

National Philosophy and Human Genius An Introduction to Bergson's Essay on French Philosophy

Caterina Zanfi

In 1915, when Bergson writes a short essay titled *French Philosophy*, commissioned for the Universal Exhibition of San Francisco, his name and his work is already well-known in the United States: not only all his books and many conferences have been translated in English, but he has also been invited two years before to give lectures at Columbia, Princeton, and Harvard. In *French Philosophy*, presented in this journal for the first time in English, Bergson sought to describe to the rest of the world, and especially to Americans, his own philosophical tradition. Although the text was distributed on a peaceful occasion of commercial and scientific international exchange, the essay belongs to one of the darkest moments of the 20th century, that of the European War.

It would be excessive to recognize in this essay a veiled anticipation of the intents which will bring Bergson back to the United States in 1917, two years after the Exhibition of San Francisco, to visit President Wilson together with a French diplomatic mission supporting American entry into the war against the Prussian Army. Nevertheless, when we read the “picturesque assessment” (Bianco 2014) of French philosophy given by Bergson in his 1915 essay, we can not avoid considering the ways in which the political framework and the war influenced scientists and philosophers in a sort of intellectual crusade. Already before 1914, international congresses and universal exhibitions were not only moments of peaceful cooperation, but also of national rivalry among intellectuals coming from all the countries of the industrialized world (Feuerhahn, Rabault-Feuerhahn 2010); this second tendency exacerbates during the war. Without considering French political hostilities to Germany, the subtle deformation operated in *French Philosophy*, where the praise and exaltation of French tradition is parallel to a more or less explicit devaluation of German tradition, would be hardly understandable.

Before starting to draw his historical framework of French philosophy from Descartes to the 20th century, Bergson states that France is at the source of all

Western modern philosophy, as the Nation where mostly has philosophical creation been uninterrupted and original. In perfect continuity with the tradition established by Victor Cousin, Descartes holds here a quasi totemic role, as the source of the whole of modern philosophy: even German idealism is said to derive from the doctrine of the *cogito*. Descartes dominates the 17th century with Pascal and Malebranche. If the philosophical innovations of antiquity were born in Greece, those of modernity are born in France, and from there derive all philosophies developed in other nations. So Leibniz is said to have done anything but merging Cartesianism with Aristotelianism, and if it is true that an English empiricist like Locke had much influence on French philosophy, Bergson points out that Locke himself had been influenced by Descartes. Also Pascal has opened up new ways in German philosophy. Without building a system like the Germans would have later done, he inspired the metaphysical systems of the 19th century such as Kantianism and the “Romanticism” of German philosophy. Bergson also states that it was just a mistake that Maine de Brian was called the “French Kant” and that Guyau himself, known as “the French Nietzsche”, had stated before the German thinker that the moral ideal coincides with the highest possible expansion of life, expressing it in a more measured and acceptable form. Even on the field of psychological enquiries, Bergson emphasizes the primacy of French tradition: even great German thinkers like Leibniz or Kant are said to scarcely have shown any sense for psychological introspection. The only German metaphysician to have been a real psychologist, according to Bergson, was perhaps Schopenhauer – who was not by chance imbued with 18th century French philosophy. Every great French philosopher has instead revealed his penetrating and subtle observation of the human soul, and not occasionally. Concerning contemporary psychology, Bergson states that the method of quantitative measurement typically practiced in Germany has yielded less meaningful findings than it was expected; the method of clinical observation instead, which stems from France and is there mostly followed, has already yielded significant results. The German tradition is the main point of reference against which Bergson means to define the profile of French philosophy, also as regards its other characters, namely the attention to science and the reluctance towards the construction of massive and rigid philosophical systems: French method is said to be far both from Hegel and Kant – even if Kantianism is actually predominating in French Third Republic.

Bergson seems to aim not so much at the development of a rigorously philosophical discourse as at a quite ideological affirmation of the superiority of his country's philosophy and its exclusive centrality in European culture,

especially if compared to the role of Germany. This argument enters in an overall strategy of spiritual mobilization which involves intellectuals from both sides – the so-called *geistige Mobilmachung* of Germany (Flasch 2000) and the French so-called *Union sacrée des intellectuels* (Hanna 1996; Prochasson, Rasmussen 1996), to which Bergson participates in the forefront next to Boutroux, Durkheim and others. The purpose of many philosophical, literary, and scientific essays of these years is to support the nationalist ideology, asserting their nation's intellectual primacy and the purity of their own philosophical identity, erasing any debt to the enemy's cultural tradition. This procedure was common to both French and German intellectuals, giving rise to many forced reconstructions of schemes of influence, or even to accusations of plagiarism. For example, when Bergson grants Schopenhauer a propensity for psychological insight, he makes clear that the German philosopher was imbued with French culture – thus giving a thrust to the controversy involving in the same months his own philosophy in Germany, where it is accused by Wundt and other professors to be a mere plagiary of Schopenhauer's doctrine of will (François 2005).

The distinctiveness of French philosophy in today's international debate and its role of bastion of moral values of humanity is asserted in a less subtle and less dissimulated way in other lectures held during the war. It is the case of the hard anti-German speech given in December 1914 at the annual public meeting of the *Académie des sciences morales et politiques*, or of the conferences that Bergson will give in Madrid in 1916, supporting the idea of national "personalities", accusing Germany of having developed its culture in a purely material sense, so that it has now become the slave of an overwhelming state and a system of production ruled by mechanical uniformity, preventing the expression of the creative life of individuals and crushing the law in name of brutal force (Bergson 1972a). Even though weaker than in these speeches, the shadow of the Great War was yet present and perceptible in Bergson's *French Philosophy*.

The assumption of the essay – the existence of a French philosophy, and therefore of national philosophies – even seems to contradict the doctrine of intuition, one of the cornerstones of Bergson's thought. If philosophy could have a national identity, i.e. it depends on an historical transmission and on a different language and style of expression, how could this agree with the idea of a philosophical intuition as an individual act, beyond the historical and linguistic conditions? The political meaning of Bergson's essay of 1915, lying in its "occasional" character, leads therefore to a deep philosophical question concerning the status of intuition and its articulation with historical tradition and national identity. Worms notes this point in his analysis of the

meaning of “national philosophy” referred to in the reading of Bergson’s *French Philosophy*: “How to make the individuality of intuition, precisely in its “newness” (which he claimed again here), compatible with the very idea of “French” or national philosophy? Is it therefore necessary to give up one of these two terms (the singular, the universal, the “national”)?” Here we are facing the heart of the problem” (Worms 2009: 174). This question is central not only in Bergson’s thought but also in a broader debate on the role of national identities in philosophical historiography (Piaia-Pozzo 2008). In the conference *Philosophical intuition*, held at the International Congress of Philosophy of Bologna in 1911, Bergson had addressed the issue of the history of philosophy. In Italy, home of historicism, he insisted on the centrality covered instead by the intuition in philosophy and he supported its irreducibility at national and historical determinations. Despite the prevailing intuitionism, his position was already in 1911 anything but against history. The historical analysis was just one dimension of philosophical studies, stated Bergson in the conference of Bologna: history of philosophy in fact was considered to be a preliminary work for the understanding of intuition: “without this preliminary effort to reconstruct a philosophy with what it is not, and to connect it to what was around it, we will perhaps never draw what it really is; the human spirit is so done: it begins to understand the new only when it has tried everything to bring him back to the old” (Bergson 2009: 118-119). However, the historical study of a doctrine could not replace the research of the central intuition of each philosopher. The philosophical intuition is immeasurable to the means at disposal to express it, dependent on the “conditions of time and place” (121) in which the philosopher lives. Nationality, we may say, is one of the most important conditions of time and space imposed to every philosopher, the condition that provides him with a language, an historical, institutional, stylistic tradition, and a relation to a geographical territory. How to combine this singularity with the universality of an individual act like that of intuition? For Bergson, the central methodological problem of the history of philosophy is grounded in the tension between intuition and doctrine, corresponding to the tension between the immediate experience and its conceptual expression. Admitting the importance to understand the “conditions of time and place”, Bergson perceived a tension in each philosophy between these dimensions, that of intuition and that of spatial and temporal conditioning, which provide problems with an historical and national dimension. In 1911, Bergson did not need to choose between these two positions. A philosophic work owes its problems and arguments both to the intuition and to the historical and national heritage in which it is placed. Every philosophical intuition meets an

historical and geographical thickness, “conditions of time and place”, which it is important to recognize. Belonging to a nationality does not seem to pose any hierarchy in philosophies.

The essay of *French Philosophy* of 1915 is apparently very far from *The Philosophical Intuition* of 1911. During the war, intuition seems to have become a privilege, especially of France, the “great initiator” of modern thought. While in 1911 the intuition – individual and not national – was the core dimension of philosophy, in 1915 national styles of thought are much more relevant, and *French* philosophy is nearly a synonym of *modern* philosophy. Also, the principal traits that he identifies in French philosophy – clarity, dialogue with science, psychological sensitivity, anti-systematic attitude – stress the dependence of the other traditions, especially the German, lowering their value and originality. This distortion is due to the historical framework of this essay, to which it is therefore necessary to recognize a philosophical *and* political nature at the same time.

It is nevertheless interesting to consider the evolution of Bergson’s thought to the Thirties. The torn relations with German philosophers will not sewn up completely, but *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* will offer in 1932 a new reading of the relations with the enemy. Through his intellectual and political itinerary – that will cross his commitment as first president of the International Commission of Intellectual Cooperation in the Twenties – Bergson will recognise in *The Two Sources* that it is possible to oppose a dynamic morality, that of open society, to the closed and static attitude that leads to the demonization of the enemy: “the two opposing maxims, *Homo homini deus* and *Homo homini lupus*, are easily reconcilable. When we formulate the first, we are thinking of some fellow-countryman. The other applies to strangers” (Bergson 2008: 305). This is the effect of a natural tendency of closed society to protect itself, but it is also in tension with the love of the whole humanity, typical of the open society. This aspiration is not only French, nor is the instinct of war only German, but both tendencies are said to be common to every social group. We can see an extension of this new point of view, more open and less nationalist, in a meaningful revision that Bergson will make to the third edition of *French Philosophy* published in 1933 with the collaboration of Edouard Le Roy, who will add a part on Bergson to the table. He will correct the claim of centrality and originality of French philosophy established in 1915, adding that “the French genius has nothing exclusive, but remains essentially human” (Bergson 1972b: 1184).

References

- Bergson, Henri, 2009, "L'intuition philosophique" [1911], in Id., *La pensée et le mouvant : Essais et conférences* [1934], ed. F. Worms, PUF, Paris: 117-142.
- Bergson, Henri, 2008, *Les deux sources de la morale et de la religion* [1932], ed. F. Keck, G. Waterlot, PUF, Paris.
- Bergson, Henri, 1972a, "Discours en séance publique de l'Académie des sciences morales et politiques" [1914], in Id., *Mélanges*, ed. A. Robinet, PUF, Paris: 1108-1116.
- Bergson, Henri, 1972b, "La philosophie française" [1933], in Id., *Mélanges*, ed. A. Robinet, PUF, Paris: 1157-1189.
- Bianco, Giuseppe, 2014 (to be published), "Le long et monotone chapelet de l'Esprit universel. Lignes-guide pour une histoire des congrès de philosophie", in *Revue de métaphysique et de morale*.
- Feuerhahn, Wolf and Pascale Rabault-Feuerhahn, 2010, "Présentation: la science à l'échelle internationale", in *Revue germanique internationale*, 12: 5-15.
- Flasch, Kurt, 2000, *Die geistige Mobilmachung. Die deutschen Intellektuellen und der Erste Weltkrieg. Ein Versuch*, Fest, Berlin.
- François, Arnaud, 2005, "Bergson plagiaire de Schopenhauer? Analyse d'une polémique", in *Études Germaniques*, 60: 469-490.
- Hanna, Martha, 1996, *The Mobilisation of Intellect. French Scholars and Writers during the Great War*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge Massachusetts.
- Piaia, Gregorio and Riccardo Pozzo, eds., 2008, *Identità nazionale e valori universali nella moderna storiografia filosofica*, Cleup, Padova.
- Prochasson, Christophe and Anne Rasmussen, 1996, *Au nom de la patrie. Les intellectuels français et la Première Guerre mondiale: 1910-1919*, La Découverte, Paris.
- Worms, Frédéric, 2009, "L'idée de philosophie française, la Première Guerre mondiale et le moment 1900", in Id., 2009, *La philosophie en France au XX^e siècle*, Gallimard, Paris: 173-193.