

*Recensione*

## **C. Zanfi, *Bergson e la filosofia tedesca: 1907-1932***

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Bruno Batista Rates

First published in Italian in 2013, followed by a virtually simultaneous translation into French (with a preface by Frédéric Worms) and by a recent translation into German, *Bergson and German philosophy 1907-1932*, the result of the doctoral thesis of Caterina Zanfi, is certainly one of the greatest contributions to Bergsonian studies in the last ten years. The author had already released in 2009 a significant study, entitled *Bergson, la tecnica, la guerra* (Bononia University Press), but her second book goes further. Such enthusiasm, we hope, will be justified through this review, which will not prevent us from raising some points that we consider problematic in the book, that, of course, in the best spirit of academic comradeship.

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With a clear style, interdisciplinary approach and an impressive bibliographical research, the book aims to «reconstitute the transformations of Bergson's philosophy» (p. 9, emphasis added) that occurred in the 25 years that separate *Creative Evolution* (EC from now on) from *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* (DSMR from now on), in relation to the debates of the culture-philosophical German scene of the period and, more specifically, those in which Bergson is mobilized or directly engages. It is true that there is an essentially anti-Bergsonian dimension in this endeavor, especially if we consider Bergson's reading recommendations in 1911 at the conference «Philosophical Intuition», although the author highlights Bergson's concern at the same text with the preliminary work that consists «to compose a philosophy with what it is not and to reconnect it with what was around it» (p. 10, Bergson's quotation). In this sense, Caterina Zanfi follows up the research on the German reception

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of the philosopher of duration previously conducted by Gregor Fitzi, Arnaud François, Olivier Agard and Jean-Louis Vieillard-Baron, as well as by Wolfhart Henckemann and the pioneering studies of Rudolf W. Meyer and Günther Pflug. However, the term «reception» gains another consistency with Zanfi, since what is at stake is not only the manner in which the German philosophers of the first decades of the twentieth century read Bergson, but also how such readings, in a kind of «ricochet effect» (p. 18), decisively influenced Bergson's writing. While following his reception in Germany, we see a «reception of the reception» emerge on the French bank of the Rhine, and so on, so that the boundaries between «German philosophy» and «French philosophy» (Bergsonian) widen considerably, to the point of sometimes almost becoming the same, despite the withdrawal at a dramatic moment in European history, the First World War. And it is this «back-and-forth movement» (p. 18), this «labyrinth of mirrors» (*ibid.*), inspired by the idea of «cultural transfer» forged by Michel Espagne (p. 12), but also by the sociology of knowledge of Pierre Bourdieu (*ibid.*), what makes the book convey the idea of a history of philosophy that is read mainly from its «effects», not so much to neutralize the «truth» or «originality» of each doctrine, but to reinforce the idea that thinking is, above all, «thinking with», in an intense dialogue between interlocutors who, in turn, are not out of the place, community nor the time in which they live. This endows the research with a further ambition, namely, «to assign a new dimension to Bergson's work in the history of European philosophy» (p. 280), a task that seems to be possible through the recognition of the originality of the concept of life as is thought by the Frenchman.

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Aware of the «provincialization» of German philosophy during the chosen years, Caterina Zanfi uses a very successful methodological strategy in structuring her object of study in the form of a «geophilosophical atlas» (pp. 184, 280), that is, in a kind of geographical oriented history of philosophy, in which the succession of events is arranged in four cities that function as centers of reception and reverberation of Bergsonian philosophy, and that will constitute the four chapters of the book: Iena, Berlin, Heidelberg and Göttingen. The last chapter is reserved for the analysis of the intellectual impacts caused by the First World War. In Iena, the discussion revolves around Rudolf Eucken and his students, through the concept of «*Geistleben*» («life of the spirit»), but also of the English Baron Friedrich Von Hügel, who saw in the author of *Creative Evolution* a source of renewal of Christian spirituality. In this chapter, in our view the most original in historiographical sources, the use of Bergson's ideas in a strong religious context against the onslaughts of materialism and positivism is evident. It is an invaluable resource for the researcher who wants to focus on the impact of Bergson's thinking on the Christian community, comparing, for example, the German and French reactions. It is also here that the relationship

between Bergson and the editor Eugen Diederichs is discussed in depth, when important aspects of the translation of certain «untranslatables» are pointed, as is the case of the «kantianization» of the Bergsonian pair Intelligence/Intuition.

We then go to Berlin, where the name of Georg Simmel appears at the center of the controversies. Despite the initial enthusiasm with the Bergsonian critique of intellectualism, the sociologist is soon disappointed: Bergson, due to the lack of sensitivity to the inherent negativity of life, would have ignored the aspect that, in Simmel's eyes, would be the most fundamental, which he calls «the tragic of life». Although the author justifiably restrained her research from the years 1907 to 1932, it would be interesting to examine how Simmel's criticism would work in relation to Bergson's considerations of tragedy and drama made some years before, in 1900, in *Laughter*. Given the centrality of the social dimension in this book, the analyzes of the tragic go beyond the limits of an aesthetic-literary commentary and touch upon crucial problems of practical philosophy. Let us also note the emphasis that Caterina Zanfi gives at that moment to the figure of Vladimir Jankélévitch who, besides acting as an important mediator between Bergson and Simmel, seems to be a silent link between «Bergsonism» and «existentialism», in view of his insistence on incorporating themes such as «finitude» and «existence» into his master's thought.

In Heidelberg, the discussions linked with «vitalism» and «*Lebensphilosophie*» are analyzed. Hans Driesch, Wilhelm Windelband, Ernst Troeltsch, Heinrich Rickert, Richard Kroner and Ernst Cassirer are the main characters of this journey and, due to the heterogeneity of this group of thinkers, it was necessary to make it more or less cohesive through a common ground, that the author chooses to be the problem of history. After a brief discussion of the finalism in Driesch and Bergson, she goes through the intricacies of the debate on historicism, showing not only the concern of the latter about the theme that is present intensely through the first half of the twentieth century, but also the originality of his propositions. After a «neo-Kantian» *intermezzo* at the conference «Phantasms of the living' and Psychological Research» (1913), in which history and nature became irreducible, Bergson, in *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, would reconcile with the position defended in *Creative Evolution*, in which the *élan vital* extends itself on the succession of human events. Driesch and Troeltsch looked favorably upon such an overcoming of Kantianism, although the enthusiasm was not shared, as one might have expected, by Rickert and Cassirer. Here we allow ourselves to briefly make some critical comments, since we are not sure that there is a continuity between the conceptions of history presented in *Creative Evolution* and in *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*.

In 1907, Bergson seems to understand human history exclusively as a history of technical inventions, based on paleontological and archaeological discoveries about the origin of man, such as «Boucher de Perthes' discoveries in the gravel of Moulin-Quignon» (EC, pp. 138). It is this vital source that makes material progress to be prolonged in historical progress, allowing us to say that human emancipation, at least from this point of view, is the emancipation

of the human *species*. But here, there is a differentiation to be made. The emancipatory character of the intelligent production of utensils is *practical*, since the «gnosiological» or rather «*theoretical* emancipation» will be given by intuition, the mode of «knowledge» (speculative) that we *must* use if we want to access the moving essence of life. In contrast, we believe that the «law of double frenzy» presented in 1932 would work according to the *dichotomy* between *moral* and *material* rather than between *vital* and *material*, as appeared to be the case previously, in 1907. If, in *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, material (machinery) continues to be conceived as a projection of the vital, it can be said that the dichotomy in the «law of double frenzy» is *to some extent* between *moral* and *vital*, even though the genesis of both dimensions goes back to life (the antagonism of dichotomy is only superficial, as pointed in DSMR, pp. 316-317). It is for no other reason that practical emancipation, presented in *Creative Evolution* through intelligence, leaves behind its purely *descriptive* form (the creativity of life *is* exercised through the apathy of physical matter), and assumes in *The Two Sources Morality and Religion* a *partially normative* character (moral progress *must* balance material progress). The «partially» here is crucial, since what «must be» assumes rather a sense of «it is desirable that it should be so». As Caterina Zanfi reminds us, the concept of law in «the law of double frenzy» is «limited to recognizing an imperfect regularity in the becoming of human society» (p. 160). In turn, theoretical emancipation dissolves into practical emancipation, so that *speculative* intuition of the philosopher-biologist of *Creative Evolution* gives place to the intuition of the mystic, especially the Christian one, whose «intellectual health [...] manifests itself through a taste for *action*» (DSMR, p. 241, emphasis added). In any case, this solid chapter serves as a strong argumentative ally against the innumerable interpretations – usually motivated by (Neo)Kantians, Hegelians, or Marxists intentions – that Bergson ignored history.

The last stop of this intellectual cartography is the city of Göttingen, where the phenomenological reception is examined. For both historiographical and strategic reasons, the chapter deals almost with Max Scheler's reading of Bergson, leaving out the possible consequences that could be drawn by the scarce exchange (direct and indirect) between the latter and Edmund Husserl, or the interpretation offered by Roman Ingarden in his 1918 thesis. For the same reasons, the allusions of Bergson's philosophy stated by young Martin Heidegger are also left out. Former student of Eucken, Scheler had already been approached previously, in Iena, although in a more «idealistic» context. Another former student of the 1908 Nobel Prize winner is also reintroduced: Isaac Benrubi, a faithful mediator between Bergson and the philosophical scene on the other bank of the Rhine. When we read Caterina Zanfi's book we have the impression that, along with Simmel, Scheler seems to have been the thinker most influenced by the *nouvelle philosophie*, and like his compatriot, the initial enthusiasm is followed by an irreparable disappointment, albeit motivated by different reasons. After all, how a phenomenologist (even of a heterodox type such as Scheler) could admit the

idea of a consciousness «coextensive» to life? Averse to all sorts of «naturalisms», Scheler's project of a philosophical anthropology is based on the irreducibility of human consciousness, since this dimension is the only one that can transcend life. This will have no trivial consequences, especially if we consider the thesis of technique as an organic projection presented in *Creative Evolution* and developed in *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*. The author transports us to little explored terrains among Bergson's scholars, such as the excellent analysis of the relations between machinery, industrialism and capitalism through the figure of *Homo Faber*, as well as the debate on *Kultur* and *Zivilisation*. Finally, in the fifth and final chapter, the «intellectual trenches» of World War I are approached, always being careful not to adopt an anecdotal tone, even with the strong informative bias that the chapter sometimes takes. Despite the difficulty, the drama of a historical event of such importance is philosophically translated to the reader, which becomes clear with the presentation of the conflict through the relationship between Bergson and Nietzsche – or, more precisely, between Bergson and a certain «Nietzscheanism» – on the moral domain.

In general, Caterina Zanfi's book shows us how the reception of Bergson by the German philosophers was guided largely by the parameters of transcendental philosophy. The anti-Kantianism implied in the critique of intellectualism, intuitionism and, above all, the idea of life presented by the Frenchman, was mobilized as much as a virtue by the enthusiasts of his thought (Eucken, Simmel, Troeltsch and, to a certain extent, Ingarden and Scheler) as a heresy by its detractors (Rickert, Kroner, Cassirer), thus serving as a kind of «compass» to locate him within the Teutonic debates (Windelband being a special case, since he reads Bergson in a certain way as a neo-Kantian historicist). On the other hand, depending on the context, she presents us a Bergson more receptive or more aversive to criticism, and whether we agree or not, it is a renewed Bergson – in any case different from what we used to see – that emerges at the end of the book.

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But what is this «new» Bergson that appears? After all, if «the new stature and great originality in the European space at the beginning of the twentieth century» of Bergson's philosophy is to be credited with «a distant attitude rather than a welcoming one» (p. 29) in relation to the positions defended in Germany, what is the meaning of this distance? According to Caterina Zanfi, the great contribution of the Frenchman is the very peculiar way of thinking «social life, morality, mysticism, mechanism and religion» (p. 16), so that they are not considered external or absolutely heterogeneous to life and nature. In short, it would not be an exaggeration to conclude that it is the mode of incorporation of natural sciences into his thinking, especially of biology, which would make Bergson original and therefore distant from his German counterparts. An ambiguity then arises: although it has been pointed out throughout the book,

this aspect remains unconscious, just as, so to speak, a shadow that awaits a light that never comes. An example of this state of affairs can be found when Bergson attributes the insufficiency of the concept of *Geistleben* to the fact that «Eucken did not develop the scientific aspect of the question» (p. 72, citation of Benrubi). What would this scientific aspect be? What authors, references or scientific doctrines is it about? In all passages (and there are many) that we ask ourselves such questions, no answer seems to arise. It is as if, focused on the debates that explicitly explain Bergson's theses for what they are not, the author forgets to examine them through exchanges that would elucidate what they really are. Where would we find such exchanges? In our view, in the current of thought that we would call, in the absence of a better term, evolutionist, whose advances have forever changed our understanding of *man's place in nature*. It is not rare for Bergson to locate the «preparatory work» mentioned above in the sciences, especially in the life sciences. Bergsonian philosophy, notably in the period studied in the book (1907-1932), would thus be an attempt to respond to the profound change brought by this reorganization of ideas.

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We would like to insist that our reservations are *complementary*, not exclusionary, and that we intended through this review to continue the dialogue with Caterina Zanfi, on the basis of this remarkable book.