relate. So relations are then neither nominalistically external to terms nor idealistically internal to a whole. Rather they involve what William Desmond describes as an irreducible 'between', a *metaxu*, to use Plato's term.

This means that if relations are to be ultimate within this world, they can only be grounded in an irreducible relationality. But were such relationality something finite, then *either* it would be a 'given' set of spatial relations which reduces to a totality and therefore is not relation, *or* it would be a 'giving' temporal relationality which reduces to the monism of time as duration and so, again, is not a relation.

No, if relationality or 'the between' is to be ultimate within the world, then the world itself must be purely relation, purely a medium – down to its deepest ground something received, such that it is at bottom a relation to itself as other, a reception of itself as gift which it must then give to itself. This allows that the inner reality of the cosmos is vital, even psychic in Bergson's sense, since only the psychic is reflexively self-giving. But it also ensures that the vitally autopoietic is from the outset also relational, also social, also a response, also involved in giving and receiving.

In this way the only true vitalism is a personalist vitalism. To avoid both immanent dualism and immanent hierarchical subordination we require a transcendence which suspends reality and keeps both time and space, both process and substantial stability in constant play. Without this play of relationality, there is no life, because life which is merely virtual becomes, as we have seen, either a void and dead (as with Deleuze) or else an inorganic and impersonal force because it is one of absolute realised unity (as with Bergson) supposedly 'superior' to merely living individuals, who are by comparison relatively 'dead'. One has in consequence a morbid play between two deaths, instead of the true game of life. For this game to occur, life must rather be transcendently actual and plenitudinously realised as the united eminence of all 'living things', since there *is* no life without all the living. Finitely actual life participates in this 'divine' life by a sharing which is an imitation and an imitation which is a sharing, since it cannot live outside the one life, yet possesses its own integrity as many separate living things. So finite life shares in the one transcendent life through gift and not fusion. Bergson's fear that such Christianised Platonism means that the creative is subordinated to the fixed is unwarranted, because infinity transcends entirely the finite contrast of being and becoming: it is only 'replete' in a sense that includes incomparably more open possibility than any finite process, because an 'in-finite' act incomprehensibly renders unboundedness itself actual and perfectly accomplished. And because, by comparison, the virtual as first principle can only mean a primacy of death, we require a sharing in this lodestar of transcendently actual unboundedness in order that there may be any stimulus for life on earth.



Furthermore, for the relational aspect of play to remain ultimate and absolute, the only acceptable transcendent principle must be, as for the New Testament itself, a personal, inter-relational one. Nothing less, in fact, than the Triune God wherein the habitual love of Father and Son is expressed as the 'Spirit' of all life who is also the 'gift' of all life and the source of all true participated gifts, which are spiritual.

Therefore the only perfected metaphysics of vitalism must be a Catholic Christian one, a philosophy that is equally a true exegesis of the Gospel.

