

## Reviving 'Natural Religion': Nietzsche and Bergson on Religious Life

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The claims advanced in the following discussion both presuppose and elaborate upon the view that the trajectory of the 'critique of metaphysics' inaugurated by Kant is only to be regarded as complete in the attempt to articulate a 'religion of the real'. Critique, conceived as the project of the de-anthropomorphisation of thought and feeling, increasingly exposes the human organism to the latent intrinsic divinity of the real and thereby provides an opportunity, personal capacities permitting, to participate in reality's auto-apotheosis. This requires, I suggest, a rehabilitation and rethinking of (in terms unrecognisable to, for instance, Hume and Kant) 'natural religion'. In its post-critical guise 'natural religion' is no longer the attempt to construct an 'argument to design' but the endeavour to articulate, in non-theistic terms, the religious propensities of the real itself without transcendent reference. The conception of the task of philosophy from this perspective is that of placing thought and feeling at the service of intrinsically divine tendencies within and of the real itself and to thereby reintegrate and reorientate human intellectual and affective capacities to what might be termed (with apologies to Freud) the religious 'primary narcissism' of the real. It is an underlying claim of the following reflections on aspects of Nietzsche's and Bergson's thought that it is only through the pursuit of such a trajectory of critique and affirmation that philosophy can reconfirm and revivify its hard won independence from both theology and natural science respectively and thereby sustain and radicalise its most exacting historical task, namely, the attainment of genuinely 'disinterested' thought and a-subjective feeling, in short, metaphysics proper.

Although the focus of this piece are converging features of Nietzsche's and Bergson's thought respectively the wider project to which this discussion contributes – the articulation of a 'post-metaphysical' conception of 'natural religion' - draws upon many thinkers and perspectives. These include key figures in the 'phenomenology of religion', particularly Otto and Eliade alongside the pioneering work of James before them. Indeed, I consider the way forward in this respect to consist in something of an 'unholy alliance' of philosophical naturalism and phenomenology. However, whilst acknowledging the limited value of such generalisations, I have not found much of relevance to the project in question in the writings of those associated with the 'theological turn' within phenomenology. Too many, it seems to me, 'shadows of God' fall across the pages of many of those associated with the trend in question and too little by way genealogical acuity or awareness is evident in relation to the specific religious traditions that tend to be privileged in the texts in question.

A deeper worry arises in this respect concerning the very possibility of the emergence of a 'theological turn' in phenomenology. This is the suspicion that a lack of capacity and appetite for genealogical critique was the 'Achilles' heel' of phenomenology from the outset, a factor at the source of its constitutional anti-naturalism (or neo-idealism) that always precluded the possibility of a naturalistic ontology of phenomenality or manifestation (in contrast to a phenomenology conception of the natural order). Crudely put, reluctance is often detected within the phenomenological tradition to unequivocally affirm the impersonal nature of the process of presencing as such and to make it the focus of a reorientated reverence. Perhaps a symptom of this reluctance to deify phenomenality *per se* is the dominant pathos of mourning and privation that

marks so many writers in this vein as they reflect upon the 'absence of the gods' suggesting that some sense our age, compared to others, is not quite granted the 'full ticket' as regards the disclosure of the real. In contrast, the thinkers to whom I am attracted, including Nietzsche and Bergson, embrace unambiguously the historic opportunities afforded to thought and feeling by the 'death of God' and do not wish to linger at the wake any longer than propriety demands. They seek to explore and articulate, in a mood of barely concealed celebration, the now 'open sea' of full-blown religious atheism aware that, for those of a non-moral disposition, the real presences with equal disclosive force in all epochs.[i]

The reconceived 'natural religion' advocated in what follows is unequivocally impersonal and atheistic. It proposes that the human organism interpret the 'death of God' as the opportunity to explicitly orientate its worship to the now emergent essence of religion as manifest in the self-sufficient order of natural immanence in which the organism is immersed without remainder. The task of philosophy is to guide thought and feeling towards a participation in the primary process of creative becoming as and when this reasserts its ontological primordality. Hence, in contrast to the secular-transcendental riposte made by Janicaud to the currently rampant 'theological' appropriation of phenomenology, I propose that it be challenged from the trajectory of a naturalistic and atheistic 'religious' turn already to be found, I suggest, in the thought of Nietzsche and Bergson.[ii]

## I

Before discussing aspects of Nietzsche's and Bergson's thought respectively in relation to an attempt to articulate a notion of 'natural religion' in terms of immanence and without reference to design it is worth recalling and emphasising shared features of their respective philosophical problematics and their pertinence to the broader project sketched here.

Arguably Nietzsche and Bergson develop the two most significant philosophical biologies elaborated thus far and both, fairly uncontentiously I suggest, promote the claim that natural life is 'religious' in essence. Both thinkers persistently seek to affirm and prioritise the religious essence of natural life within their respective philosophical naturalisms. They also share a 'monistic' (albeit non-reductive and pluralistic in expression) conception of life, Nietzsche in terms of 'will to power', Bergson the 'vital impetus' (*élan vital*). On the basis of these primary philosophico-biological principles, both Nietzsche and Bergson reject the presumed primacy of a functional-utilitarian (i.e. adaptative, passive-reactive) conception of life's inherent tendencies. They challenge the presumed primacy of 'self-preservation' and endeavour to conceive life as, first and foremost, an active-creative process irreducible to the anthropomorphic categories of either causal determinism or teleology. It is noteworthy that both Nietzsche and Bergson are pioneers in explicitly taking issue with, from a naturalistic perspective, the philosophical and normative presuppositions they identify in Darwin (and historically related figures such as Spencer). Both are keenly aware that, if the underpinnings of Darwin's thought are illegitimately given primary ontological status, then access to the religious tendency of natural life would be debarred. Among the shared critical concerns in this respect are an insistence on life as an active 'form-creating' force; the estimation of adaptation as a secondary process; the requirement to undertake a critique of empirical knowledge, including biology, that seeks to reintegrate it within a wider 'theory of life'; an instrumentalist conception of the nature and role of empirical science, etc. Furthermore, both Nietzsche and Bergson emphasise the ontological primacy of time and both the 'will to power' and the 'vital impulse' implicitly affirm the eternity of becoming. Here we refer, without

claiming an equivalence, to the notions of 'eternal recurrence' (Nietzsche) and 'duration' (Bergson) respectively.

More contentiously, I take both Nietzsche and Bergson to be 'non-cognitivists'. That is to say, both thinkers assert the ontological primacy of affectivity thereby viewing life as first and foremost 'felt' and 'lived' before it is conceived and thought. From such a philosophical perspective cognitive content is always derivative of extra-cognitive sources such that it is taken to be philosophically naïve to remain on the level of content and signification. Indeed, from such a philosophical viewpoint it is the ineliminably motivated and 'interested' character of the cognitive-perceptual functions of the human organism, nowhere more operative and determining than in its scientific endeavour, which represents the main challenge to critical philosophy in its pursuit of a genuinely 'disinterested' thinking. For both Nietzsche and Bergson (although admittedly more obviously so in the former) this 'non-cognitivism' entails that the critical evaluation of a body of thought hastens to move beyond the assessment of the truth and consistency of its propositional content and presumed commitments on the order of reference to expose and interrogate the affective economy that constitutes it. Content (i.e. metaphysical structures, categories and propositional claims) is regarded as a symptom of affective essence which requires a psycho-physiological diagnosis rather than a rational-logical refutation.

Indeed, Nietzsche in effect signals an ultimate non-attachment to any specific content or categorical schema insofar as no such adherence necessarily guarantees what he takes to be the ultimate critical issue, namely, the quality of will underlying it.[iii] If the decisive arguments in the *Genealogy* concerning the distinctions to be made between origin and purpose, process and meaning are recalled[iv] it is clear that, for Nietzsche, no conceptual content comes with an in-built affective correlate (or *vice versa*) but remains, as with all phenomena, subject to the on-going struggle of appropriating forces. Hence no conceptual-cognitive content is excused in relation to Nietzsche's most fundamental critical-evaluative question: "is it hunger or superabundance that has become creative here?"[v]

Hence, both Nietzsche and Bergson conceive their respective philosophical-biological principles in affective terms. That is to say that both conceive life as first and foremost as a qualitative process, an auto-affectivity of and within heterogeneous time without reference to quantification or objectification. Of necessity, due to the exigencies of practical and social existence, life has to be rendered capable of measurement but the magnitudes by which this exigency is achieved tell us, Nietzsche and Bergson insist, nothing of its temporal-affective nature.

For the philosophy of religion such 'non-cognitivism' has fundamental consequences not the least of which is an emphasis (appreciated, admittedly, by many phenomenological approaches in this area as well) on the primacy of 'religious experience' and its underlying libidinal-affective determinants. For both Nietzsche and Bergson the 'deification of existence'[vi] - life's own religious affirmation - is exclusively disclosed in and through the passions.[vii] Indeed, it is to be identified *in toto* with such influxes of a-subjective affect. For both thinkers this auto-transfiguration of nature occurs as joy in an unqualified affirmation of all aspects of the real without remainder. It also forms the naturalistic basis of Nietzsche's and Bergson's critical-evaluative approach to specific organised religions, an assessment which focuses not on coherence and validity but on the quality of the sensibility expressed therein. In this regard we can think of Nietzsche's distinction between 'healthy' and 'sick' forms of religious sensibility and Bergson's contrast between 'static' and 'dynamic' religion.

Taken together the broad affinities found between these two pre-eminent philosophical biologies form the basis of a suspicion shared by both Nietzsche and Bergson in relation to both anti-natural religions and (less generally recognised) anti-religious naturalisms. Both thinkers reject the predominant modern 'functionalist', socio-anthropological interpretation of religion and its implicit assumption that religion that claim no constitutive ontological status, that it is not part of the fabric of natural life itself; in short, that ultimately there is no 'reality of the sacred'. From such a reductionist perspective, insofar as natural life is credited with any indigenous semiotic capacities at all, it is uncritically assumed that these could not take a religious form the latter being exclusively a 'projection' of an entirely anthropological origin.[viii] The only contestable issue from such a viewpoint concerns the value of religion, whether it is an expression of human frailty that ought to be eradicated or, alternatively, the source of a positive framework of purpose and meaning.[ix] In contrast to the, admittedly often strong, riposte made by many phenomenologically orientated thinkers to this secular-naturalist, reductionist consensus, Nietzsche and Bergson propound an alternative critique of it from the perspective of a non-reductive naturalism. I shall now turn to each of these thinkers respectively to explicate further these general claims.

## II

I shall not rehearse here arguments I have made elsewhere by way of a contribution to the now quite widespread view that, despite superficial appearances to the contrary, Nietzsche is to be conceived as first and foremost a 'religious thinker'.[x] Instead I shall address an initial, seemingly difficult *impasse* that strikes many readers of Nietzsche including those who are otherwise sympathetic to the interpretative perspective sketched here. Taking *The Gay Science* as a prime example, the stumbling block in question concerns the often baffling conjunction within Nietzsche's text of, on the one hand, a supremely joyous affirmative religious celebration of life and, on the other hand, an uncompromising demand, unsurpassed in its radicality, that the project of 'de-deification' be pursued to a hitherto unimagined extent (i.e., extended to the constitutive normativities of metaphysics, modern science and the values of secular humanism'). It is a requirement of the interpretative stance promoted here that it demonstrate that far from any ultimate incompatibility arising between these two aspects of Nietzsche's text, they mutually support and entail each other and thereby exclude and undermine the credibility of alternative, ostensibly non-religious, responses to the 'death of God' (in particular, humanism and scientific atheism).

In simple terms it is clear that, for Nietzsche, the realisation of critique involved in the project of 'de-deification' is an essential pre-requisite to the 'deification of existence'. The former liquidates the transcendent God and its 'shadows' (which include any exaggeration of the ontological status of natural science) which are dissolved to allow the auto-deification of the real to display itself. Indeed the two processes, 'de-deification' and the 'religious affirmation of life' and the transition between them, are implicit in the first formulation of these themes in *The Gay Science*,

When will all these shadows of God no longer darken us? When will we have completely deified [*entgöttlicht*] nature? When may we begin to *naturalize* humanity with a pure, newly discovered, newly redeemed nature [*erlösten Natur*]? [xi]

Of course, Nietzsche assists our navigation of this move from 'de-deification' to the 'deification of existence' in his delimitation of the ontological reach of science [xii] sharing, with Bergson, an instrumentalist conception of it. More significantly however, is Nietzsche's clear rejection and

critique of scientific atheism. Nietzsche seeks to wrest atheism away from science and reclaim it for religion which must also, of course, thereby undergo a process of 'de-deification'. Both *The Gay Science* and *Genealogy* seek to establish the genealogical intimacy between Christianity and modern science, the shared constitutive values behind their mutually self-sustaining 'opposition', their shared commitment to the 'will to truth'. [xiii] This kinship precludes, for Nietzsche the claim of science to offer the historically demanded alternative to the 'ascetic ideal'. This critique of the scientific form of atheism is clear in the following famous formulation,

...it is still a *metaphysical faith* upon which our faith in science rests – that even we knowers of today, we godless anti-metaphysicians, still take *our* fire, too, from the flame lit by the thousand-year old faith, the Christian faith... [xiv]

In a similar vein Nietzsche inveighs against 'pale atheists' [xv] criticising the self-delusion of their claim to have attained 'free spirit' status and exposing their genealogical solidarity with their theistic 'opponents' in relation to shared fundamental values (i.e., the 'ascetic ideal' in its essence as the 'unconditional will to truth'). Indeed, building towards his most audacious claim that modern science is essentially the auto-destructive consummation of Christianity, Nietzsche offers the following critique of atheism's mistaken self-image,

Everywhere...that the spirit is...at work today...it now does so without ideals entirely - the popular expression for this abstinence is "atheism" – *except for its will to truth*. This will...this *remnant* of an ideal is...not so much its remnant as its *core*. Unconditional honest atheism...is...*not* in opposition to that ideal...it is the awe-inspiring *catastrophe* of a two-thousand-year discipline in truth, which in the end forbids itself the *lie involved in belief in God*. [xvi]

In short, for Nietzsche, scientific atheism is to be understood as a form of hyper-Christian moralism, "Christian morality itself...translated and sublimated into the scientific conscience, into intellectual cleanliness at any price". [xvii] Taken together, the passages cited support the claim that Nietzsche pursues the task of 'de-deification' in order to affirm the religious essence of the real. For Nietzsche, scientific atheism pursues, in contrast, a superficial and incomplete form of de-deification as it is the covert 'outwork' of Christianity, the last desperate expression of a profoundly anthropomorphic religion in its struggle against the indigenous divinity of the real. Scientific atheism is, for Nietzsche, the latest manifestation and contemporary acceptable face of the evaluative-affective appropriating force that, in defence of its anti-religious commitment to the 'ascetic ideal' as the 'will to truth', abandons the Church. Such a conception of the trajectory of Nietzsche's critical-affirmative project allows us to hear the genuinely religious fervour behind what can sometimes appear to be rather superficial rhetorical ploys in his struggle with Christianity. An example of this can be identified in Nietzsche's (admittedly somewhat desperate!) yearning for the "*redeeming* human of the great love and contempt" who will, "bring home the *redemption* of this reality (*die Erlösung dieser Wirklichkeit*): its redemption from the curse that the previous ideal placed upon it". [xviii]

A further significant feature of Nietzsche's thought is important to the basic task of locating and excavating the religious core of his critical endeavour. This is Nietzsche's distinctive and persistent rejection of the value of 'universalism', his questioning of its purported desirability and role as a socio-political and cultural 'regulative ideal'. [xix] For Nietzsche 'universalism' harmfully suppresses the reality of radically incommensurable 'types of will', which he articulates

in terms of the distinction between 'nobility' and 'slavery', underpinned by a conception of the contrast between 'health' and 'sickness' in turn conceived as the capacity for an 'affirmation' rather than a 'denial' of life. Nietzsche's cultural-politics, at its most plausibly modest, simply makes a plea for some cultural 'breathing-space' for the well-constituted given the suffocating hegemony of moral or 'herd' values.

This aspect of Nietzsche's thought is important here on two counts. Firstly, it confirms the possibility of demarcating 'healthy' and 'sick' forms of religious sensibility rather than identifying religion *per se* as a morbid phenomenon. Secondly and to reiterate the ontological primacy Nietzsche's accords to affectivity, the distinctions in question remind us that Nietzsche orientates all evaluation of religion away from an assessment of its categorical content as concerns its rationality towards the clarification the affective-libidinal sensibility that lies at its origin and essence and its assessment in terms of the criteria of his philosophical biology. In effect, this concerns the sketching of different affective-libidinal phenomenologies of religious life reflecting contrasting 'types of will'. In this vein we find the extraordinary accounts given in the *Genealogy* of 'sick' religiosity, the description of the libidinal economy of the 'feeling of guilt' and account of its origin and historical development, the nature of the 'ascetic priest' as the virtuosic, self-interested 'physician' to the 'sick' and, ultimately, the reflections on the source of the attractiveness to the human will of the 'ascetic ideal'. [xx]

For Nietzsche, the ontological basis of the difference in libidinal-affective types under consideration here lies in the extent to which one's sensibility is claimed either by the interests of the individuated ego or by the transpersonal flow of non-individuated yet self-differential natural life within which the human organism is immersed without remainder. Nietzsche's 'Dionysianism' simply records that his libidinal-affective economy predominantly belonged to trans-individual, rather than individuated, life and that, ultimately, he was, as determined by such a physiological tendency (within the politics of 'his' organism) more invested in the infinite (self-differential life) rather than the finite (individuated life). [xxi] Both Nietzsche's and Bergson's thought contain and presuppose the recognition of such a difference between, on the one hand, a trans-individual order of self-difference and relation and, on the other hand, an individuated domain of individuation founded upon negation. [xxii] Only individuated life undergoes 'death' as the trans-individual register is characterised by an 'eternity' of impersonal self-difference. Both Nietzsche's and Bergson's atheistic religiosity moves within this difference and the experience of it.

A significant, albeit minority, seam of Nietzsche interpretation has always insisted on the importance, when reading Nietzsche, of being attuned to an all-pervasive current within his texts of very specific 'religious feeling' in response to life. [xxiii] An affective register of joy, gratitude and affirmation that celebrates embodied life without transcendent appeal despite, indeed *on the basis of* its indifference to the fate of the individual and refusal to reduce itself to the categories and principles of the human intellect. Nietzsche's text have as their tonal-affective centre the expression of a joyously affirmative response to precisely those aspects of existence which, evaluated negatively by those lacking the capacity for their affirmation, lead to that rejection of real Nietzsche exposes and interrogates relentlessly. This, fundamentally irreligious denial of the real occurs, for Nietzsche, firstly, in the form of 'Platonic-Christian' metaphysics and religion and, subsequently, in the form of modern science. It is the very conceivability of an alternative affective-libidinal religious response to the 'negativity' of the real than that which generated the 'Platonic-Christian' tradition which renders redundant the overwhelmingly predominant assumptions concerning the origins of religion as these are found in the dominant secular-

naturalistic theories of religion – or at least punctures their claim to universality. Nietzsche's religious affirmation of the a-morality and irreducibility of life to cognition, his celebration of its primary non-egoic violence and desire to unite with it, requiring as it does, the disconnection with self-preservation and utility[xxiv] are all characteristics of a religious attitude entirely missed by most modern theorists of the sources of religion.[xxv]

Indisputably Nietzsche's elaboration of a 'healthy' religious sensibility is far less developed than his exhaustive exposition and critique of its alternative. Perhaps of necessity Nietzsche's texts are often frustratingly enigmatic and merely suggestive in this respect.[xxvi] An example is Nietzsche's account of the 'elevated mood' of the 'healthy' type as, "a perpetual movement between high and low and the feeling of high and low; a continual sense of ascending stairs and at the same time of resting on clouds." [xxvii] The general emotional tone is that of an out-pouring of joy in relation to life's inherent dysteleology, jubilation at its irresolvable a-symmetry with human cognitive capacities and psycho-physiological needs and weaknesses. A feeling of profound gratitude in response to the immanent sublimity of life itself [xxviii] and an affirmative response to the ultimate ethical challenge confronting the human will, namely, 'eternal recurrence' and the overcoming it demands of the will's endemic 'revenge against time'. These seem to be, for Nietzsche, the hallmarks of a 'healthy' religious sensibility. Often Nietzsche evokes and develops a novel conception of 'happiness' far removed from that presupposed in 'virtue ethics' and utilitarianism (although significantly closer to the former!) respectively and closely related to a feeling of superabundance. This is induced through a becoming one with a primary expenditure Nietzsche identifies within life as 'will to power' itself, conceived as a movement of 'self-overcoming'. He writes in this respect of a, "divine happiness full of power and love...a happiness which, like the sun in the evening, continually draws on its inexhaustible riches, giving them away and pouring them into the sea..."[xxix]

### III

Bergson, arguably, pursues a 'de-deification of nature' to the degree demanded by Nietzsche. Furthermore, many of Bergson's texts are pervaded by a 'religious' atmosphere, an aspect which becomes thematically explicit in his last major work, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*. [xxx] Taken together these two key aspects of Bergson's thought indicate that, like Nietzsche's, it moves in the direction of a radically reconfigured conception of 'natural religion'. [xxxi] An indication of the shared critical-affirmative trajectory of Nietzsche's and Bergson's thought is evident in the latter's landmark article, "An Introduction to Metaphysics"[xxxii] in which the task of philosophy is identified with the pursuit of the transcendence of the 'human' through an affirmative re-engagement with immanent nature towards the attainment of a more originary, non-transcendent, form of transcendence characteristic of natural immanence, a trajectory which is, it is claimed here, inherently 'religious'. Thus Bergson famously declares that, "philosophy can only be an effort to transcend the human condition"[xxxiii] which is aligned with the attainment of a "true empiricism"[xxxiv] which in turn, it is suggested, is to be recognised as the "true metaphysics".[xxxv]

In his first major work, *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*[xxxvi] Bergson introduces central themes of his thought which, whilst admittedly still confined to something like a transcendental phenomenology of consciousness, already bespeak an immanent 'religious' orientation. Although it surpasses the remit and scope of this piece, it is claimed here that, at least considered retrospectively from the viewpoint of the subsequent development of Bergson's thought, that basic features of *Time and Free Will* can be

best interpreted as a preliminary attempt to complete both the 'de-deification of nature' (i.e., the identification and displacement of anthropomorphic categories and normativities) and articulate the 'deification of existence' (the affirmative recognition of nature's intrinsic self-transcendence) that it precipitates. The remarkable distinction Bergson articulates between 'two types of multiplicity'[xxxvii] through which a notion of difference prior to negation is recovered and the elaboration of the notion of 'duration' as constitutive of 'lived', irreducibly qualitative, inner consciousness can be fore-grounded in this respect.[xxxviii]

Although sufficient argument cannot be provided here, the suggestion being made is that Bergson's conception of the ontological primacy of qualitative time, of 'perpetual becoming', can be credibly identified with the 'deification of existence'. In this respect, the 'divine' simply is the ontologically constitutive process of 'succession without externality'[xxxix]. God simply is, from this perspective, an impersonal "confused multiplicity"[xl], an ontological permeation process.[xli] As an intrinsically 'lived' process this implicit conception of the 'divine' beyond 'onto-theology' is inherently elusive and irreducible to the instrumental concerns and orientation of the human intellect driven as it is by an "insatiable desire to separate"[xlii] that culminates in the entirely anthropomorphic notion of a transcendent God. Bergson's early work invites us to contrast the genuinely temporal God of 'confused multiplicity' with the more familiar (as anthropomorphic), ontologically derivative, spatio-geometric God of 'discrete multiplicity'.[xliii]

Indisputably the 'religious' Bergson posited here only begins to emerge, more or less explicitly, in his *magnum opus*, namely, *Creative Evolution*.[xliv] This text completes, in effect, the 'de-deification of nature' project through the articulation of a radical conception of time as ontological force within the context of a philosophical naturalism in which Bergson offers his conception of enduring life, "a philosophy which sees in duration the very stuff of reality...to show that *a self-sufficient reality is not necessarily a reality foreign to duration*".[xlv] Among the many themes in *Creative Evolution* of relevance to the claims of this piece the following can be highlighted. Firstly, Bergson repeatedly focuses on and endeavours to articulate, the inter-face between the movement of life itself and its utilitarian translation into 'human experience'.[xlvi] Bergson refers to this moment of transition and self-surpassing in which the human organism, uniquely it seems, gains access to nature of the real as the 'indistinct fringe' [*une frange indéçise*].[xlvii] In effect, this is a 'religious' theme which marks the advent of an awareness of the impersonal immensity of durational life within which the 'human' occurs and from which it isn't debarred access because, as a living organism itself, it is a part of the real.[xlviii] It is noteworthy that, in effect, Bergson here credits the human organism with a capacity for 'disinterested' thought and feeling.[xlix] Secondly, by way of a partial justification of the proposed 'religious' reading of Bergson suggested here, evidence will be offered of a 'poetic' dimension of *Creative Evolution* in which what Nietzsche refers to as the 'religious affirmation of life' wells-up in Bergson's text, culminating in one of the stranger definitions of 'God' in the literature! In contrast, the equivalent in *Creative Evolution* of Nietzsche's motif of the 'death of God' is, perhaps, Bergson's persistent attack on the credibility of the notion of a "superhuman intellect"[I] for whom "*all is given*" [li] such that time is, ultimately, ontologically inconsequential, merely an inconvenient mark of finitude. As if time did not contribute substantively to the being of living things and was not the source of the perpetual creation of new and unforeseeable forms, the font of novelty.

The notion of the 'indistinct fringe' marks the point at which Bergson seeks to return evolutionary



biology into its forgotten condition of possibility - the ontological order of durational life itself. This is the move from a thinking (evolutionary biology) derived from, and limited to, the utilitarian concerns of the human species to a disinterested mode of thought reconnected to the generative source of thinking itself. This is a 'religious' trajectory that seeks to reintegrate thought and feeling into creative life itself and allow itself to become a vessel of its more primordial processes. The necessarily half-hearted naturalism of evolutionary biology is surpassed by a more uncompromising affirmation of the natural order, in principle beyond the reach of science. Bergson's direction of travel in *Creative Evolution* here is always only immanent. With Nietzsche he shares the view that thought becomes more anthropomorphic the more transcendent are its aspirations and categories and more religious insofar as it radicalises its naturalism. The movement of critique within *Creative Evolution* can be conceived as the 'destruction' of two related reductionisms (empirical science and transcendent religion) and the emergence in their place of an anti-reductionist, religious naturalism. This movement seems to be indicated in the following passages,

We do not *think* real time. But we *live* it, because life transcends intellect. The feeling we have...of the evolution of all things in pure duration is there, forming around the intellectual concept...an indistinct fringe...mechanism and finalism agree in taking account only of the bright nucleus shining in the centre. They forget that this nucleus has been formed out of the rest by condensation and that the whole must be used...to grasp the inner movement of life...if the fringe exists...it should have more importance for philosophy than the bright nucleus it surrounds...what can this useless fringe be, if not that part of the evolving principle which has not shrunk to the peculiar form of our organization?..It is there, that we must look...to expand the intellectual form of our thought; from there shall we derive the impetus necessary to lift us above ourselves.[lii]

A 'disinterestedness' is evoked here which, unlike the transcendent orientation of its Kantian predecessor, is aligned with an ever-increasing immersion in immanent nature towards the "coincidence of human consciousness with the living principle whence it emanates".[liii]

I shall conclude this brief identification of relevant themes from *Creative Evolution* by citing some passages in which the renaturalisation of the human organism into the durational whole of life assumes a decidedly religious tone:

Like eddies of dust raised by the wind as it passes, the living turn upon themselves, borne up by the great blast of life. They...counterfeit immobility so well that we treat each of them as a *thing* rather than as a *progress*, forgetting that the very permanence of their form is only the outline of a movement. At times, however, in a fleeting vision, the invisible breath that bears them is materialized before our eyes...a glimpse of the fact that the living being is above all a thorough-fare, and that the essence of life is in the movement by which life is transmitted.[liv]

In a similar vein:

Yet a beneficent fluid bathes us, whence we draw the very force to labor and to live. From this ocean of life, in which we are immersed, we are continually drawing something, and we feel that our being, or at least the intellect that guides it, has been formed therein by a kind of local concentration. Philosophy can only be an effort to dissolve again into the Whole...by

expanding the humanity in us and making us even transcend it.[lv]

Here we see, I would suggest, the same movement of critical-affirmative thought as that undertaken by Nietzsche, an overcoming of the human conceived as the critique of the transcendent or 'moral' (i.e. unmasked as merely utilitarian) conception of transcendence in favour of its immanent form, a 'this worldly', naturalistic transcendence in which the nature intensifies rather than escapes itself. Nature, conceived as a creative evolution, is an incessant becoming or self-transcendence, "what is admirable *in itself*, what really deserves to provoke wonder, is the ever-renewed creation which reality, whole and undivided, accomplishes in advancing." [lvi] On this basis, Bergson offers the following conception of 'God',

I speak of a centre from which worlds shoot out like rockets in a fire-works display – provided however, that I do not present this centre as a *thing*, but as a continuity of shooting out. God thus defined, has nothing of the already made; He is unceasing life, action, freedom.[lvii]

God is here the term for an impersonal "power of creation." [lviii] Bergson does not, like many of those within the 'theological turn' school of phenomenology, offer the resources of a radical temporal ontology of natural life to theology in order to enable it to develop a more sophisticated conception of a transcendent personal deity but instead proposes that we reorientate our devotional feelings towards the deification of duration itself, the creative passage of impersonal time.

#### IV

Bergson's *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* contains many themes relevant to the concerns of this discussion. The non-reductive character of Bergson's discussion of morality and religion in his final major work follows from the fact that represents an extension to the moral, religious and socio-political domains of the naturalistic ontology of *Creative Evolution*. Bergson introduces contrasts between 'open' and 'closed' forms of morality and 'static' and 'dynamic' forms of religion with the first of each pair in each case referring to the biological formation and maintenance of stable societies, the latter with their growth and progress. These distinctions recall Nietzsche's contrast between "species-preserving and species-enhancing" [lix] values and forces, with the ontological primacy of the latter asserted.

Minimally, Nietzsche and Bergson share a conception of the biologically-grounded nature of religion in a primary sense. Neither thinker pursues (at least not in relation to 'healthy' or 'dynamic' religion respectively) a reductionist explanation of it in non-religious terms. Neither Nietzsche nor Bergson assume the primacy of a merely 'survivalist' or 'functionalist' tendency within nature and thus they reject the reductionist explanations of the origin and role of religion (*per se*) that often characterise accounts of it offered by evolutionary biologists. Rather, both thinkers seek to identify a becoming-religious of the real itself, a self-affirmation which takes place as a specific type of autonomous, ontological affectivity implanted in exceptional members of one of its creative experiments – the human organism.

This perspective presupposes the credibility of an order of emotion that has ontological status and is thus not a merely subjective feeling arising in response to, and therefore dependent and subsidiary to, an object. This possibility (doubtless initiated in its modern form in Kant's insistence on an order of transcendental affectivity) is implicit in Nietzsche's and Bergson's shared conception of the real as, in essence, a qualitative becoming. Bergson offers an extended and impressive theory and phenomenology of ontological emotion in *Two Sources*. [lx] A shared

conception of 'God' can be detected here as both thinkers identify the divine as (rather than merely a product of) a specific type of a-subjective 'desire-flow' through and as which the 'will-to-power' or 'élan vital' respectively manifest and reaffirm themselves. As Bergson states, "divine love is not a thing of God: it is God Himself." [lxi]

In this context, in which God is identified as natural life's *Grundstimmug*, both Nietzsche and Bergson accord 'mysticism' pride of place. [lxii] Bergson seeks to conceive mysticism in "relation to the vital impulse...it is this impulse itself, communicated to exceptional individuals who in turn would fain impart it to all humanity" [lxiii]. This further underlines Bergson's view of the intrinsically religious nature of reality. As he states, "the ultimate end of mysticism is the establishment of a contact...a partial coincidence, with the creative effort which life itself manifests. This effort is of God, if it is not God himself." [lxiv] Indeed Bergson offers what is, in effect, a formulation of the entire trajectory of his thought culminating in the discussion of mysticism under consideration,

For this intuition was turned inward; and if, in a first intensification, beyond which most of us did not go, it made us realise the continuity of our inner life, a deeper intensification might carry it to the roots of our being, and thus to the principle of life in general. Now is not this the privilege of the mystic soul?" [lxv]

As in Nietzsche, for Bergson the ontological affect in question here is joy [lxvi] and he offers a sustained phenomenology of its development [lxvii] towards the attainment of the condition of "complete mysticism" [lxviii] characterised as "an unmixed joy, lying beyond pleasure and pain." [lxix] The watchwords in this non-reductive renaturalisation of mysticism are energy and vitality, for Bergson the mystics, "represent a vast expenditure of energy...the superabundance of vitality...flows from a spring which is the very source of life...God, Who is this energy itself." [lxx] Again it is apparent that, for Bergson, 'God' is not simply the supreme object of the mystic's desire but is rather, *in toto*, the very inundation of a-subjective energy and affectivity itself. [lxxi] This conception of mysticism as the very creative becoming of life itself, and particularly Bergson's privileging of Christian mysticism [lxxii] raises, in comparison with Nietzsche, the diagnostic question concerning the aetiology of mystical states and 'religious experience' more generally. Whilst admittedly Bergson does not explore this issue with anything like Nietzsche's tenacity and suspicion he does address the issue (see TSMR, pp. 228ff, 245f, 250) and indicates due critical restraint. [lxxiii] However, as with Nietzsche, Bergson insists on demarcating a non-morbid form mysticism in which, "there is an exceptional, deep-rooted mental healthiness." [lxxiv]

It is important to note the extent to which Bergson implicitly reasserts throughout *Two Sources* an essential feature of the reconceived 'natural religion' suggested throughout this discussion. This is the claim that there is a universal origin and source of religion intrinsic to natural life, in principle available to all independently of organised religion, which specific religions affirm in varying degrees. Bergson formulates this point thus,

...an original content, drawn straight from the very well-spring of religion, independent of all that religion owes to tradition, to theology, to the Churches...philosophy...must confine itself to experience and inference...it would suffice to take mysticism unalloyed, apart from the visions, the allegories, the theological language which express it, to make it a powerful helpmate to philosophical research...we must then find out in what measure

mystic

experience is a continuation of the experience which led us to the doctrine of the vital impetus. All the information with which it would furnish philosophy, philosophy would repay in the shape of confirmation.[lxxv]

Bergson concludes his text with a very striking formulation, again implicitly radicalising the notion of 'natural religion' that inverts the trajectory of the 'design argument' and underlines the extent to which his thinking, like Nietzsche's before him, surpasses the banal terms of the debates between 'intelligent design' and evolutionary biology. Both thinkers enable us to recognise such an 'opposition' as essentially a dispute between two forms of neurosis concerning nature's primal religious dysteleology. As Bergson states, "...the essential function of the universe...a machine for the making of gods." [lxxvi]

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[i] These comments evoke themes in Nietzsche's *The Gay Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), § 343, 374 (hereafter GS)

[ii] I refer here to D. Janicaud: "The Theological Turn of French Phenomenology" in *Phenomenology and the "Theological Turn"* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), pp. 16 – 103.

[iii] For a clear statement of Nietzsche's ultimate indifference to cognitive content, extended to even the prioritisation of becoming over being, see GS §370.

[iv] See, F. Nietzsche: *On the Genealogy of Morality* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998), Second Treatise § 12 - 13.

[v] GS §370.

[vi] See, F. Nietzsche: *The Will to Power* (New York: Vintage Books, 1967) §821 (hereafter WP).

[vii] These comments draw upon WP §1052.

[viii] Hopefully it goes without saying that the philosophical perspective elaborated here presupposes the overcoming of the 'fact/value' and 'meaning/meaninglessness' distinctions and all idealist proprietorial claims to the source of meaning.

[ix] This issue could be said to circumscribe the parameters of the critical debate concerning the nature and value of religion as found in Hume, Feuerbach, Marx, James and Freud.

[x] For a statement of how I interpret this interpretative stance see, J. Urpeth: "'Health' and 'Sickness' in Religious Affectivity: Nietzsche, Otto and Bataille" in J. Lippitt and J. Urpeth (eds.): *Nietzsche and the Divine* (Manchester: Clinamen Press, 2000), pp. 226 – 251. Other stimulating examples of the trend in question, offering a range of alternative conceptions of it, include: B.E. Benson: *Pious Nietzsche: Decadence and Dionysian Faith* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2008); G. Fraser: *Redeeming Nietzsche: On the Piety of Unbelief* (London: Routledge, 2002); T. Murphy: *Nietzsche, Metaphor, Religion* (Albany: SUNY

Press, 2001) and T. Roberts: *Contesting Spirit: Nietzsche, Affirmation, Religion* (Princeton: Princeton Uni. Press, 1998).

[xi] GS §109

[xii] See, GS §112, 373

[xiii] See, GS §344, 347, 357; GM, Third Treatise §23 – 25, 27

[xiv] GS §344. Cited in GM, Third Treatise §24.

[xv] See, GM, Third Treatise §24.

[xvi] GM, Third Treatise §27.

[xvii] GS §357. Cited GM, Third Treatise §27.

[xviii] GM, Second Treatise §24.

[xix] In extremis, Nietzsche sometimes seems (e.g., GM, Third Treatise §14) to be drawn towards a policy of strict segregation in order to ensure the future viability of the 'health' of the human species.

[xx] See, GM, Second and Third Treatises *passim*.

[xxi] Appeal is hereby made to the introduction ("Finite and Infinite Life in the Greek Language") of Carl Kerényi's seminal study, *Dionysus: Archetypal Image of Indestructible Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976, pp. xxxi - xxxvii). Kerényi reflects upon the significance of there being two different words for 'life' in Greek. On the basis of Kerényi's argument it might be possible to suggest a 'vitalogical difference' (perhaps as an alternative to more familiar varieties, 'ontological', 'différance' etc) concerning the co-dependent relation between, on the one hand, life (ZoQ) as non-individuated self-difference and, on the other hand, life as individuated or 'characterised' (Bios) an irresolvable relation within the former sustains a finite priority over the latter.

[xxii] For evidence of this in Bergson see H. Bergson: *An Introduction to Metaphysics* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1999, p. 49), hereafter IM.

[xxiii] Examples of the interpretative strand in question include H. Birault: "Beatitude in Nietzsche" in D.B.Allison (ed): *The New Nietzsche* (Cambridge Mass: MIT Press, 1985, pp. 219 - 231) and C. Rosset: *Joyful Cruelty: Towards a Philosophy of the Real* (Oxford: Oxford Uni. Press, 1993). Whilst Rosset's text as a whole is highly recommended the chapter "Notes on Nietzsche" (*ibid*, pp. 22 - 69) is of particular relevance here.

[xxiv] See GS §318. A further important statement of the basic contrast between affective-libidinal types and their respective religious sensibilities concerns Nietzsche's distinction between 'romantic' and 'Dionysian' forms of pessimism as formulated in GS §370.

[xxv] A notable exception is, of course, Georges Bataille who articulates a fundamentally 'Nietzschean' religious sensibility and elaborates a critique of religion that recognises the affirmation/denial distinction (both between and within specific religions) in numerous works perhaps most notably, *Inner Experience* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1988); *Theory of Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1992) and *Eroticism* (London: Marion Boyars, 1987).

[xxvi] See GS §346.

[xxvii] GS §288.

[xxviii] See GS §343, 382.

[xxix] GS 337. See also §338, 382.

[xxx] H. Bergson: *The Two Sources of Religion and Morality* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977), hereafter TSMR.

[xxxi] Bergson explicitly expresses an affinity with the notion of 'natural religion' but decides against its positive incorporation (at least in relation to 'static' religion) into his vocabulary given the burden of its received meaning (see TSMR, pp. 205, 207, 222). For Bergson's avowal of the empiricist philosophical ethos underpinning the notion of 'natural religion', see TSMR, p. 250.

[xxxii] H. Bergson: *An Introduction to Metaphysics* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1999), hereafter IM.

[xxxiii] IM, p. 55.

[xxxiv] *Ibid*, p. 36.

[xxxv] *Ibid*, p. 37.

[xxxvi] H. Bergson: *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness* (New York: Dover Publ. 2001), hereafter TFW.

[xxxvii] See TFW, pp. 53, 69, 72.

[xxxviii] For statements of Bergson's conception of temporal consciousness as inherently processional and qualitative, see TFW pp. 13, 61, 63, 69, 73.

[xxxix] *Ibid*, p. 63.

[xl] *Ibid*, pp. 54, 73.

[xli] *Ibid*, pp. 59 – 61.

[xlii] *Ibid*, p. 72.

[xliii] We shall not include here a discussion of how the 'religious' interpretative perspective I am proposing for Bergson's thought applies to his second major work, *Matter and Memory* (New York: Zone Books, 1991), hereafter MM. This work is, of course, crucial in the overall development of Bergson's thought in terms of its 'ontologising' of the notions from TFW discussed above. This is apparent in the notion of the "continuity of the real" (MM, 165) and claim concerning a "continuity of becoming which is reality itself" (MM, 139).

[xliv] H. Bergson: *Creative Evolution* (New York: Dover Publ. 1998), hereafter CE.

[xlv] *Ibid*, pp. 272, 298.

[xlvi] See *ibid*, pp. 237f. This aspect of CE deepens the reflection on what in MM had been referred to as the "turn of experience" (MM, p. 184). This, and other topics discussed in this section, would ultimately require an account of Bergson's key notion of 'intuition' and the 'method' he associates with it. This task cannot be undertaken here.

[xlvii] *Ibid*, p. 46.

[xlviii] *Ibid*, p. xii.

[xlix] See *ibid*, pp. 159, 176ff, 255, 274, 343. At one point Bergson identifies such a capacity with the "duty of philosophy" (*ibid*, p. 196).

[l] *Ibid*, p. 8.

[li] *Ibid*, p. 345. See *ibid*, pp. 37, 196.

[lii] Ibid, pp. 46f, 49. See *ibid*, p. xiif.

[liii] Ibid, pp. 369f.

[liv] Ibid, p. 128.

[lv] Ibid, pp. 191f.

[lvi] Ibid, p. 217.

[lvii] Ibid, p. 248.

[lviii] Ibid, p. 217.

[lix] GS §318.

[lx] See TSMR, pp. 38 – 54.

[lxi] Ibid, p. 252. See *ibid*, pp. 53, 253, 268f.

[lxii] In this respect it worth noting the pioneering, and still very stimulating, sympathetic discussion of this aspect of Nietzsche's and Bergson's thought offered by Evelyn Underhill in her seminal 1911 study, *Mysticism: The Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness* (Oxford: One World Publ., 1993). See especially, Chap. II: "Mysticism and Vitalism" (*ibid*, pp. 26 - 43). Underhill underlines (*ibid*, "Note to the Twelfth Edition", p. 43) the reservations expressed in her earlier discussion (*ibid*, p. 37) concerning the ultimate plausibility of a 'vitalist' account of mysticism and distances herself from Bergson's thought in particular. Underhill's statement of her revised views precede by a couple of years the publication of TSMR in which Bergson expresses his admiration for her "remarkable works" (see TSMR, p. 227, n.3), clearly unaware of her recent reconsiderations!

[lxiii] TSMR, p. 213.

[lxiv] Ibid, p. 220. See *ibid*, pp. 179, 186.

[lxv] Ibid, p. 250. See *ibid*, p. 256

[lxvi] Ibid, pp. 212, 230, 317.

[lxvii] Ibid, pp. 227 – 240.

[lxviii] Ibid, p. 231.

[lxix] Ibid, p. 261.

[lxx] Ibid, pp. 237, 257. These formulations invite a comparison with Georges Bataille's remarkable, often very similarly articulated, discussion of mysticism in "Mysticism and Sensuality", *Eroticism* (op. cit, pp. 221 - 251).

[lxxi] For a stunning elaboration of the conception of mysticism suggested here see, J. Marsden: *After Nietzsche: Notes Towards a Philosophy of Ecstasy* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), especially chap. 6, "The Night of Unknowing" (pp. 123 - 147) and 160 - 170. Marsden's remarkable book, surely one of the most original and significant contributions to Nietzsche studies in recent years, includes stimulating and profound discussions of many of the topics and thinkers considered here (including extended reflections on the Nietzsche/Bergson relation).

[lxxii] See TSMR, pp. 216 – 227. Bergson underpins his valorisation of Christian mysticism through an

extended and detailed evaluation of many other Western and Eastern alternatives.

[lxxiii] Ibid, pp. 228ff, 245f, 250.

[lxxiv] Ibid, p. 228. However, Bergson and Nietzsche disagree in their assessments of individual cases, most notably St. Paul and St. Theresa of Avila. The topic of distinguishing between 'healthy and 'sick' types of 'religious feeling' calls to mind James's seminal discussion of the issue, see W. James: *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), especially Lectures IV – VIII, XVI - XVII (pp. 78 – 188; 378 - 429). See also Marsden (op. cit.), pp. 96 – 109, 118 – 122.

[lxxv] Ibid, pp. 250f. See *ibid*, p. 262.

[lxxvi] Ibid, p. 317. As will have been noted the emphasis in this discussion has been to draw attention to the very considerable common ground between Nietzsche and Bergson in relation to the task of revivifying and reconfiguring the notion of 'natural religion'. Obviously however, there are also many fault lines between them which would need to be addressed in a longer study, albeit in terms of a hermeneutic of mutual radicalisation. Some prominent issues here would include: the interrogation, from a genealogical perspective, of the normativities endorsed in TSMR and, reciprocally, a critical evaluation of Nietzsche's notion of the 'future' (and what it makes possible in his thinking) from the point of view of Bergson's conception of the nature of time. For a valuable discussion of aspects of the Nietzsche/Bergson relation with reference to TSMR see, L. Lawlor: *The Challenge of Bergsonism* (New York: Continuum, 2003), "Appendix I: The Point where Memory Turns Back into Life: An Investigation of Bergson's Two Sources of Morality and Religion" (pp. 85 - 111).