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The Reality of Consciousness and Its Logical Intermittences: from Hegel to Bergson

RICCARDO RONI
Società Filosofica Italiana
Università degli Studi di Urbino “Carlo Bo”

Abstract

The critic of substance immobility through negation constitutes the starting point of the ‘voyage of discovery’ of Hegel’s *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, in which mind and body experiences are considered in terms of mutual recognition, without denying the subjectivity. In this article I am discussing some aspects of Hegel’s philosophy of spirit after Nietzsche’s ‘experimentalism’ and Dennett’s theory of mind, in order to articulate, through Bergson, two fundamental reasons. The first concerns the subject and the dramatic awareness of its constitutional temporality and, at the same time, the possibility to transcend the limit of ‘here’ and ‘now’. On this basis, the second regards the indefensibility of nihilism, because, thanks to consciousness and its continuous activity, the temporal subject, from Hegel to Bergson, persists as a ‘dark side’, in which a constant ‘overcoming’ (*élan*) of an implicitly normative and essentially social practice takes place.

Keywords: G.W.F. Hegel, H. Bergson, subject, consciousness, metamorphosis.

1. Hegel after Nietzsche’s experimentalism: the ‘intermittences’ of consciousness

In the 70s of the eighteenth century, Kant planned his critical project, considering to be ‘metaphysical’ those problems

posed by reason itself. Although he failed the attempt to find a solution in some order of knowledge, however, he opened a new 'pure' field, beyond the empirical use of categories, limited only to the conditions of sensible world.

He inaugurated the world 'thought in the spirit' (*Geist*), providing a new source of illumination in the attempt to understand the nature of cognition and of mind. Kant's cognitive world goes 'beyond' the laws of physics, beyond a physics of mind, or rather, as Kant prefers to say about Locke, of a 'physiology of the intellect'.

'Beyond', in the *Critik der reinen Vernunft* (1781, 1787²) means, in relation to cognitive subject, going to reasons and principles both essential and irreducible at the same time to any set of factual circumstances and things: this is why these latter are likely to be designed in different ways from one mind (indeed human) which cannot believe in external guarantees and in external entities (for example in the idea of an external entity understood as *causa sui*).

Although the subject is able to determine the conditions of legitimacy of its metaphysical pronouncements without affecting their apriority, nevertheless, he recognizes the 'pragmatic' dimension that each principle assumes when it comes in relationship with some form of life. The 'pure' reason, understood as a normative/regulative structure, founds and legitimates the experience of 'over', because it organizes this 'unusual' experience according to principles called not to ensure particular experiences, but the totality and generality of them, seeking homogeneity in diversity. The way Kant presents the device he calls 'pure reason' alludes to its qualitative and not merely

quantitative nature, involving the reason itself within the limits of its constitution which we would like to define 'changeable', always according to an experience 'in general and as such' (überhaupt):

Daher sind transzendental und transzendent nicht einerlei. Die Grundsätze des reinen Verstandes, die wir oben vortrug, sollen bloß von empirischem und nicht von transendentalem, d. i. über die Erfahrungsgrenze hinausreichendem Gebrauche sein. Ein Grundsatz aber, der diese Schranken wegnimmt, *ja gar sie zu überschreiten gebietet*, heißt transzendent. Kann unsere Kritik dahin gelangen, den Schein dieser angemäßigten Grundsätze aufzudecken, so werden jene Grundsätze des bloß empirischen Gebrauchs, im Gegensatz mit den letzteren, immanente Grundsätze des reinen Verstandes genannt werden können (Kant 1956: 336).

Kant has shown that our cognitive relationship with objects is the result of the active position that we take towards them, thanks to the way in which we unify the intuitive and conceptual elements in our experience. Furthermore, he showed that our representations are not simply 'mirrors' we install in front of nature, nor simple internal, private events, but rather mental operations governed by rules, carried out through acts of synthesis which produces the unity of the subject and of the object (Pinkard 2002: 34).

All these operations reveal behind all our experience of the world the fact of human spontaneity, that is, the ability to unify the experience. Our consciousness, even that one of subjective psychic life, presupposes this act of synthesis of concepts and intuitions. In addition, Kant has shown that the *ego*, by virtue of the nature of reason itself, can go beyond the limits of possible experience, so that he can make sense of his experience as a whole:

Nun geht der transzendente Vernunftbegriff jederzeit nur auf die absolute Totalität in der Synthesis der Bedingungen, und endigt niemals, als bei den schlechthin, d. i. in jeder Beziehung, Unbedingten. Denn die reine Vernunft überläßt alles dem Verstande, der sich zunächst auf die Gegenstände der Anschauung oder vielmehr deren Synthesis in der Einbildungskraft bezieht. Jene behält sich allein die absolute Totalität im Gebrauche der Verstandesbegriffe vor, und sucht die synthetische Einheit, welche in der Kategorie gedacht wird, bis zum Schlechthinunbedingten hinauszuführen (Kant 1956: 358-359).

Unlike the concepts that we apply to objects of perception, our ideas structure and order our reflections on the world (Pinkard 2002: 52-53). Human mind therefore assumes a 'normative' position towards experience and above all, always in Kant's perspective, the only way to reconcile freedom with nature is to place the realm of 'noumenic', transcendental freedom, which escapes the causal laws of nature (332).

In this epistemological context, the responsibility that Goethe, reader of Spinoza and of Kant's *Critik der Urtheilskraft*, in his *Naturwissenschaftliche Schriften* assigns to biological individuality is not casual: it consists in the intimate arrangement of *ego* to identify in natural existence (the Earth) the conditions of his evolution, in order to justify the moral development of cognitive functions in *scala naturae* from the plant and the animal (*Tier*) to man, so that the subjectivity of the organism develops as a raw material which is transformed in its different conditions.

Hegel developed his theory of consciousness in this intellectual atmosphere, in which moral interpretation of biological evolution was an important element. For example, in *Zur Morphologie* (2 Bände: 1817-1822; 1823-1824) Goethe formulates the law that, in the organism, subordination of

parts indicates a high level of organization. Hegel's sympathy with Goethe's conception of nature, or his attitude to the *Biologie oder Philosophie der lebenden Natur für Naturforscher und Ärzte* of Treviranus (6 Bände: 1802-1822) – he was among Blumenbach's pupils (Poggi 2000: 440) – helped him to reconsider his critic of the conception of nature only as something higher and better than human mind. After Kant's 'normative characterization of the mental' (Brandom 2009: 33), the turning point of Hegel's *Phänomenologie* is not casual: when Hegel sets the concept of 'spirit', natural awareness negates itself in order to come to 'absolute spirit', in order to take on specific responsibilities within the 'social space':

The key conception allowing Hegel to carry off that particular way of taking the post-Kantian turn had to do therefore with his conception of spirit, *Geist*, 'mindedness' as normative, as essentially assuming certain responsibilities in a social space – of undertaking commitments, attributing entitlements, and negotiating, as it were, the entire set of normative responses to all those related activities – and of then arguing that it was the impossibility of a naturalistic account of normativity that distinguished *Geist* from nature, not *Geist's* being any kind of metaphysical substance. Hegel himself realized how difficult it was even to articulate such a position (Pinkard 2002: 278).

Consciousness negates every immediate substantiality of the 'given' (cf. Sellars 1997) in a dialectical movement which implicates a circular negation of formal 'I' (written in capital letters), not only, in the sense of Löwith, 'from Hegel to Nietzsche' (Löwith 1981), but also, in accordance with a kind of 'retrospective rational reconstructive recollection' (Brandom 2009: 104), from Nietzsche to Hegel. The consciousness which speaks and acts, even within the limits of a determined reality, remains, according to Hegel, the 'problematic'

core of all knowledge, because we can rightly understand the stages of experience only when we know them as the elementary degree of something more developed.

In the section of Hegel's *Phänomenologie* entitled 'conscience', the first chapter shows the conditions of the rudimentary consciousness which consists in the simple certainty of 'sensitive impression', while the second presents the apparent conditions of 'perception', and the third those of 'understanding'. In chapter four the negative is the force of the first necessary step toward the subject, while, in the chapter five, Hegel speaks about the principle of a universal order in which everything has come to assume the transparency of reason. Then, the last chapter is about the 'absolute knowledge', which changes the subject into the 'impersonal' one, namely in the infinite series of figures (*Gestalten*) that structure mental activity.

The first five chapters of the *Phänomenologie* show the formation of 'Self' with its transcendental structures, *within* and *beyond* the 'substance' (cf. Spinoza and Jacobi), with its consciousness and self-consciousness, while the other three explain that the historical and cultural conditions require such a construction. In light of these premises, I will argue how the subject, acting within and beyond the substance, still remains after Hegel the 'problematic' core of experience because, already in Hegel, any real experience can be limited within individuality, whereas 'reality' is conceived as 'das Werden seiner selbst, der Kreis, der sein Ende als seinen Zweck voraussetzt und zum Anfange hat' (Hegel 1989: 23), with the result that 'mit dem Einzelnen ist ihm zugleich das Jenseits gesetzt' (74).

From an unsystematic philosophical perspective, Nietzsche will write that

in Hegel kulminieren beide Tendenzen: im Grunde verallgemeinerte er die Thatsache der deutschen Kritik und die Thatsache der deutschen Romantik – eine Art von dialektischem Fatalismus, aber zu Ehren des Geistes, thatsächlich mit Unterwerfung des Philosophen unter die Wirklichkeit. Der Kritiker bereitet vor: nicht mehr! (Nietzsche 1967: NF-1885, 35[44]).

The ‘inconsistency’ Hegel, from the first chapter of *Phänomenologie*, ascribes to ‘sense-certainty’ (cf., about this, Nietzsche 1967: JGB-I-16), namely to the reality he calls ‘consciousness’, is not accidental. Hegel writes that only a sensitive conscience, because it lacks the capacity for abstraction and categorization, could not understand the data in their integrity without falling in contradiction with itself, only ascribing them their associated empirical meanings, which metaphysics attributed to abstract categories like ‘being’, ‘here’ and ‘now’:

Weder Ich noch die Sache hat darin die Bedeutung einer mannigfaltigen Vermittlung, Ich nicht die Bedeutung eines mannigfaltigen Vorstellens oder Denkens, noch die Sache die Bedeutung mannigfaltiger Beschaffenheiten, sondern die Sache *ist*; und sie *ist*, nur weil sie *ist*; sie *ist*, dies ist dem sinnlichen Wissen das Wesentliche, und dieses reine *Sein* oder diese einfache Unmittelbarkeit macht ihre *Wahrheit* aus. Ebenso ist die Gewißheit als *Beziehung unmittelbare* reine Beziehung; das Bewußtsein ist *Ich*, weiter nichts, ein reiner *Dieser*; der Einzelne weiß reines *Dieses* oder *das Einzelne* (Hegel 1989: 83).

This limit of consciousness cannot however be taken as a proof of its failure, because behind the ‘illusion’ of sense-certainty, a moral truth exists, although inappropriate. Hegel places the subject-organism in a space (*Diesseits*) where natural con-

sciousness starts its own way of knowledge but cannot imagine its development (*Werden*) up to self-consciousness. And yet, the passive alienation (*Entäusserung*) of the individual in substance is only a counterpart of the troubled spontaneity which is the spirit real substance (39). In Hegel's philosophy of spirit, the subject's task is to free time and space 'beyond' their character of void and to connect the sensual 'here' with the 'Jenseits' (or space and time of the possibilities). Hegel writes:

Das *Ziel* aber ist dem Wissen ebenso notwendig als die Reihe des Fortganges gesteckt; es ist da, wo es nicht mehr über sich selbst hinauszugehen nötig hat, wo es sich selbst findet und der Begriff dem Gegenstande, der Gegenstand dem Begriffe entspricht. Der Fortgang zu diesem Ziele ist daher auch unaufhaltsam, und auf keiner früheren Station ist Befriedigung zu finden (74).

With the concept of *Werden*, Hegel describes a reality which goes *beyond* itself in itself, moving away from what it is *here* and *now*, and beginning as something undetermined. A reality with these characteristics is what Hegel calls *Geist*, the most comprehensive and as inclusive as possible system of social practices of a community (Brandom 1999, Pinkard 2014: 336). But, according to Hegel, this *Geist* achieves its truth or its *subjectivity* only when it finds itself in the absolute 'disruption' (*Zerissenheit*). On this basis, Hegel clearly understands *why* and *how* the answer about the grounds of world's experience could lead to nihilism, exactly when the subject becomes independent from the invasive power of substance. In that sense, as Nietzsche will observe, the concept of substance is only a *consequence* of that one of subject (Nietzsche 1967: NF-1887, 10 [19]).

So, to clarify this point, it is necessary to compare Nietzsche's notions of 'overman' (*Übermensch*), 'will to power' (*Wille zur*

Macht) and ‘eternal recurrence of the same’ (*Ewige Wiederkehr des Gleichen*) with Hegelian concept of *Geist*, in order to find a more concrete shape (*Gestalt*) in the dialectical path of consciousness. As anticipated, in Hegel, subject’s relationship with life as organism is never provocative, but biologically well-grounded, because it reveals the inner nature of necessity.

Nevertheless, Hegel does not capitulate in the face of negative, because he intends to enhance the subject’s responsibility to his community:

In einem freien Volke ist darum in Wahrheit die Vernunft verwirklicht; sie ist gegenwärtiger lebendiger Geist, worin das Individuum seine *Bestimmung*, d.h. sein allgemeines und einzelnes Wesen, nicht nur ausgesprochen und als Dingheit vorhanden findet, sondern selbst dieses Wesen ist und seine Bestimmung auch erreicht hat (Hegel 1989: 266).

However, in Hegel, as it is well known, the self-becoming of *ego* is based on the transcendence (negation) of finite (natural) consciousness: this is what Hegel meant when he wrote ‘to give contingency the form of necessity’ (cf. Brandon 2009: 102). Hegel describes two modes of manifestation of subjectivity: as ‘I’ and as ‘being in general’. Self as singularity is possible only through the experience of the immediate certainty which consciousness does. This allows the subject to understand its infinite freedom and, consequently, its own ‘responsibility’ (Honneth 2008), thanks to its disposition to orient itself practically (Hegel 1989: 416). From his side, Nietzsche, like Hegel, develops a critical position both towards the ‘formal’ self and every immediate certainty, but he draws different conclusions. Looking at Kant, he observed:

Eine Welt ohne Subjekt – kann man sie denken? Aber man denke sich jetzt alles Leben auf einmal vernichtet, warum könnte nicht alles andere ruhig weiter sich bewegen und genau so sein, wie wir es jetzt sehen? Ich meine nicht, daß es so sein würde, aber ich sehe nicht ein, warum man es sich nicht denken könnte. Gesetzt die Farben seien subjektiv – nichts sagt uns, daß sie nicht objektiv zu denken wären. Die Möglichkeit daß die Welt der ähnlich ist, die uns erscheint, ist gar nicht damit beseitigt, daß wir die subjektiven Faktoren erkennen. Das Subjekt wegdenken – das heißt sich die Welt ohne Subjekt vorstellen wollen: ist ein Widerspruch: ohne Vorstellung vorstellen! Vielleicht giebt es hunderttausend subjektive Vorstellungen. Unsere menschliche wegdenken – da bleibt die der *Ameise* übrig. Und dächte man sich alles Leben fort und nur die *Ameise* übrig: hiengewirklich an ihr das Dasein? Ja, der Werth des Daseins hängt an den empfindenden Wesen. Und für die Menschen ist Dasein und werthvolles Dasein oft ein- und dasselbe (Nietzsche 1967: NF-1880, 10 [D82]).

Believing too much in the subjective power of drives and instincts, Nietzsche falls into contradiction, compromising the concrete experience of the ‘beyond’, precisely made possible through the force of the spirit (*Geist*) and the personality. Because this force allows the individuality to pass from the level of representation to that one of ‘expression’.

Due to this contradiction of identity, Nietzsche feels the urgent need to overcome any immediate certainty: ‘Der Begriff ‘*Individuum*’ ist falsch’ (NF-1885, 34 [123]).

A deep understanding of Nietzsche’s and Dennett’s, as we see now, theory of consciousness mainly depends on this aspect: if the subjectivity can understand and develop the space/time of the ‘beyond’, giving it real contents through a social project, starting from an overturning of its origin. Hegel’s dialectical development is the process of thought which is a temporal and a historical process. Thought’s power to

go beyond – or the practical and social demonstration of its conditions and possibilities – is the only thing which can clarify the contradiction between every act of negation and the ‘eternal recurrence of the same’.

2. Time, language and environment: between Nietzsche and Dennett

Modern metaphysics requires two conditions to understand the subject. The first conceives human thought as a stable production of ‘clear and evident’ acts and the second as a constant reflection on this production. This implicates, as in Descartes, the answer about the *fundamentum absolutum inconcussum veritatis*. Nevertheless, modern determination of man as ‘subject’ is not so univocal and unambiguous, because many factors as identity, change, perception of change, natural changes, variety, internal principle or external cause, contribute to questioning the apparent certainty of an ontological principle or of a ‘substance’. The fundamental question about how a created being could change through time, preserving at the same time its identity, requires the substantial or, at least, phenomenological unity through an internal principle and through memory, and awareness of the transitions from one state to another one. In the path from Kant to Hegel, we can trace a metaphysical principle playing an essential role in the development of human cognition and setting limits to human experience in order to identify (and possibly clarify) some problematic issues which characterize the contemporary experience of subject’s crisis. If then we move from Hegel to Nietzsche, we see that modern determination of man as ‘subject’ is not so univocal. The success of

the subject's effort largely depends on the way it 'represents' itself and its essence. As we have shown, in Hegel's *Phänomenologie*, self-consciousness, which is essentially desire (*Begierde*), can anticipate future: Hegel explains that the subject does not live in an empty time, the one of eternity, but in an often dark past, in a specious present and in a future, which is undetermined. In that case, the mind (*Geist*) coincides with the 'dialectical' movement of the self, interpreted, thanks to the recollection (*Erinnerung*), as a temporal synthesis.

On a different side, Nietzsche deconstructs the subject-substance and rejects dialectical thought, describing consciousness as the ultimate result of physiological processes, which directly affect the organism.

He wrote in 1885:

Die Logik unseres bewußten Denkens ist nur eine grobe und erleichterte Form jenes Denkens, welches unser Organismus, ja die einzelnen Organe desselben, nöthig hat. [...] Unser Causal-Gefühl ist etwas ganz Grobes und Vereinzeltes gegen die wirklichen Causal-Gefühle unseres Organismus. Namentlich ist das ‚Vorher‘ und ‚Nachher‘ eine große Naivetät. Zuletzt: wir mußten alles erst erwerben für das Bewußtsein, einen Zeit-sinn, Raum-sinn, Causal-sinn: nachdem es ohne Bewußtsein lange schon viel reicher existirt hatte. Und zwar eine gewisse einfachste schlichteste reduzirteste Form: unser bewußtes Wollen, Fühlen, Denken ist im Dienste eines viel umfänglicheren Wollens Fühlens und Denkens. – Wirklich? Wir wachsen fortwährend noch, unser Zeit- Raumsinn usw. entwickelt sich noch (NF-1885, 34 [124]).

And in another fragment of the same period we read:

Wie ein Feldherr von vielen Dingen nichts erfahren will und erfahren darf, um nicht die Gesamt-Überschau zu verlieren: so muß es auch in unserem bewußten Geiste vor Allem einen *ausschließenden wegscheuchenden* Trieb geben, einen auslesenden, welcher nur ge-

wisse facta sich vorführen läßt. Das Bewußtsein ist die Hand, mit der der Organismus am weitesten um sich greift: es muß eine feste Hand sein. Unsere Logik, unser Zeitsinn, Raumsinn sind ungeheure Abbeviatur-Fähigkeiten, zum Zwecke des Befehlens. [...] Aber mit dieser erfundenen starren Begriffs- und Zahlenwelt gewinnt der Mensch ein Mittel, sich ungeheurer Mengen von Thatsachen wie mit Zeichen zu bemächtigen und seinem Gedächtnisse einzuschreiben. Dieser Zeichen-Apparat ist seine Überlegenheit, gerade dadurch, daß er sich von der Einzel-Thatsache möglichst weit entfernt. Die Reduktion der Erfahrungen auf *Zeichen*, und die immer größere Menge von Dingen, welche also gefaßt werden kann: ist seine *höchste Kraft*. ‚Geistigkeit‘ als Vermögen, über eine ungeheure Menge von Thatsachen in Zeichen Herr zu sein. *Diese geistige Welt, diese Zeichen-Welt ist lauter ‚Schein und Trug‘*, ebenso schon wie jedes ‚Erscheinungsding‘ – und der moral<ische> M<ensch> empört sich wohl! (NF-1885, 34 [131]).

The late Nietzsche extends that paradigm to human sciences, arising the problem of the reproducibility or not, in artificial conditions, of a renewed humanity with a specific consciousness, as it results from the process of *Selbstüberwindung* (cf. JGB-IX-257), and attributes to psychology the task of conducting this task:

Die gesammte Psychologie ist bisher an moralischen Vorurtheilen und Befürchtungen hängen geblieben: sie hat sich nicht in die Tiefe gewagt. Dieselbe als Morphologie und *Entwicklungslehre des Willens zur Macht* zu fassen, wie ich sie fasse – daran hat noch Niemand in seinen Gedanken selbst gestreift: sofern es nämlich erlaubt ist, in dem, was bisher geschrieben wurde, ein Symptom von dem, was bisher verschwiegen wurde, zu erkennen (I-23).

At this point, we have to briefly frame that problem in the contemporary debate about consciousness. In his epistemology of mind, Daniel Dennett specifically recognizes the importance of overcoming any immediate certainty, because his

view of consciousness is closely connected with a conception of temporality. Against the Cartesian ‘theatre of consciousness’, Dennett investigates the way the brain represents time, and explains that it works under a ‘time pressure’, in which the contents are very important:

The brain’s task is to guide the body it controls through a world of shifting conditions and sudden surprises, so it must gather information from that world and use it swiftly to ‘produce future’ – to extract anticipations in order to stay one step ahead of disaster. So the brain must represent temporal properties of events in the world, and it must do this efficiently. The processes that are responsible for executing this task are spatially distributed in a large brain with no central node, and communication between regions of this brain is relatively slow; electrochemical nerve impulses travel thousands of time slower than light (or electronic signals through wires). So the brain is under significant time pressure (Dennett 1991: 144).

So the subject, on this basis, can represent itself and can understand the ‘contingency’ of the personal experience. Dennett describes a process which implies, as it is also well shown by the British psychologist Richard Gregory (1923-2010) (cf. Dennett 1996: 99), the assimilation of instruments from a cultural environment: well, language is fully part of these tools.

‘Mental contents become conscious not by entering some special chamber in the brain, not by being transduced into some privileged and mysterious medium, but by winning the competitions against other mental contents for domination in the control of behavior, and hence for achieving longlasting effects – or as we misleadingly say, ‘entering into memory’. And since we are talkers, and since talking to ourselves is one of our most influential activities, one of the most effective ways for a mental content to become influential is for it to get into position to drive the language-using parts of the controls’ (155).

The concept of time is conceived by Dennett in relationship with a notion of language which refers to a conscious process persisting longer and having a strong influence *in* and *beyond* the experience of adaptation. In that frame, the relation between brain, consciousness and inner language (understood as an active background) plays an important role.

The habit – writes Dennett – of semi-understood self-commentary could, I am suggesting, be the origin of the practice of deliberate labelling, in words (or scribble words or other private neologisms), which in turn could lead to a still more efficient practice: dropping all or most of the auditory and articulatory associations and just relying on the *rest* of the associations (and association-possibilities) to do the anchoring. The child, I suggest, can abandon out-loud mouthings and create private, unvoiced neologisms as labels for features of its own activities (150).

Furthermore, Dennett, in virtue of the fact that he conceives the brain as an ‘anticipatory machine’, underscores how it uses the concept of time in order to transform the information it takes from the environment in a coherent narration or story, within which the act of speaking to oneself plays a central role. A similar fact we can find in Bergson’s only sporadic considerations on ‘private’ language. Therefore, in light of these considerations, the mind should not be interpreted as a ‘program’ a programmer installs in his computer, because, according to Dennett, the *unexpected* effects of the ‘memes’ (cf. Dawkins 1989: 176) in our brain are not predictable in absolute through the process of imitation.

Hegel has already called this ‘program’ with an ancient name: ‘reason’. In this context, Dennett theory of ‘multiple drafts model’ is enlightening, thanks to the important role he attri-

butes to the functional activity in our brain. Therefore, the first consequence of cultural development of human language is that consciousness cannot be innate in the human being. Dennett develops the idea of ‘user illusion’ only because the subject is not just a shadow in a machine, even though the same subject preserves a fundamental ‘ambiguity’. So, what metaphysics calls ‘power’ of subjectivity – not reduced to a simple mechanism or, on the contrary, in a mere formalism – is the organism’s power to develop the cognitive ability to enlighten the darkness of the unconscious and to overcome it in a ‘conscious temporal synthesis’. At the beginning of human experience, what modern metaphysics calls the ‘self’ is only the reflexive force of a very formal ‘I’.

Dennett shows that in the subjectivity itself we can find both conscious and unconscious activities: that important observation would demonstrate many famous remarks of Nietzsche, especially in his moral philosophy:

‘This long story of how *responsibility* originated’ is a story of how early human beings learned to torture each other – literally – into developing a special kind of memory, the memory needed to keep track of debts and credits (Dennett 1995: 463).

From the interaction between moral behaviour and cognitive capacity for abstraction, the habit of taking the intentional attitude of the others develops itself, as also taught by the pragmatist social psychologist George Herbert Mead:

As a man adjusts himself to a certain environment he becomes a different individual; but in becoming a different individual he has affected the community in which he lives. It may be a slight effect, but in so far as he has adjusted himself, the adjustments have changed the type of the environment to which he can respond and the world is accordingly a different world. There is always a mutual relation-

ship of the individual and the community in which the individual lives (Mead 1962: 215).

But under what conditions can we recognize ourselves and others, in order to ascribe them the intentional attitude, namely what Dennett calls 'personhood'? There is a way, Dennett explains, 'in which *we* are conscious in which no other species is conscious' (Dennett 1976: 178).

He is right when he argues that subjectivity is without any doubt the 'dark side' of human behaviour, but nevertheless, just as subjects, we are able to commit ourselves, take responsibility, exercise authority. However, in order to be a 'self' in this normative sense, we need the authorization of others, as synthesized in Hegel by the process of 'mutual recognition' (cf. Brandom 2009: 78). Unlike when we refer to the subject, for Dennett the person is a 'second order intentional system' (Dennett 1976: 181). Thanks to the use of language and, above all, to its evolution from egocentric language up to inner speech (cf. Vygotskij 1990), the person is 'one to whom we not only ascribe simple beliefs, desires or other intentions, but to whom we ascribe beliefs, desires, and other intentions *about* beliefs, desires and other Intentions' (Dennett 1976: 181).

While in Hegel the self has a normative status, in Dennett the person is not a mere formal notion but a normative concept, although 'the moral notion of a person and the metaphysical notion of a person are not separate and distinct concepts but just two different and unstable resting points on the same *continuum*. This relativity infects the satisfaction of conditions of personhood at every level' (193). This last consideration allows us to understand why also in the cur-

rent debate about consciousness it is so difficult to get rid of subjectivity, despite the 'enigmatic' path it does.

So, in Nietzsche, men's moral determination (a kind of power) to go beyond good and evil appeals to the same moral conditions that in Hegel's *Phänomenologie* allow consciousness to 'project' itself in a path whose engine is the 'beyond'. Consciousness inevitably orients itself to something other than itself, beyond itself. Why should not that one be the normative reason for which human consciousness follows a project which can be developed according to a range of possibilities, as evidenced by the discussion about intentional attitude (cf. Pippin 2010: 105-120)?

I have tried to show that there are many reasons for rethinking the two antagonistic philosophies, idealism and materialism, because one form of ontological idealism, particularly that one of Hegel's *Phänomenologie*, is quite compatible with materialistic pluralism which, through Nietzsche's physiological interpretation of mind and behaviour, reaches Dennett's theory of personhood and consciousness. This materialistic pluralism does not leave out of sight the conditions of human knowledge which the same neurosciences do not disregard, because philosophy of mind itself results from such knowledge. And this connection between objective idealism and materialistic pluralism leads to confrontation with the concrete problems of ethics and politics in the 'social space of reason'.

Both Hegel and Nietzsche have shown, from different perspectives, that we cannot know the limits of our mind, unless we put ourselves 'beyond' (*über*) our limitations. Consequently, this recognition implies that we can set (and negate)

in some way our limits. So understood, the conscious self is the result of a logical process (cf. Spahn 2007: 90) in which the different kind of knowledge constitutes the history of mental development.

Thanks to the factors which Darwin assumes for his theory of natural selection – variation, heredity, struggle for existence (cf. Höhle-Illies 2005) –, we cannot draw a rigid line between lower and higher animals, and heredity and variation could be understood as particular forms of the categories of identity and difference (see Hegel's *Wissenschaft der Logik*), whose union and interaction produce different species.

Thus, in the higher stage of consciousness, negativity can be free and self-determined. Therefore, on one side, if consciousness and language may be accounted for by natural selection, the mere 'existence' of consciousness is very different from its 'reality'. In Hegel's term, reality of consciousness – although 'reality' is a very ambiguous word – consists of those variations which not only exist but also persist, because they are of some 'value'. Hegel, as we have seen, has shown that the process of development (*Entwicklung*) is not completed in one self as in one consciousness. Therefore, this attempt has to be renewed for each generation which represents in itself the intelligible reality as a unity of plurality.

3. The self-metamorphosis as a normative experience of the 'unlimited': Bergson

The self-conscious subject starts from its natural condition, thus recognizing itself finite and limited to the phenomenon, but it does so only to make way simultaneously to a power which allows subject to go 'over' the set data its own limited

reality consists of. But if such power is what corresponds to reason, a regulative principle, what is the model, what are the traits, what is the true essence of subjectivity as the one sketched by Kant, 'who' is so powerful and in full possession of his faculties, to be able to make a bold and risky enterprise of 'critical of pure reason', then to practically live a metaphysical path to go even beyond the limits of possible experience? What about the 'power' of apperception introduced in the transcendental deduction? What relationships exist between the 'thinker' of Kant and the psychological idea, then between these two notions and that one of a 'noumenal self'? In which way and on which strategies can the subject of empirical intuition take charge of its rights in the most fortunate cases in which it develops the consciousness of a certain boundlessness (*Unbegrenztheit*) in the possible extension of his knowledge, so even of his drives, to this knowledge corresponding and proportional?

Echoing Kant's critical formulations, we have just raised a series of questions we now try to answer through Bergson's philosophy of spirit. Unlike Kant, Bergson is not so much interested in embarking on a search for the possibility of *a priori* knowledge, but rather to investigate what Kant defines the 'internal sense' (the subject of psychology) – i.e. the ways the subject knows itself phenomenally when it assumes the existence of a given material whose movement impresses and modifies the whole organism. While the subject, according to Nietzsche, persists as a limit-zone, as the 'dark side' of memory, Bergson leaves a 'territorial' concept of mind as a kind of self-subsistent reality of body which 'hosts' it (cf. Descartes).

Bergson recognizes that Kant provided our empirical thought with a solid foundation (transcendental) and therefore assured the opportunity to adequately think phenomena, although only as 'phenomena', in order to lay the foundations of a pragmatics of living matter, putting himself in a line of thinking that culminates in William James passing through Spinoza and Leibniz. In Bergson's analysis of consciousness (Bergson 2013a), the subject corresponds to an experience of continuity because it is the expression of the total activity of the matter understood through the modifications of human memory. Memory is not only the object of metaphysics (i.e. it is not only the highest point to which culminates the theory of reasoning), it is the object in 'material' sense, the biological and cultural content of psychology.

In order to preserve subject's identity through change and action, Bergson does not necessarily or exclusively refer to formal logic of our intelligence. The inner logic of 'pure memory' represents that moment of rationality necessary for the formation of a material unit that is perceivable and usable in view of the action.

Form and content, subject and object, matter and memory are in continuous mutual mediation, the one does not absorb the other but it would not be without the other. That is the position through which Bergson goes beyond Kant' formalism and then he returns backward to Hegel and Spinoza. The logical aspect and consistency of material is internal to his formal moment in memory, properly to the time of structuring the material of the world: the shape is that one by which material gets to have an objective content, gets to own that content through which it can just take the form

and content understood as relationships, when viewed in relation to the 'pure duration'. The question driving Bergson's investigation to its limit-point regards the modality (not exclusively psychological) in which an individual consciousness can operate during the crisis of its own physical extinction. Bergson tries to untie this knot with theoretical and psychological support science than with formal metaphysics. The event of the 'panoramic vision of the dying' exploited by coeval philosophers and psychologists such as Victor Egger (1848-1909) and recalled by Bergson in *Matière et mémoire* (Bergson 2012: 172) not only sheds light on his intricate conception of pure memory but also on the material functioning of human mind. As well shown by Georges Poulet, this psychical experience has provided interpretive insights, relevant not only for the phenomenological studies but also for the discussions in 'modernism', especially in the Anglo-American literature (Poulet 1982). So the privileged doorway to understanding Bergson's concept of 'total memory' is to be found in the experiences where the 'totality' of the past of an individual, kept in the memory, can simultaneously facilitate the passage from *je* to *moi* and finally to *nous*. This 'sacrificial' act in front of death is the moral destiny of every singular consciousness, or, in different words, the moral of every absolute experience, as well shown by Hegel at the end of his *Phänomenologie*. A similar fact was found in Kant's first *Critik*, where the subject, while making use of the intellect, feels and perceives simultaneously the power of reason thanks to its ability to reflect on the assumptions and conditions of knowledge, extending its limits beyond the empirical phenomenal sensitiv-

ity and beyond any empirical use of pure intuitions of space and time.

After investigating the immediate data of consciousness in relation to the 'pure duration' conducted in the *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience* (1889), the attention paid by Bergson to cognitive activity, interpreted in non-reductionist terms, is particularly incisive in *Matière et mémoire* (1896) the book in which he affirms the thesis that brain cannot store memories as in a 'drawer', because it is a structure which guides human action and acts as the 'psychological' direction of life. Furthermore, he says that perception and memory are turned towards action and that body prepares action. In particular, memory has the function 'en nous faisant saisir dans une intuition unique des moments multiples de la durée, elle nous dégage du mouvement d'écoulement des choses, c'est-à-dire du rythme de la nécessité' (256).

The 'pure perception', on the other hand, consists of a 'selection', which is,

elle ne crée rien; son rôle est au contraire d'éliminer de l'ensemble des images toutes celles sur lesquelles je n'aurais aucune prise, puis, de chacune des images retenues elles-mêmes, tout ce qui n'intéresse pas les besoins de l'image que j'appelle mon corps (257).

Recognizing the undoubted relationship of consciousness with reality, thanks to its 'intentional' character, Bergson admits a certain 'idealism'. He also admits that knowledge of matter is not subjective, as it is in things themselves rather than in the subject, and that it is not relative, since between 'phenomenon' and 'thing' there is not the same relationship which exists between appearance and reality, but between the part and the whole.

Que toute réalité ait une parenté, une analogie, un rapport enfin avec la conscience, c'est ce que nous concédions à l'idéalisme par cela même que nous appelions les choses des 'images'. [...] Mais pour établir ainsi entre la perception et la réalité le rapport de la partie au tout, il fallait laisser à la perception son rôle véritable, qui est de préparer des actions. C'est que ne fait pas l'idéalisme (258).

Bergson declares a certain 'realism', consisting in filtering the real action of external things, to stop and retain their 'virtual' action, the latter being the perception itself.

Therefore, if material universe consists of images which make it a kind of consciousness, moving from pure perception to memory, we definitely leave the matter for the spirit. But Bergson intends to overcome both idealism and realism.

Memory at this level does not consist not much in the regression of the present in the past, but in a progress of the past in the present which starts from a 'virtual state' (the memory, which preserves in all its details the picture of past life) we lead, through a series of planes of consciousness, to the point where it becomes a present and acting state (perception), since the body is the last plane of our memory, the extreme image, the *pointe acérée*, 'par où la conscience pénètre dans le tissu compact des événements' (Bergson 2013b: 263). The duration is inseparable from images returning it.

Images are virtual objects of perception. Image is not synonymous with representation: the latter is the object of perception, which represents an uninterrupted series of instantaneous visions which are more part of things than of ourselves. The brain is an organ of representations. Image is the thing itself, its manifestation as 'event'. Images emerge from the bottom of a 'pure' dimension. The formation of memory in Bergson is never later than that one of percep-

tion, but is contemporary to it. The material occupies a homogeneous space but it is qualitative, it cannot be reduced to a geometric extension conceived as homogeneous. Memory contracts and loosens a sensitive content coming from the matter itself. Matter is a mobile and continuous unit. Space and time are limits through which the *ego* processes the material world. Materiality is 'pure' experience: our perceptions are selections made by our imagination; our body is an organ of action and not of representation.

Through intuition it is possible to recover the true duration and therefore grasp reality in its mobility: in intuition subject and object coincide.

Pure intuition is what captures an 'undivided continuity', which can be either external or internal.

On this theoretical basis, Bergson's purpose in *L'évolution créatrice* (1907) is just to understand the intensive nature of life duration, precisely of living matter, so that the self can escape the specious character of linear time thanks to the emotional and cognitive vivacity of memory which even exceeds the limits of reality itself. Bergson describes the deepest dimension of consciousness: that one of 'pure' experience, of life without forms, of life as duration and as freedom:

Je constate d'abord que je passe d'état en état. J'ai chaud ou j'ai froid, je suis gai ou je suis triste, je travaille ou je ne fais rien, je regarde ce qui m'entoure ou je pense à autre chose. Sensations, sentiments, volitions, représentations, voilà les modifications entre lesquelles mon existence se partage et qui la colorent tour à tour. Je change donc sans cesse (1).

According to Bergson, our mind is structured in such a way to guarantee us moral survival over time:

Il faut que, par une contraction violente de notre personnalité sur elle-même, nous ramassions notre passé qui se dérobe, pour le pousser, compact et indivisé, dans un présent qu'il créera en s'y introduisant. Bien rares sont les moments où nous nous ressaisissons nous-mêmes à ce point : ils ne font qu'un avec nos actions vraiment libres (201).

An *ego* who does not change cannot last ('un moi qui ne change pas ne dure pas'): this is Bergson's great thesis (4). And the notion of character defines the synthesis of the history that we have been living since our birth: our duration is irreversible and our personality grows unceasingly.

Que sommes-nous, en effet, qu'est-ce que notre *caractère*, sinon la condensation de l'histoire que nous avons vécue depuis notre naissance, avant notre naissance même, puisque nous apportons avec nous des dispositions prénatales ? (5).

Particularly in chapter 3 of *L'évolution créatrice – De la signification de la vie, de la nature et la forme de l'intelligence* – Bergson develops important considerations on the relationship between brain, language and social life, taking up themes already addressed in *Matière et mémoire*, this time declining them in a broader perspective, which involves nature, moral world and society. He explains evolution in part, but only in part, through the concept of adaptation to the environment: the evolution of life does not even consist in the realization of a preordained plan, as in finalism, because evolution consists in a creation which is constantly renewed.

On these assumptions, Bergson defines consciousness as follows:

De ce point de vue, on définirait la conscience de l'être vivant une différence arithmétique entre l'activité virtuelle et l'activité réelle. Elle mesure l'écart entre la représentation et l'action (145).

Bergson writes that consciousness does not spring from the brain, but ‘cerveau et conscience se correspondent parce qu’ils mesurent également, l’un par la complexité de sa structure et l’autre par l’intensité de son réveil, la quantité de choix dont l’être vivant dispose’ (263).

And further on Bergson states:

La conscience d’un être vivant, comme nous avons essayé de le prouver ailleurs, est solidaire de son cerveau dans le sens où un couteau pointu est solidaire de sa pointe. [...] Ainsi, de ce que deux cerveaux, comme celui du singe et celui de l’homme, se ressemblent beaucoup, on ne peut pas conclure que les consciences correspondantes soient comparables ou commensurables entre elles (263).

From that description of the brain Bergson draws ethical-political implications concerning the vision of social world and history:

Le cerveau humain est fait, comme tout cerveau, pour monter des mécanismes moteurs et pour nous laisser choisir parmi eux, à un instant quelconque, celui que nous mettrons en mouvement par un jeu de déclic. Mais il diffère des autres cerveaux en ce que le nombre des mécanismes qu’il peut monter, et par conséquent le nombre des déclics entre lesquels il donne le choix, est indéfini. Or, du limité à l’illimité il y a toute la distance du fermé à l’ouvert. Ce n’est pas une différence de degré, mais de nature (263-264).

Consciousness is synonymous with invention and freedom. Compared to what happens in animals, in humans consciousness ‘breaks the chain’ and is free, thus subtracting humans from automation.

In this frame, our brain allows us to build an unlimited number of motor mechanisms and to contrast new habits with the old ones, our language stores the thought, allowing consciousness to ‘incarnate’ itself in an ‘immaterial body’.

Nonetheless, social life stores and conserves efforts such as language and thought. Bergson argues:

Mais notre cerveau, notre société et notre langage ne sont que les signes extérieurs et divers d'une seule et même supériorité interne. Ils disent, chacun à sa manière, le succès unique, exceptionnel, que la vie a remporté à un moment donné de son évolution. Ils traduisent la différence de nature, et non pas seulement de degré, qui sépare l'homme du reste de l'animalité. Ils nous laissent deviner que si, au bout du large tremplin sur lequel la vie avait pris son élan, tous les autres sont descendus, trouvant la corde tendue trop haute, l'homme seul a sauté l'obstacle (265).

Let us see how one of the problems raised in the *Évolution créatrice* consists in the fact that intuition is completely sacrificed to intelligence, or to matter. Intuition is instead like a weak lamp projecting its light on our personality, on our freedom, on the place we occupy in nature as a whole, on our origin and even on our destiny. Consciousness cannot share the same fate as brain matter because, according to Bergson, consciousness is synonymous with freedom, it is freedom itself. It will always discover freedom below necessity.

In the conference *La conscience et la vie*, of 29 May 1911, held at the University of Birmingham, Bergson explains that consciousness means first of all memory, conservation and accumulation of the past in the present, that every consciousness is anticipation of the future, or, with his metaphor, a 'bridge' thrown between the past and future, and that life strives from the outset to preserve the past and to anticipate the future in a time in which past, present and future encroach on each other and form an 'undivided continuity' (Bergson 2009: 13). This memory and anticipation are consciousness itself and are 'coextensive with life'. In this way, a

large 'stream of consciousness' crosses matter to bring it to organicity and to make it, although it is the same necessity, an 'instrument of freedom':

Si, en effet, conscience signifie choix, et si le rôle de la conscience est de se décider, il est douteux qu'on rencontre la conscience dans des organismes qui ne se meuvent pas spontanément et qui n'ont pas de décision à prendre (10).

On these bases, 'personality' becomes the creation of oneself by oneself:

À quel signe reconnaissons-nous d'ordinaire l'homme d'action, celui qui laisse sa marque sur les événements auxquels la fortune le mêle ? N'est-ce pas à ce qu'il embrasse une succession plus ou moins longue dans une vision instantanée ? Plus grande est la portion du passé qui tient dans son présent, plus lourde est la masse qu'il pousse dans l'avenir pour presser contre les éventualités qui se préparent : son action, semblable à une flèche, se décoche avec d'autant plus de force en avant que sa représentation était plus tendue vers l'arrière (15).

This passage describes the infinitely creative current of moral life that passes through the lives of bodies in action. By developing these decisive themes, Bergson comes to the conclusion that 'supérieur est le point de vue du moraliste', because 'chez l'homme seulement, chez les meilleurs d'entre nous surtout, le mouvement vital se poursuit sans obstacle, lançant à travers cette œuvre d'art qu'est le corps humain, et qu'il a créée au passage, le courant indéfiniment créateur de la vie morale' (25).

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