"In this highly original study Messay Kebede shows himself to be an incisive and instructive reader of Bergson. He ably shows the enduring philosophical value of Bergson’s philosophy and its pertinence to core philosophical problems. Especially impressive is the way he brings Bergson into rapport with thinkers and practices of philosophy from Nietzsche to phenomenology. The book is a most welcome contribution to the ongoing renaissance of interest in Bergson.”

— Keith Ansell-Pearson, University of Warwick, UK

"With a new wave of Bergson scholarship emerging, Kebede’s timely book will be both welcomed by and challenging to Bergson scholars. Rigorously navigating Bergson’s major concepts, Kebede uses the notion of self-overcoming to open up new ways of understanding Bergson and resolving many of the tensions within the receptions of Bergson’s philosophy. This is necessary reading for Bergson scholars."

— Mark William Westmoreland, Villanova University, USA

This book proposes a new reading of Bergsonism based on the admission that time, conceived as duration, stretches instead of passes. This swelling time is full and so excludes the negative. Yet, swelling requires some resistance, but such that it is more of a stimulant than a contrariness. The notion of élan vital fulfills this requirement; it states the immanence of life to matter, thereby deriving the swelling from an internal effort and allowing its conceptualization as self-overcoming. With self-overcoming as the inner dynamics of reactivity, Bergson dismisses all forms of dualism and reductionist monism because both the absence of negativity and the swelling nature of time posit a creative process yielding a qualitatively diverse world. This graded oneness is how the lower level activates intensification by turning into limitation, making possible higher levels of achievement, in particular through the union of mind and body and the integration of openness and closed sociability.

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Abstracts of Chapters

1. Introduction

The introductory chapter takes note of the recent revival of Bergson’s philosophy after a period of relative decline as a result of criticisms, often unfair, coming from influential philosophical schools of the last century. It gives the intention of the book, which is to contribute to Bergson’s revival by providing a perspective that gives an insight into the originality and strength of his work. This perspective rests on the central idea that an interpretation that is both renovating and able to counter the criticisms is reached if we grasp duration as the key to an understanding of being as self-overcoming. The provided perspective does not adhere to the order of invention by following the sequence of publication of Bergson’s books. Rather, it demonstrates the centrality of the notion of self-overcoming by using the method of logical derivation. It thus shows that all Bergson’s basic concepts, such as intuitive knowledge, creation, the virtual and the actual, the vital élan, the closed and the open society, are all instances of self-overcoming, and that the famous Bergsonian oppositions (quantity/quality, space/time, matter/memory, freedom/determinism, etc.) are not contradictory because they are analytic, objectified views on the indivisible dynamics governing the overstepping of limitations. The proposed new reading gives an idea of its prospects by providing a detailed summary of the contents of each chapter.

Chapter 2: Intuitive Knowledge via the Inversion of Intelligence

Action and Intuition
Bergsonism and Theories of Knowledge
Epistemological Divergence
Intuitive Knowledge as Ideal Genesis
Inversion and False Problems
Crossing Limitations

Chapter 2 elucidates Bergson’s notion of intuitive knowledge, the reason for dealing with this issue first being that none of the Bergsonian concepts achieves clarity unless one keeps in mind the existence of two modes of knowledge. Notably, the Kantian idea of putting time and space at the same level as forms of representation requires, when it is correctly understood, the distinction between spatialized, representational time and generative or creative time. While representation and intelligence juxtapose things in space and moments in spatialized time for the good of practical and social life, in gathering the spatially distinct moments and things, intuitive knowledge thinks in duration and, in so doing, grasps them from inside. In other words, it enacts or performs instead of taking external views on things. The relationship between intelligence and intuition is thus not one of opposition but of complementarity, since the role of intuition is to reintegrate what the analytic ability of intelligence separates and externally connects. Clearly, this effort of reintegration of what is dissociated is how intuition incorporates and overcomes the work of intelligence.

Chapter 3: Duration and Self-Striving

In Search of True Time
Towards a Dynamic Conception of Time
Continuity versus Discontinuity
Duration and Consciousness
Duration as the Stuff of Reality
Duration as Effort
Beyond Free Will and Determinism

**Chapter 3** undertakes a thorough study of duration by contrasting the notion with representative conceptions of time. It shows that when philosophers admit the reality of time, they either reduce becoming to an appearance or to an unfolding of what is already given, as in the case of dialectics. Since time, so conceived, does or produces nothing, the need to provide a specific function favored the subjectification of time. While the reduction of time to representation conveniently agrees with the needs of practical life, it posits duration as what time must be to be real and hence productive. Time becomes generative if its moments, instead of dissociating and displaying, fuses into an indistinct and heterogeneous unity. For a unity to be both indistinct and multiple, it must be actualized as consciousness, that is, as a content existing in the mode of self-consciousness. In this way, going beyond phenomenology, Bergson accounts for both the intentionality of consciousness and its ontological dimension. In its practical function, consciousness is intentionality; as duration, it is being made. With this result, the chapter moves toward the idea of duration as substance: the prolongation of attributes and states into one another excludes the recourse to a fixed support, just as it overcomes dualism, since the distinction between consciousness and matter moves from being substantial to a difference in intensity. Differentiations based on consideration of tension and relaxation associate the intensification of duration with the gestation of effort. With effort, we have what is needed to overcome the debate between the defenders of free will and determinists. Both positions are just different retrospective reconstructions based on the belief that the action in question is already given. For the proponents of free will, freedom is about choosing between given alternative courses; for determinists, the choice is illusory because the die is already cast. In thus refusing to pay attention to the fact that decision takes time, both theories decline the path leading to a solution, namely, the effort of concentration yielding a creative outcome, as opposed to choosing between preexisting courses of action or unfolding a predetermined course.

**Chapter 4: Life as the Inversion of Materiality**

Being and Nothingness
The Negativity of Action
Controversy over Negativity
Negation without Nothingness
The Striving of Self-Limitation
Unity versus Analysis
Transcending Finalism and Mechanism
The Oneness of Life
Enduring Striving in lieu of the Eternal

**Chapter 4** deepens the durational unity and distinction between consciousness and materiality, as encapsulated in the concept of “vital élan.” Since Bergson’s attempt is to go beyond dualism by conceiving consciousness, life, and materiality as different levels of durational tension, the prime condition for this stratifying approach is to provide an ontology that is free of negativity. In particular, the dualistic
opposition between matter and consciousness must be set aside and replaced by a conception allowing the transition from the one to the other. The removal of opposition invalidates the reductionism on which monistic schools of idealism and materialism are based. To this effect, the chapter reviews Bergson’s arguments against nothingness and his restriction of negative concepts to practical significance, thereby laying the ground for an integrative ontology. This is where the question of Bergson’s consistency is raised. As many critics noted, his understanding of matter as a movement inverse of life introduces negativity into the center of his ontology. While admitting that Bergson describes the connection between matter and life in terms of opposition, I argue that one must differentiate the level of analysis from the intuitive grasp whose defined feature is precisely the overcoming of oppositions. In fusing life and matter, intuition obtains the vision of an élan, of an inversion recuperating as a striving to surpass itself, to obtain more from itself than its original endowment. Living beings are various outcomes of this striving, otherwise called evolution, which then is essentially creative because the necessity of materiality can be circumvented only through invention. In addition to dismissing both finalism and mechanism, the creative conception of evolution clearly demarcates Bergsonism from dialectical thinking. On the one hand, the striving nature of life means that the élan is finite, trapped as it is in its own inversion as necessity, on the other hand, as a self-overcoming phenomenon, it has no terminus.

Chapter 5: Perception and the Genesis of the Subject

The Contradictions of Representational Theories of Perception
From the Material to the Psychic
Perception: Pure and Concrete
Materiality and the Notion of Image
Bergson and Phenomenology: The Issue of the Subject
The Mechanism of Perception
Limitation and Perception

Chapter 5 addresses the question of perception with the view of understanding the genesis of the subject through the display of a world reflecting its possible actions. It begins by exposing the source of the contradictions of classical theories, namely, the conception of perception as a projection of the mental duplicates formed from the reactions of the brain to the influences of external objects. To this assumption shared by realists and materialists, idealism responds that the reference to an externally existing world has no foundation given that the perceiver has access only to what is in the mind. The only way to break the deadlock is to advance the bold thesis that things are perceived neither in the brain nor in the mind; instead, they are perceived where they are because they are made perceivable. Since the necessity of matter is the reason for the non-perceivability of things, a mechanism able to select what is of interest to the living body while also retarding the actions and reactions connecting the perceiver with the selected portion would made them perceivable. In other words, the brain is not an organ of representation, but a delaying and selecting mechanism that inserts indetermination into the material environment and, in so doing, converts necessity into possible actions. To say that things are perceived where they are is to imply that they are perceived as they are. However, we do not perceive them as they are, that is, as fleeting and numberless vibrations, as science describes them. Hence Bergson’s distinction between pure perception and concrete perception: through the condensing act of memory, the fleeting vision of pure perception is changed into the concrete perception of stable and colorful objects. The affirmation that things are perceived where they are seems to suggest a convergence between phenomenology and Bergsonism. In assessing the convergence, the chapter highlights their crucial difference. Though both reject the theory
of perception as a projection of mental states, with phenomenology, consciousness reveals things thanks to its intentionality, while to Bergson, things themselves are revealed to the subject, precisely by appearing as images. Pure perception is the lowest or impersonal level of consciousness; concrete perception is the level of the subject born out of the durational continuity of memory. In this way, the fleeting present of the living body is overcome by the being-made or the self.

Chapter 6: Memory and the Being of the Subject

Memory and Action
On the Conservation and Nature of Memory
Deleuze and Bergson
Intentionality and the Continuity of Consciousness
The Actualization of Memory
On the Unity of Mind and Body

Chapter 6 first develops memory’s role in practical life and then tackles the issue of the union of mind and body. Unlike the appearing and disappearing present of materiality, the present of consciousness has some thickness because memory prolongs the past into the present. This integration of moments generates a perpetual tension actualizing consciousness, as opposed to the nonconsciousness of materiality caused by its evanescent present. The prolongation is also how action benefits from past experience instead of being an automatic response to external influences. Experience becomes useful if the relevant information is selected from the past: hence the positive role of forgetting. The latter operates like a blockage keeping unconscious the irrelevant part, thereby focusing consciousness on practical life. To speak of what is no more in terms of non-consciousness is to reject the theory of memory as a weak perception in favor of theory advocating the active creation of memory-images. The rejection entails the distinction between pure memory and memory-images, with the consequence that pure memory is not a storage, but an indivisible and indistinct continuity, in short, the thinking and concrete self. To develop this point further, the chapter confronts Deleuze’s interpretation of Bergson’s view in the direction of “world-memory” and shows that confining consciousness to the psychological level, in distinction to the ontological status of memory, does not agree with the Bergsonian identification of consciousness with memory. This identification is also used to contest interpretations proposing a rapprochement between Bergson and phenomenology. Though some similarities are undeniable, the huge difference is that the Bergsonian retention is just not intentionality in that it is also an ontological act, the continuity of the being-made. Given that memory is an imageless continuity, the question of its actualization as memory-images ushers in the study of the sensori-motor function of the living body. Memory uses the sensations associated with the nascent actions of motor memory to assume the appearance of images and inserts into the present of the living body. This image appearance effects the union of mind and body, which is, therefore, nothing more than synchronization. In proposing an alternative to parallelism as well as to the assumption of a causal relation, as envisaged by dualism or materialism, Bergsonism reduces the issue of mind-body relation to the process by which the mind limits itself so as to be attentive to the life of the body. Nothing could illustrate better the concept of self-overcoming than the mind overflowing the body and limiting itself to upgrade practical life.

Chapter 7: Mysticism or the Overstepping of Nature

Halt versus Stage
Chapter 7 extends the concept of self-overcoming to moral and social issues and to the question of social progress, as examined in The Two Sources of Morality and Religion. The book places the theme of self-overcoming at the center of moral and social issues by conceiving social life as a stoppage carrying the injunction to overcome it so as to continue the unfinished creative work of life. In this case, overcoming means the effort to unbind the restrictions and the hierarchical organization that form the basis of the closed society. As a continuation of the biological work, the closed society is natural to human beings and is the source of obligations in a setting structured around the distinction between command and obedience. In addition, the sense of belonging is strengthened by a natural hostility to other groups and the fear of supernatural powers protective of the social order. This conception of social order as a stoppage posits another source of morality and religion calling for the continuation of the movement in the direction of human fraternity and spearheaded by the mystic love of humanity. Because the one source wants to open what the other source has closed, the temptation is great for a dialectical reading of this duality of source. However, a crucial factor is missing owing to Bergson’s rejection of a goal-driven historical process: unlike the notion of stage, stoppage requires a creative deviation, not a linear process. Consequently, the relationship between the two sources does not translate into the closed progressively realizing the ideal or mixing with it. Rather, the mystical, while remaining distinct, inspires the creative effort to translate love, which by nature is limitless and hence beyond legality and obligation, in terms of rights and duties. The inspirational relation between the ideal and the real, as opposed to the real progressively realizing the ideal, is due to the fact that the closed society is a natural structure that cannot be removed. This fact advises a cautious usage of the term “progress.” Not only do the realized advancements remain fragile, but also disharmony conditions progress because the tendencies of social life cannot develop at the same time. The need for a successive development of the tendencies explains social conflicts and imbalances, in particular those affecting modernity. Without rejecting the effort to correct the problems by reforms, Bergson argues that the reliable solution to counter the excesses of modern life, notably the frenzied pursuit of material wealth, comfort, and pleasure, is the commitment to simple life subsequent to a spiritual renovation inspired by the mystic love of God and humanity. This radical solution is none other than a call for the overcoming of the human, a call that is all the more pressing as our natural characteristics are ill-equipped to handle the destructive powers that science and technology have put at our disposal.

8. Conclusion

The concluding chapter gives a succinct view of the results obtained by the proposed interpretation. It concludes by showing that Bergson’s refusal to endow negative concepts with ontological meanings inaugurates a joyful vison celebrating the triumphant march of life’s victory over itself, whose end-goal is none other than the attainment of worthiness to God’s love.