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**AN-ARCHIC PAST: RETHINKING NEGATIVITY
WITH BERGSON**

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Thanks to the revival in Bergson's scholarship prompted by Gilles Deleuze's Bergsonism, it is widely recognized that Bergsonism challenges the metaphysics of presence. Less attention, however, has been devoted to the status of negation or negativity in Bergson's thought. Differently from Deleuze, I argue that Bergson's claim that memory and perception, past and present, differ in kind does not call for the erasure of the negative but rather for the radical reconceptualization of negation in temporal terms. Thinking negation temporally allows Bergson to open the space for conceptualizing existence beyond presence, for developing an account of the paradoxical nature of the past. With an insight that anticipates Derrida's thinking, Bergson tells us that the past is neither "there" nor "not-there," neither a presence nor an absence.

Grâce au regain d'intérêt pour Bergson qu'a suscité le livre de Gilles Deleuze, Le bergsonisme, il est maintenant largement reconnu que le bergsonisme met la métaphysique de la présence à l'épreuve. On a cependant moins porté attention au statut de la négation ou de la négativité dans la pensée de Bergson. Au contraire de Deleuze, je soutiens que l'affirmation de Bergson selon laquelle la mémoire et la perception, le passé et le présent, diffèrent en espèce n'amène pas un effacement du négatif mais plutôt une reconceptualisation radicale de la négation en termes temporels. En pensant la négation temporellement, Bergson peut ouvrir un espace pour conceptualiser l'existence au-delà de la présence et développer une explication de la nature paradoxale du passé. Anticipant la pensée de Derrida, Bergson nous montre que le passé est ni « présent » ni « non-présent », ni une présence ni une absence.

Thanks to the revival in Bergson's scholarship prompted by Gilles Deleuze's *Bergsonism*, it is widely recognized that Bergsonism, as Leonard Lawlor puts it, "is a philosophy of the unconscious" that fundamentally challenges the metaphysics of presence.¹ Less attention, however, has been devoted to the status of negation or negativity in Bergson's thought. Finding in Bergson a valid alternative to Hegelianism, Deleuze famously claims that "the heart of Bergson's project is to think differences in kind independently of all forms of negation: there are differences in being yet nothing negative."² Differently from Deleuze, I argue that Bergson's claim that memory and perception, past and present, differ in *kind* does not call for the erasure of the negative—a move that cost Deleuze much criticism—but, rather, for the radical reconceptualization of negation and negativity in *temporal* terms.³ That is, Bergson invites us to resist the tendency of understanding negation spatially, a tendency that reduces existence to that of presence *to* consciousness, thus foreclosing the intuiting of a mode/temporality of existence that operates according to a different rhythm as a movement that escapes metaphysical binaries of presence/absence, existence/non-existence. Rethinking negativity *temporally* opens the "space"—finds the time—to conceptualize existence beyond presence, for developing an account of the paradoxical nature of the past.

In what follows, I take up what Leonard Lawlor calls the challenge of Bergsonism, *i.e.*, thinking in duration, and trace the implications of Bergson's rethinking negation temporally. I suggest that this gesture is performed not *against* the metaphysical tradition, but within it, hence reconfiguring the metaphysical landscape for deconstruction. With an insight that anticipates Derrida's thinking, Bergson claims that the past is neither "there" nor "not-there," neither a presence nor an absence. Rather, existing in the temporal mode of the virtual, the past continues to exist and exert influence upon the present without, for this very reason, being present to consciousness. Ulti-

¹ Leonard Lawlor, *The Challenge of Bergsonism: Phenomenology, Ontology, Ethics* (New York: Continuum, 2013), 27. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as CB.

² Gilles Deleuze, *Bergsonism* (New York: Zone Books, 1988), 46. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as B.

³ The demand that philosophy approaches its inquiries not in terms of space, but of time is, arguably, one of Bergson's central insights. In 1902–03, Bergson's lecture course at the *Collège de France* was exclusively devoted to the issue of time in Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus, Descartes, Leibniz, and Kant. See, Henri Bergson, *Histoire de l'idée de temps. Cours au Collège de France 1902-1903* (Paris: PUF, 2016).

mately, I suggest that the recasting of negation and negativity in temporal terms sheds light on the paradoxical claims that past and present co-exist *while* non-coinciding and that duration (*durée*) is continuous *without*, for this reason, sublating difference (and negation!) into fullness.

The Actual and Virtual: Different Temporalities of Existence

To grasp how Bergson does *not* do away with the negative, but rather recasts it in temporal terms, we need to attend to his claim that the present and the past are different in *kind*. In *Matter and Memory*, Bergson sets out to go beyond traditional mind/body, consciousness/matter dualisms by rethinking their difference in terms of temporality instead of space, that is, by posing “questions relating to subject and object, to their distinction and their union...in terms of time rather than of space.”⁴ Framing the issue in this way leads Bergson to claim that, although possible only in principle, there is a difference in *kind* between perception and memory, the present and the past.

Pure perception, Bergson argues, is *of* matter, it belongs to matter. Against both idealists and materialists who think of perception as an epistemological act, that “to perceive means above all to know” (MM, 15), Bergson claims that perception is concerned with *action* (or motor-reactions) and is organized by utility. (MM, 16) That is to say, perception is not a centrifugal operation that gives rise to representations, but a centripetal process through which the features of the perceived object (what Bergson calls *images*) that are useful to the body are “referred to the eventual action of one particular image, my body.” (MM, 12) We can think of perception, then, as being an arch: the body filters the movements of the external object based on their utility to the needs of the body. In this sense, the movements of the body “intend to prepare, while beginning it, the reaction of my body to the action of external objects”; they “foreshadow at each successive moment its [the body’s] virtual acts.” (MM, 12) Conceived tem-

⁴ Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, (tr.) N.M. Paul and W.S. Palmer (Digireads.com Publishing, 2010), 37. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as MM. By recasting their relationship in temporal terms, Bergson overcomes the impasse posed by articulations that conceive of their difference as one of space—articulations that lead to the incommensurability of an unextended inside with an extended outside.

porally, this zone of “preparation,” or “foreshadowing” is the deferral, or delay of the body’s action upon the object perceived and varies greatly depending on the degree of complexity of the organism at hand.

Five observations follow from Bergson’s understanding of perception. First, since perception places us within matter, or is *of* matter, there is no difference in kind between matter and perception, “*being and being perceived*” (MM, 20), but only a difference of degree.⁵ Second, Bergson argues that consciousness consists in this zone of indetermination, in the choosing that takes place in this deferred time-space. In lower organisms, as well as in the reflexive action of higher organisms, the delay, or deferral of the fulfilment of action that constitutes the (virtual) zone of indetermination and choice is reduced to a minimum.⁶ Third, conceiving of perception as concerned with action (practice) and not knowledge (speculation) recasts consciousness as “first and foremost embodied.”⁷ Hence, as Lawlor observes, “Bergson does not define consciousness as consciousness of something; rather consciousness is something.” (CB, 27) Fourth, claiming that perception/consciousness is *of* matter and concerned with action entails that its temporal domain is the *present*, what is actually lived. Fifth, since “consciousness is but the characteristic note of the *present*, that is to say of the actually lived, in short of the *active*” (MM, 77), its temporal mode of existing is *actual*.⁸

Different in kind from pure perception, Bergson locates pure memory on the opposite side of the spectrum, claiming that it is powerless or useless to action and that its temporal domain is the virtual, or, as Deleuze puts it, the ontological past. To understand pure memory, it is helpful to work negatively. Bergson argues that the mistake often made when thinking about memory is to reduce it to a less intense perception, thus effacing the difference in kind between the two. Such a mischaracterization leads to the conflation

⁵ The mistake of both idealists and materialists is to posit a difference in kind between matter and perception.

⁶ Speaking of the consciousness of lower organisms, Bergson observes that “the more the reaction is compelled to be, the more must perception resemble a mere contact; and the complete process of perception and of reaction can then hardly be distinguished from a mechanical impulsion followed by a necessary movement.” (MM, 17)

⁷ Heath Massey, *The Origin of Time* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2015), 174.

⁸ Note that, as observed, consciousness or perception has a virtuality specific to its temporal domain of actuality—the zone of indetermination or virtual preparation for future motor reactions.

of pure memory with memory-images, which are “already embodied in nascent sensations” (MM, 76), *i.e.*, actual. This last claim needs further clarification. Bergson discusses two primary ways in which the past is preserved in the present.⁹ He asserts that the past is preserved in habitual/motor-memories and in memory-images. In the case of motor-memories, as Massey points out, “it is not images of the past that are preserved, but movements ‘deposited’ in the body, and recollection is not spontaneous, but learned.”¹⁰ Of this type of memory, Bergson notes that it is “*habit interpreted by memory rather than memory itself.*” (MM, 43) This type of memory accounts for the feeling or recognition that infuses the organization of motor accompaniment or attitude of the body *vis-à-vis* what it perceives. Another way of thinking of motor-memories is as performing the work of prolongation, of “contract[ing] a perceptual image by repeating its useful effect or action.” (CB, 32) Motor-memories and memory-images run side by side and are engaged in an ambiguous relationship, with the former serving a dual function. On the one hand, action/future-oriented and regulated by utility, motor-memories inhibit the emergence of memory-images. (MM, 51) “Movement rather tends to drive away the image” (MM, 51), allowing only those memory-images that are useful for the given task to filter through. On the other hand, it is motor-memories that invite the slipping in of memory-images by calling forth past images: “movements...prepare this choice [of relevant images], or at the very least mark out the field in which we shall seek the image we need.” (MM, 51) In the latter case, motor-memories provide the space for memory-images “to graft [themselves] on an attitude or a movement” (MM, 53), as is the case with perception. The differentiation between the two types of memory makes clear what is at stake in perception. As noted, conscious perception entails a zone of indeterminacy such that there is a delay between action and reaction. It is this delay that enables the body to disengage from action, thus giving room to memory-images to enter the rift between impression and movement (MM, 50–51) and graft themselves onto perception.

Because motor-memory is associated with the *body* and is future-oriented, centripetal, and directed towards life in such a way that it *prolongs* or “contracts a perceptual image by repeating its useful effect or action” (CB, 32), it must be distinguished from pure memory, or “true memory.” (MM, 43) Bergson notes that this

⁹ Note that, as this last sentence indicates, the focus of this discussion is on the ways in which the past or memory is *mixed* with perception.

¹⁰ Massey, *The Origin of Time*, 180.

“memory *par excellence*” records or *conserves* (as opposed to *prolongs*) every moment of duration with their “place and date” (MM, 43) in memory-images, which can then be voluntarily recalled or surface spontaneously.¹¹ Thus, whereas motor-memory, like perception, is action and future oriented, true memory is “regressive memory,” a backward-looking retreat from action and life. (MM, 229) Although detached from life, however, the memory-image is placed between perception/matter and memory/spirit [*esprit*]; it “partakes of the ‘pure memory,’ which it begins to materialize, and of the perception in which it tends to embody itself.”¹² (MM, 73) In other words, the memory-image is that which reveals pure memory by giving color and life to it. Significantly, the movement of memory-images is centrifugal; from the depth of memory they graft themselves to the present perception.¹³ It would be a mistake, then, to conflate the memory-image with pure memory. What the former reveals is only a *trace* of pure memory and, most importantly, a trace that, in its being revealed in the material memory-image, is now “actually lived,” present to consciousness and, as such, always already “something else.” (MM, 77, 74) By being colored and lived in images, pure memory moves from the virtual to actual (or nascent) sensations localized on the surface of the body.

“Essentially virtual,” then, pure memory *cannot be known in itself*; “it cannot be known as something past unless we follow and adopt the movement by which it expands into a present image, thus emerging from obscurity into the light of day.” (MM, 74) While, at first, Bergson’s phrasing may suggest that we can know pure memory “by adopting [its] movement,” a more careful reading points to the impossibility of making pure memory fully present. When we locate ourselves in the past, pure memory remains vague and general, “our recollection still remains virtual.” (MM, 73) As we focus our attention and the image comes into view with all its details, the contraction/materialization has already happened; the past has already turned into something that “interests me” (MM, 75) and, as such, is actually lived and present to consciousness. Bergson writes:

¹¹ Lawlor observes that the spontaneous nature of memory-images is such that they are “‘capricious’ in [their] reproduction and ‘fugitive’ in [their] retention.” (CB, 34)

¹² Lawlor notes that the hyphen in “memory-image” is telling of its positionality, of its “intermediate status.” (CB, 36)

¹³ Lawlor argues that difference in direction—centripetal versus centrifugal movements—“*always defines a difference in nature for Bergson.*” (CB, 32) Following this insight, we can see how perception and memory are different in kind.

From the moment that it becomes an image, the past leaves the state of pure memory and coincides with a certain part of my present. Memory actualized in an image differs, then, profoundly from pure memory. The image is a present state, and its sole share in the past is the memory from which it arose. Memory, on the contrary, powerless as long as it remains without utility, is pure from all admixture with sensation, is without attachment to the present, and is consequently unextended. (MM, 140–41)

In this sense, pure memory is the *unconscious*; it remains unknown and not present to consciousness.

To better grasp the way in which memory remains estranged from consciousness, it is worth noting that a similar phenomenon, *i.e.*, the slippage or opacity of time, characterizes the grasping of the present as well. “*Practically*,” Bergson states, “*we perceive only the past*, the pure present being the indivisible progress of the past gnawing into the future.” (MM, 82) This is so because the present instant—understood as a discrete moment, a “now”—exists only in abstraction, “it does not have real existence.”¹⁴ In actuality, the present “necessarily occupies a duration” and, as such, it has “one foot in my past and another in my future.” (MM, 75) It is of the future insofar as I am future-oriented; guided by action and utility, I am already projected toward the future. It is in the past insofar as the present cannot manifest itself as such; as it appears, it is always already past. Ultimately, then,

when we think this present as going to be, it exists not yet; and when we think it as existing, it is already past. If, on the other hand, what you are considering is the concrete present such as it is actually lived by consciousness, we may say that this present consists, in large measure, in the immediate past. (MM, 82)

Both attempts of grasping the present “now” and the ontological past thus fail because of time’s opacity, which is conditioned by its structural delay/deferral. The past remains in the dark and any attempt at grasping the present moment reverts us back to the immediate past that, paradoxically, is always already outside of itself, projected into the future. Note, then, that saying that pure memory becomes present by materializing into memory-images should not be read as indicating that it becomes fixed in a moment in time, in the present

¹⁴ Henri Bergson, “The Perception of Change,” *The Creative Mind: An Introduction to Metaphysics* (New York: Dover Publications, 2007), 107–32, here 126.

moment or “now.” Rather, to say that pure memory becomes present insofar as it is actually lived in memory-images means that it manifests itself in sensations. And sensations always take place in duration, having one foot in the future and one in the past.

Within this framework, presence and immediacy (but also the pure past) are always already mediated and impure because time, as we have seen, is always already outside of itself. The attempt to grasp the present “now” fails because of time’s opacity, which is conditioned by its structural differing-deferral. In other words, the present, Bergson highlights, is always already illusionary and out-of-reach. It is possible to articulate this insight in a way that echoes Derrida’s language.¹⁵ Bergson’s recognition that the “now” exists only in abstraction entails acknowledging that each single, present moment traces and is traced by future and past; it is the play of traces of other temporal moments (that are never themselves simply present) that allows for a given moment to be experienced, albeit never fully. In this sense, Bergson’s treatment of duration challenges what Heidegger called the “vulgar conception of time.”¹⁶

These considerations regarding the opacity of time bring us to the important observation that in spite of Bergson’s deployment of a language of “purity,” he is far from advocating for another dualism or delineating a mutually exclusive logic as the regulating principle of the relationship between perception and memory, the actual and the virtual. Rather, Bergson is well aware that the stark separation between *pure* perception and *pure* memory is possible only in principle, as a heuristic device to elucidate the difference in kind between the two and unsettle metaphysical presuppositions and assumptions. Once the primacy of spatial thinking is called into question, Bergson reminds his readers that “there is no perception which is not full of memories.... However brief we suppose any perception to be, it always occupies a certain duration, and involves consequently an effort of memory which prolongs one into another a plurality of moments.” (MM, 17–18) Matter and memory, thus far accounted for as impossibles, are forcefully brought together in the concluding chapter of *Matter and Memory* as Bergson turns to the “metaphysical

¹⁵ Derrida’s relation to Bergson is, to say the least, ambiguous. On the one hand, Derrida acknowledges that Heidegger and Bergson come the closest to formulating a theory of temporality that breaks with the tradition of Western metaphysics. On the other, Derrida contends that they end up reinstating the metaphysics of presence. Yet, Derrida does not spell out how Bergson remains bound within metaphysics.

¹⁶ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, (tr.) J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2008), 472–80.

problem...of the union of soul and body.” (MM, 97–98) Rather than eliminating the ontologico-temporal difference between the two, Bergson strives to think these impossibles together by recasting them in temporal terms. Actual perception is constituted by the tension, the in-between, of matter *and* memory, whereby *attention* differentiates degrees of contraction or relaxation.¹⁷

Being No Longer versus Not Being

Arguing that pure memory has a different temporality than consciousness sets the stage for Bergson to radically challenge, as Massey puts it, the “being of consciousness and the privilege of presence.”¹⁸ Bergson’s analysis shows that it is a mistake to claim that simply because something has ceased to be present to consciousness, it has ceased to be; that there is a difference between *not being* and *being no longer*. To explicate this difference, Bergson brings attention to the fact that the past, which is different from the present insofar as it is not actual or useful for action, does not, for this reason, cease to *exist*. “The past is not ‘abolished’ or ‘effaced’ just because we are not conscious of it.”¹⁹ Rather, the past continues to influence, coexist with, and partake in the present, while existing in a different temporal mode or rhythm—a *powerless*, inactive virtuality. In this sense, pure memory preserves itself, existing in the “shadows,” in the “darkness” of the unconscious. The recognition of a plane of existence that extends beyond consciousness poses a radical challenge to traditional ontology, which limits existence to what is actually lived *by* or is present to consciousness; it “*broaden[s]* the extension of the word ‘existence’” (CB, 40) to the unconscious, the non-present—in sum, to the virtual.

In light of these remarks, we begin to grasp that the difference between *not being* and *being no longer* consists in a different way of conceiving negativity and negation. *Not being* posits a disjunction between existing and not-existing, between being and not-being, in which the negative concept indicates an absence or negation of being/existence. In *Creative Evolution*, Bergson explicitly rejects this type of negation, observing that it is “the root of all the difficulties

¹⁷ Put differently, the degree of attention determines the interplay between memory and perception and, more precisely, between memory-images and motor-images.

¹⁸ Massey, *The Origin of Time*, 172.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 188.

and errors with which we are confronted.”²⁰ Referring specifically to Hegel’s dialectic, he claims that this process of *abstract* negation entails conceiving of negative notions such as nonbeing or disorder in opposition to their positive counterparts, being and order, “as forces that exercise power and combine with their opposite to produce (synthetically) all things.” (B, 46) This move neglects, rather than starting from and affirming, the question of difference in kind—or, as I argue, temporally conceived negation. Hegelian dialectic involves starting from a general concept, *e.g.*, order, which, as Deleuze explains, “can no longer be thought except in opposition to a nonbeing in general, a disorder in general, *or else* which can only be posited as the starting point of a deterioration that leads us to disorder in general or to nonbeing in general.” (B, 47) In light of Bergson’s non-Hegelianism, Deleuze concludes that “the heart of Bergson’s project is to think differences in kind independently of all forms of negation: there are differences in being yet nothing negative.” (B, 46)

It is a mistake, however, to conclude, as Deleuze does, that simply because Bergson exposes the errors implicit in spatially conceived negation he does away with negation altogether. *Being no longer* suggests that there is another way—a different way—of thinking negation that does not entail the mediation or opposition of two concepts, the “represent[ation of] negation as exactly symmetrical with affirmation.” (CE, 287) Indeed, *being no longer* indicates that to be/exist in the past is *not the same* as not-existing. Negation ought to be rethought and acknowledged as marking the difference between two temporal modes of existence—one active, present, and actual, and the other inactive, past, and virtual. Put differently, although Bergson does not frame the issue in these terms, I suggest that the differentiation between *being no longer* and *not being*—these two different temporal modes of existence—allows us to bring back negation within Bergson’s theory where it belongs, *i.e.*, to recognize that Bergson’s formulation of time is not devoid of negation, as Deleuze suggests, but rather relies upon the radical resignification of negation and negativity in temporal terms. Bergson’s thinking does not reject, or purge negation, hence positing itself over and against a metaphysics of presence, but fissures or deconstructs, through the reworking of negation, the metaphysical landscape from within. This also means that, although Bergson explicitly affirms the continuity of time, the continuity that characterizes the past and present is a strange one, featuring a negativity that makes possible both the co-

²⁰ Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, (tr.) A. Mitchell. (Mineola: Dover Publications Inc., 1998), 287. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as CE.

existence and non-coincidence—the *asymmetry*—of the two temporal modes.

But what does it mean to think of negation temporally? And what are its ontological implications? Traditional metaphysics conceives of negation as sanctioning an onto-logical opposition between what is and what is-not, what is present and what is absent. “We are inclined,” Bergson writes in a 1911 lecture, “The Perception of Change,”

to think of our past as inexistent, and philosophers encourage this natural tendency in us. For them and for us *the present alone exists* by itself: if something of the past does survive it can only be because of the help given it by the present...by the invention of a certain particular function called memory, whose role is presumed to be to preserve certain parts of the past ...by storing them away in a kind of box.²¹

Underlying this conception of negation is the assumption that “what is” must exist or be located in space, or, more precisely, in an *empty* space, a nothingness that contains being(s)—a claim to which I return in what follows. In turn, this tendency to think spatially, to locate being(s) in space, misleads us into reducing being and existence to *presence*. The question “*where* are memories stored?” reveals the tendency of granting existence to something only on the condition that it occupies a place in space, which in turn confines being and existence to presence, subsuming it to the present. This logic promotes and reifies substantial thinking, the pernicious implication of which, Bergson warns us, is the purging of creative negation from being.

Bergson proceeds to undermine spatial thinking by first revealing the fundamental misconception entailed in the spatial concept of Nothing and then recasting negation in temporal terms. Bergson points out that spatial thinking posits Nothing as the “substratum or receptacle” (CE, 276) of what exists, an eternally prior void that existence comes to fill. “The full,” he observes, is conceived as “an embroidery on the canvas of the void” and “being [a]s superimposed on nothing.” (CE, 276) Thinking Nothing spatially leads to the impression that there is *less* in Nothing than in Something insofar as Nothing is taken to be an empty receptacle. Yet, this is an illusion: within this (spatial) framework, Nothing is in fact *more* than Something because negative concepts entail the affirmation of their posi-

²¹ Bergson, “The Perception of Change,” 125; my emphasis.

tive counterparts. Thinking non-being or dis-order entails positing being and order and then *adding* the “not” or “exclusion” to such concepts. The “non-existent can only consist, therefore, in *adding* something to the idea of this object: we add to it, in fact, the idea of an *exclusion*.” (CE, 285) In this sense, as Bergson points out, although the spatial conception of negation claims that Nothing is less than Something, negation is far from indicating a void or non-existence “for it already includes existence in general.” (CE, 280) Being is exclusively held within the confines of presence.

Shifting away from spatial thinking and conceiving negation temporally allows us to see that the past *is no longer* in the sense that it is not actual, not useful to the present. That is, it invites us to think of the negation as marking the difference between, on the one hand, being as actually lived, useful, and active and, on the other, being as virtual, useless, and powerless. With this in mind, we can revisit Bergson’s observation regarding the assumption that “the full is an embroidery on the canvas of the void.” (CE, 276) It is true, Bergson observes, that “our action proceeds thus from ‘nothing’ to ‘something,’ and its very essence is to embroider ‘something’ on the canvas of ‘nothing.’” (CE, 297) Yet, thinking negation temporally reveals that *nothing* ought not to be understood as an absence of existence, but as an absence of *utility*. In this sense, “the truth is that the ‘nothing’ concerned here is the absence not so much of a thing as of a utility.”²² (CE, 297) The past does not cease to exist, but ceases to be useful. Thus conceived, negation/negativity does not mark the limit or the opposition between being and non-being, but it sanctions different rhythms of life—the difference (in kind) between actually and virtually *existing*, between qualitatively different ways of being.

Casting negation in temporal terms opens the space to conceive of existence beyond the confines of presence. The task that Bergson faces is an arduous one. He needs to articulate a mode of existence that cannot be captured by standard logic—in which affirmation and negation are symmetrical and stand for the agreement or disagreement between subject and attribute, respectively. (CE, 292) The virtual, although non-present in the sense that it is not active or present to consciousness, is *asymmetrical* to the present. As such it cannot be expressed “in contrary terms to presence, negative absence or as an unconscious perception of nonpresence—it is some-

²² Bergson goes on to say: “If we mean by void an absence of utility and not of things, we may say, in this quite relative sense, that we are constantly going from the void to the full.” (CE, 298)

thing else entirely.”²³ The virtual is different in kind from non-presence. The difficulty is pronounced by the fact that the answer to the question “what does it mean to exist virtually?” cannot be grounded in experience and is necessarily limited by language and conceptual thinking. It cannot be grounded in experience because, as Bergson notes, experience cannot “receive an imprint of negation” (CE, 292), limiting its recording to what is present. Language, on the other hand, poses serious limitations to conveying “what can only be understood in terms of negation,”²⁴ *i.e.*, virtuality, because the signs and syntax at our disposal are saturated with the Western philosophical baggage of presence, a heritage that works in opposition to this not non-presence or not non-consciousness.²⁵ As Derrida reminds us in *Ousia and Grammē*, this *not otherwise*—this not non-presence—only “permits itself to be sketched, announcing itself in certain calculated fissures of the metaphysical text.”²⁶ It is in light of this logico-linguistic difficulty, I suggest, that Bergson brings attention to the above-mentioned distinction between *not being* and *being no longer* as a means to articulate the ineffable, the *beyond of*—but not contrary to—metaphysics. Recasting memory as existing in the mode of the *being no longer* allows Bergson to not only challenge the assumption that to exist is to be present to consciousness, but also to invite the *intuition* of this mode of existence that is fundamentally paradoxical and, in a sense, ineffable. In this sense, rethinking negation temporally as *being no longer* opens the “space”—finds the time—to experience negation, to “ground” the virtual in the “presence” of an “absence.” *Being no longer* expresses the existence of this past that exists yet cannot be grasped or accounted for, an existence that is neither “there” nor “not-there.”

An-Archic Memory

Saying that the past is neither “there” nor “not-there” should call to

²³ Daniel Alipaz. “Bergson and Derrida: A Question of Writing Time as Philosophy’s Other,” *Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy*, vol. XIX, no. 2 (2011): 96–120, here 107.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 105.

²⁵ Alipaz observes that Bergson’s awareness of the limits posed by language leads him to present his philosophy—or, better yet, his philosophical method in *Matter and Memory*—as a “fiction.” (*Ibid.*, 109)

²⁶ Jacques Derrida, “*Ousia and Grammē*: Note on a Note from *Being and Time*,” in *Margins of Philosophy*, (tr.) A. Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 65.

mind the expression—common to twentieth-century French thought, especially that of Merleau-Ponty, Derrida, Deleuze, and Levinas—of a “past that has never been present.”²⁷ As such, the past functions as an originary ground or as an *a priori* condition. In this context, “originary” should not be understood as a Kantian *a priori*, which is undetermined by temporality. As Lawlor observes, in 20th century France, “*a priori* conditions must be experientible.” (CB, 54) Yet, they cannot be reduced to experience, to a positive, graspable origin. As Deleuze reminds us, the origin must never resemble what it grounds.²⁸ If that were the case, it would no longer be *a priori*. Originary, then, must be “*at once* experientible and yet not reducible to experience.” (CB, 54) This is to say that Bergson’s past, as an originary ground, is neither a positivity/presence nor a negativity/absence.²⁹ Existing in the temporality/mode of the virtual, the past is not a positivity insofar as it cannot be made present to consciousness. Yet, it is not a negativity or absence insofar as it does not cease to exist simply because it is not present to consciousness. Rather, it continues to influence the present, making itself experientible in, *e.g.*, present perception. Thus conceived, the past turns out to be a non-*arche*, fundamentally *an-archic*—lacking an origin.

At this juncture, we should hear the echoes of Derrida’s remarks about *différance* as a “grounding” principle or origin. “There is produced in the thought of the impossibility of the otherwise, in this *not otherwise*,” Derrida observes, “a certain difference, a certain trembling, a certain decentering that is not the position of an other center. Another center would be another now; on the contrary, this *dis-*

²⁷ For a discussion of memory as a “time which has never been present” in relation to Merleau-Ponty’s thought, see Alia Al-Saji, “‘A Past Which Has Never Been Present’: Bergsonian Dimensions in Merleau-Ponty’s Theory of the Prepersonal,” *Research in Phenomenology*, vol. 38, no. 1 (2008): 41–71; Alia Al-Saji, “The Temporality of Life: Merleau-Ponty, Bergson, and the Immemorial Past,” *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 45, no. 2 (2007): 177–206; and Lawlor, *The Challenge of Bergsonism*, 56.

²⁸ Gilles Deleuze, *Logic of Sense*, (tr.) M. Lester with C. Stivale, (ed.) C. Boundas (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 99.

²⁹ Note how this way of accounting for the past recalls Derrida’s discussion of *différance*. *Différance* indicates a new movement of temporalization in which the synthesis or retention of the moment’s past is performed by the trace. “Here the appearing and functioning of difference presupposes an *originary synthesis* not preceded by any absolute simplicity. Such would be the *originary trace*.” Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, (tr.) G. C. Spivak (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2016), 67; my emphasis. Henceforth referred to parenthetically in the text as OG. There is no consciousness that, given in the form of the present and thus devoid of negativity, performs the synthesis.

placement would not envisage an *absence*, that is an other presence: it would *replace* nothing.”³⁰ This “origin” that is *différance* is not a transcendental *a priori*, an “‘origin’ or ‘ground’”—these notions belong to the history of metaphysics, “that is to say to the system functioning as the effacing of difference” (OG, 25)—but a non-origin from which sense, difference, and metaphysics more broadly originate.³¹ Yet, *différance* as a *non*-origin is not an absence either. “That which gives us to think beyond the closure cannot be simply absent.”³² As Derrida notes regarding absence,

either it would give us nothing to think or it still would be a negative mode of presence. Therefore the sign of this excess must be absolutely excessive as concerns all possible presence-absence, all possible production or disappearance of being in general, and yet, *in some manner* it must still signify, in a manner unthinkable by metaphysics as such.³³

Not bound by a metaphysical economy of presence, then, *différance* is *neither* present *nor* absent. It is not absent in that it continues to signify *via* traces. And yet, precisely because its presencing is that of *différance*, it is not present either. In this sense, by positing “the supplement of (at) the origin” (OG, 341), Derrida describes an origin that is fundamentally “an-archic,” *i.e.*, that has no-arche, without origin, but that, as a signifying *movement*, enables or produces sensible plentitudes, including the experience of time and space.

By forcing us to grapple with the mediated structure of the present “now” (section I), but also of the ontological past, Bergson’s thinking—this an-archic past—challenges the successivity of time and primacy of presence.³⁴ In fact, affirming the opacity of time

³⁰ Derrida, “Ousia and Grammē,” 39.

³¹ Derrida explains *différance* as the “formation of form.” (OG, 68) Yet, the fact that “*the trace is the absolute origin of sense in general*,” Derrida observes, “*amounts to saying once again that there is no absolute origin of sense in general. The trace is the différence* which opens appearance and signification.” (OG, 70)

³² Derrida, “Ousia and Grammē,” 65.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ The successivity of time and the primacy of presence are notions that, as Derrida observes in his criticism of Husserl’s concepts of protention and retention, need to be destabilized in order to fissure metaphysical thinking. Time’s “homogeneity and its fundamental successivity,” Derrida argues, also need to be deconstructed. (OG, 72) Indeed, although the deconstructing the Now B into the retention of Now A and the protention of Now C points to the mediated structure of the present, it does not destabilize the successivity of time; “this model of successivity would prohibit the *Now X* from taking the place of *Now A*.” (*Ibid.*)

means coming to terms with the fact that there is no such thing a transcendental signified—pure memory or pure perception—that can be represented and thus made impure or mediated by a signifier. Pure memory or pure perception are, to borrow Derrida's words, "originarily and essentially trace, that is *always already in the position of the signifier*." (OG, 79) Since every temporal moment bears the trace of another, no temporal moment—including what was thought of as a "transcendental signified"—can simply be "there" or "not-there."

As this ground that is neither "there" nor "not-there," we can see how this paradoxical and ineffable past that Bergson strives to articulate at once co-exists with and is *asymmetrical* to the present. Regarding the coexistence of the "past in general" with the present, Bergson notes that all of our past states are synthetized in our character and, although actual consciousness only accepts those memories that are useful to present perception, all of the past influences our decisions. As Al-Saji points out, the present is doubled; it "becomes the locus where actual and virtual" coexist.³⁵ At first sight, it may seem that the co-existence of the temporal rhythms entails that they both exist in the present. Yet, by relocating negativity where it belongs, we can see that it would be a mistake to reduce co-existence to co-presence; the virtual and actual co-exist as two different temporal rhythms while maintaining their non-coincidence or asymmetry.³⁶ This is so not only because the past cannot be rendered in perception, but also because of the past's primacy over the present. The continual influence of the past on the presence suggest that "no matter what perception we have," as Lawlor observes, "there is always a past that is prior to it, affecting it." (CB, 55) Present percep-

That is to say, this model still posits the present as primary; it conceives of the past as present- or immediate-past and the future as present- or immediate-future. This conception of time forecloses the possibility of the existence of another kind of past that is "anterior" to the present- or immediate-past, an "absolute past." (*Ibid.*)

³⁵ Al-Saji, "A Past Which Has Never Been Present," 68.

³⁶ While it is true that Bergson qualifies the plane of pure memory as "immobile," immobility here should be read along Bergson's remarks about pure perception, which is active. Compared to perception, which is projected toward the future, toward action, memory is useless, not active—in other words, immobile. Put differently, pure memory is "immobile" in the sense that the past is recorded in its specificity and cannot be recalled without alteration; it cannot be repeated or done over, a feature that characterizes the present and body-memory. Yet, it would be a mistake to understand this immutable plane as "eternal." As Deleuze argues, pure memory is not eternal, but "impassible" because memories do not pass out of time. (B, 55)

tion is characterized by a necessary delay or deferral such that what consciousness perceives is always the immediate past. “The difference and negotiation of rhythms in sensory life,” then, “ensures that perception lags behind sensibility”³⁷ and, I would add, memory.³⁸ To recall, consciousness, for Bergson, is the zone of indeterminacy that delays the body’s (nascent) action upon the perceived object. Called for by a structural necessity, then, consciousness *requires* that gaping open within which the past, virtual temporality, grafts itself. That is, the actuality of the present requires the virtuality of the past.

Significantly, the fact that the virtual, nebulous past “exists for us even more than the external world” (MM, 80) is such that “it is not the past that is copying the present, it is the present that is copying the past.”³⁹ (CB, 55) We can see, then, that the past co-exists with the present insofar as the past is repeated by the present. Yet, the past is primary because there would be no present without it, there would be nothing that could be taken up and repeated. Asymmetrically co-existing with the present, the past manifests itself via *traces* that are repeated in present perceptions and memory-images. Recall Bergson’s observation regarding making contact with the past: “We will never reach the past if we don’t place ourselves in it from the start. Essentially virtual, the past cannot be grasped as past unless we follow and adopt the movement by which it opens into a present image, emerging from the shadows into the light of day.” (MM, 149–50) The past, while remaining in itself, in the shadows, and as such inactive and ungraspable, manifests itself in present images as a *trace*, neither present nor absent.⁴⁰

These last remarks about the relationship between present and past as one of repetition invite a few comments about the meaning of continuity in Bergson’s thought. Although Bergson insists on declar-

³⁷ Al-Saji, “A Past Which Has Never Been Present,” 63.

³⁸ As Al-Saji observes, “radical reflection reveals the trace of the sensory [of the unconscious] in, and its excess to, what is perceived.” (*Ibid.*, 69)

³⁹ Ultimately, as Lawlor puts it, the past or “memory does not come *from* perception but *to* perception; the past does not come from the present but to the present.” (CB, 53)

⁴⁰ If my reading is correct, Deleuze is mistaken in claiming that “difference,” for Bergson, “is never negative but essentially positive and creative.” (B, 103) It is true that difference is not negative, but the negativity that Bergson rejects is *spatial* negativity. Difference cannot be “essentially positive” insofar as it is the labor of the negative that makes difference possible. In this sense, Deleuze is correct in pointing out that difference/negation is creative or generative. Strictly speaking, though, this creativity is the labor of a difference that *is* neither negative nor positive.

ing that there is continuity between past and present—a continuity that explains and allows for the materialization of pure memory into memory-images and the overcoming of dualisms—this continuity is a different *kind* of continuity, a continuity that fundamentally relies, as we have seen, upon negativity. Even in continuity, in the “gradual passage from the idea to the image and from the image to the sensation...[as the past] evolves towards actuality, that is to say towards action,” the movement of negation persists. (MM, 120) Nevertheless, *esprit* remains

radically distinct from it [matter]. It is distinct from matter in that it is, even then, memory, that is to say a synthesis of past and present with a view to the future, in that it contracts the moments of this matter in order to use them and to manifest itself by actions which are the final aim of its union with the body. (*Ibid.*)

In this sense, continuity relies on a difference in kind between the temporalities of the virtual and the actual, of the past and the present, a continuity that continues *not the same*, but *the different*.⁴¹ This is to say that Bergson’s continuous duration requires negativity precisely because it is the rethinking of negativity in temporal terms that opens the abyss between the virtual and the actual, that institutes the temporality of the past, which, in turn, makes the passing of time possible.⁴² Remaining true to Bergson’s insight, then, allows us to see that the institution of these different rhythms does not elimi-

⁴¹ In light of these consideration, it is possible to attend to the recent claim by Martin Hägglund that Bergson “denies time” by positing duration as a continuous movement free from negativity, a movement that “includes all of the past in an ‘undivided present.’” Bergson’s account of duration as synthesizing all of the past/present/future moments, Hägglund claims, is such that “nothing ceases to be in duration” and, in turn, “there is nothing that can distinguish the past from the present.” As I have shown in this paper, such a reading of Bergson reduces being with presence, an equation that Bergson works hard to sever, reminding us that because something does not cease to be, it does not entail that it is present. Martin Hägglund, “A Trace of Time: A Critique of Vitalism,” *Derrida Today*, vol. 9, no. 1 (2016): 36–46, here 42.

⁴² The present passes insofar as there always is a past or the *unconscious* that, by grafting itself onto the present, guides and shapes it. Massey, *The Origin of Time*, 194. Another way of understanding this claim is by referring back to Bergson’s observation that “we perceive, practically, only the past, the pure present being the ungraspable progress of the past gnawing into the future.” (MM, 82) This statement suggests not only that the present occupies and relies upon the continuity of being. It also indicates that the present depends on the past; the present perception grasps the progressive movement of the past.

nate the condition of time. Rather, it is the an-archic condition, the “past that was never present,” *of the institution of temporality itself.*

Conclusion

In this paper, I attended to negation or negativity in Bergson’s thought and, differently from Deleuze, I argued that Bergson’s articulation of a difference in *kind* between perception and memory does not call for the erasure of the negative, for difference without negation, but rather for the radical re-signification of negation in temporal terms. Following through with the challenge of Bergsonism, which, in this specific case, entails not rejecting or purging negation (hence positing itself over and against a metaphysics of presence), but re-thinking negation *in duration, i.e., in terms of time*, leads to the intuiting of being beyond presence, a move that fissures metaphysical thinking and presence from within, ultimately inaugurating what will then become deconstruction.⁴³ In this sense, often associated

⁴³ Although the work in this article has suggested that Bergson grapples with the mediated structure of the present “now” (section I), but also of the ontological past (section III), thus challenging the successivity of time and primacy of presence, it may still seem strange to claim that Bergson is a philosopher of mediation, especially when he seems to prioritize intuition over language as well as a philosophical approach that is immediate and absolute over one that is mediated and relative. As Bergson explains in “Introduction to Metaphysics,” the symbolic structures mediate the knowing of a phenomenon, giving access only to what that thing has in common with others, and not what belongs uniquely to it. See Henri Bergson, “Introduction to Metaphysics,” in *The Creative Mind: An Introduction to Metaphysics* (New York: Dover Publications, 2007), 133. This worry acquires weight when we take into account that in his earlier writings, Derrida’s criticism of a metaphysics of presence focuses explicitly on (Husserl’s) intuitionism. In *Voice and Phenomenon*, Derrida recognizes that Husserl’s description of the movement of temporalization locates a non-presence in the heart of presence, thus mediating the self-knowledge and self-presence of intuition and infinitely deferring the establishment of present. See Jacques Derrida, *Voice and Phenomenon: Introduction to the Problem of the Sign in Husserl’s Phenomenology*, (tr.) L. Lawlor (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2011). This seeming mediation, however, does not prevent Husserl, Derrida claims, from reinstating a metaphysics of presence by upholding a *teleological faith, i.e.,* by subordinating the mediated, relative, and deferred to the *ideal of the living present.* Derrida, *Voice and Phenomenon*, 66; 84. The question, then, is whether Bergson is vulnerable to a similar charge, that is, whether Bergsonian intuition is pure presence. An investigation of the extent to which Bergson’s method of intuition operates within and reaffirms a metaphysics of presence calls for a study of its own, but the insights developed in this

with a philosophy of immanence of which Deleuze is the successor and main exponent, the work done in this paper sheds light on another dimension of Bergson's work, a different movement of his thinking. Despite being read as a thinker of immediacy over mediation, intuition over language, in my reading, Bergson's thinking of negation in duration prefigures, in significant ways, the project of deconstruction that will become central to post-structuralism and, more broadly, 20th century continental philosophy, thus offering another genealogy for Derrida's work, but also for the onto-phenomenology of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty.

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article at least suggest that the thing under consideration in intuition is never wholly grasped, that there is no full coincidence in intuition.