

Chapter 3 of *Creative Evolution*: “On the Meaning [*Signification*] of Life”  
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1. **SETTING THE STAGE.** Chapter 1 showed that separation of inorganic matter is relative to our senses / practical needs and that in itself, matter is a field of universal interaction or “flux”. Chapter 2 showed that intelligence is oriented to inorganic matter and its practical manipulation, whereas instinct is oriented to life, and that both of them stand out from “cness in general.” Chapter 3 will then try to show the correlative genesis of intelligence and matter, their “reciprocal adaptation,” and their derivation from a “wider and higher form of existence.”

Psychology, Spencer, and metaphysics all agree that (a) “nature is one” and (b) that the function of intellect is to grasp this natural unity.

**THE LEAP INTO LIFE.** Bergson argues that philosophy can only be “an effort to dissolve again into the Whole” from which intelligence (and matter) is drawn. Even though B qualifies this by saying this is a “collective and progressive” endeavor, you can still imagine the horror with which Russell would have greeted this statement! But how do we do this? How can intelligence transcend itself? It can’t; but action can: you have to leap into life and “thrust intelligence outside itself by an act of will.” (Again, here is the voluntarist, vitalist Bergson the fascists found enchanting.)

2. **BERGSON’S ANTI-POSITIVIST EPISTEMOLOGY.** It might seem tempting to leave facts to scientists and keep principles for philosophy. But then you just repeat “the unconscious and consequently inconsistent metaphysic ... which the very attitude of science marks out.” What you miss in doing this is the relation of intelligence and unorganized matter, so you end up trying to understand life with mechanistic presuppositions.

So philosophers should “examine the living without any reservation as to practical utility, by freeing itself from forms and habits that are strictly intellectual.” (You can see why Deleuze had to insist intuition had a method and wasn’t just a flight into feeling and communion with nature.) It’s not that philosophers should read science. We should, but we should realize the disconnection between (necessarily mechanistic / practical) science and life, that is, recognize the “symbolic” nature of scientific / mechanistic biology.

In so doing we arrive at a “METAPHYSICAL” KNOWLEDGE OF REALITY ITSELF, “by the combined and progressive development of science and of philosophy.” And what we realize is that “an identical process must have cut out [*tailleur*] matter and the intellect, at the same time, from a stuff [*étouffe*] that contained both.”

3. **BERGSON’S METHOD OF TRANSCENDING INTELLIGENCE: GLIMPING THE BIDIRECTIONAL MOVEMENT OF REALITY: TOWARD DURATION AND TOWARD SPACE.** We begin with a plunge into pure duration, that is, we feel all our life’s history concentrated into the present moment by a strong effort of will. We never reach a complete

“self-possession” in this way, so we have to admit duration admits of degrees. The deeper we go, the more we bind together a qualitative heterogeneous multiplicity, and hence the more we transcend intelligence, which binds like to like.

Now if we RELAX our attention a bit, we start to slide toward a life of separated episodes (rather than a durational life of concentrated character). We glimpse an existence in which presents are progressively narrower, approaching the limit of the instant, in which the now is a durationless pulse, ever starting again with no binding to its past. Even matter never reaches this limit state (it is vibratory, even if its frequency is much too fast for our organic rhythms – MM4), but we can say that matter “inclines” in this direction, just as psychical existence inclines toward pure duration.

If we consider this bi-directionality in terms of EXTENSION, we see by our descent into dreaming that we “coast around [space] continually in sensation” (recall the analysis of pure perception as spatializing snapshots from MM). So if pure space is the limit or “schema” of this direction, we can see that “physics is simply psychics inverted.”

Again, we have to remember that while matter tends in the direction of space and separation, this is only our [practical / scientific] schema; in itself, science [qua theoretical physics] shows a field of universal interaction. Thus MATTER IS A PROCESS OF EXTENDING ITSELF W/O EVER REACHING THE END POINT OF BEING-EXTENDED. With the idea of pure space, we are only “transporting ourselves to the terminal point of the movement of which matter simply indicates the direction.”

KANT saw this in part, but was not able to draw the full consequences, because (a) he did not see that intelligence was only part of mind, and (b) he internalized time as the a priori form of intuition, instead of allowing duration to assume an “absolute existence.”

What METAPHYSICS has to do then is to “remount the incline that physics descends, to bring back matter to its origins, and to build up progressively a cosmology which would be, so to speak, a reversed psychology.” We should notice the “remount the incline” here as Deleuze’s “counter-effectuation” (DR and WP?). We also have to beware attributing self-consciousness to natural duration. Nature / life has an existence that is “psychological” (i.e., durational) in character, but it need not be self-conscious.

4. GEOMETRY AND THE INTELLECT. Geometrical space is nothing positive: it is only the slackening of durational attention. We find durational sympathy in concentrating on a poem; when we slack off in the direction of dreams we find separation and complexity, rather than duration as indivisible interweaving.
5. THE IDEA OF DISORDER. Two types of order: of genera [vital similarity] and of laws [repetition of the same]. Disorder is just the disappointment of the mind finding a different order than the one it was expecting.
6. CONSCIOUSNESS AND DETENSION. The “consciousness” of which B speaks as the ultimate reality which generates space by relaxation or “detension” (hence we have the

“tension” of duration which holds the past to the present) is not the embodied self-consciousness that we possess. Our consciousness is two-fold; to move toward duration it has to “detach itself from the *already-made* and attach itself to the *being-made*” – that is, turn from product to process.

WILL. We have to make “seeing” one with “willing,” which is a painful effort contrary to our nature. We have to exercise “will” in order to concentrate attention on our duration: we are pulled to slack off in the direction of space, because perception of things in space is attuned to action needed to feed our bodies. In doing so we can get in touch with the “pure willing, the current that runs through ... matter, communicating life to it.” We thus have an intuition of reality: “when we put back our being into our will, and our will itself into the impulsion that it prolongs, we understand, we feel that reality is a perpetual growth, a creation pursued without end.”

MATTER. Our own will is creative, but creative only of form, as we ourselves are the current of life “already loaded with matter,” and matter is only “congealed parts” of the current of life. Matter is itself generated by “a simple arrest of the action which generates form.” (To keep this from sounding completely spooky, all we have to do is remember the relativistic physics Bergson is anticipating: matter and energy are in fact interchangeable:  $E = mc^2$ ! “Matter” is in fact only a “congealed” form of energy, and light is matter that has been freed to become “pure” energy. Matter is thus energy that is bound into complex interwoven networks of atoms and molecules. But quantum physics will tell us that atoms and molecules are not substantial things: they are only probability matrices or patterns of energy.)

7. LIFE AND MATTER. After a discussion of conservation of energy and the second law of thermodynamics, B comes back to his theme: “all our analyses show us, in life, an effort to re-mount the incline that matter descends. In that, they reveal to us the possibility, the necessity even of a process the inverse of materiality, creative of matter by its interruption alone.” Organic life is life that is “riveted to an organism that subjects it to the general laws of inert matter. But everything happens as if it were doing its utmost to set itself free from those laws.”

SOLAR ENERGY. Although organic life cannot stop the material decline / detension, it can “retard it,” that is, it can store solar energy in the form of carbohydrates and keep it in reserve for “explosive” discharge in movement.

TWO IMAGES. B now turns back to consider life in terms of matter and energy. The creation of species is a “creative act which unmakes itself.” B offers two images. At first, there is a steam vessel through whose cracks a jet of steam bursts out and then condenses into water drops as it cools and falls to earth. (Life creation is the steam burst; organisms are the congealed water drops; death is the fall to earth.) But this image is too mechanical. Creating a species is like lifting your arm; left to itself the arm fall back, but there’s still something in it of the will which lifted it in the first place. So what is life? It is that which is glimpsed in vital activity: that which “subsists” of the direct movement (creative energy) in the inverted movement (organisms as “congealed” life energy).

THINGS. We'll never get to intuit this reality if we have a substantialist ontology. B thus insists on his process philosophy: "there are no things, there are only actions." We can talk about God in process philosophy, but not as a thing or entity, but as "unceasing life, action, freedom." Things are only the correlates of our perceptual "cuts" (pure perception as utilitarian reification).

8. EVOLUTION AND THE *ELAN VITAL*. Organic life is not free creation, but creation in the realm of matter: it is the introduction of freedom and indetermination into the realm of determined matter. We see this in animal life, which stores solar energy produced by plants and holds it in reserve, for movement at a moment which its nervous system (as zone of indetermination) will choose. So all life is a storing up of energy to let it flow in flexible channels. Now if the *élan vital* were unlimited, it would do this all at once. But it is not; it has to work through matter, so its work takes time and proceeds by divergence, delay, dead ends, arrests, accidents, and so on.
9. THE *ELAN VITAL* IS ONLY AN IMAGE! This is of the highest importance. An "impetus" is a physical image, but life is of a psychological (durational) character. We have difficulty expressing duration as qualitative multiplicity in our (intellect-oriented) language, as the very categories of "unity" and "multiplicity" are intellectual views. So we can say that *in its contact with matter*, life is an impetus, but *in itself* it is an "immensity of potentiality, a mutual encroachment of thousands and thousands of tendencies." But "thousands and thousands" are only potential numbers in life per se; they become determined as actual numbers only in contact with matter (that is, as the virtual multiplicity becomes actualized).
10. INDIVIDUAL AND SOCIETY. But even in this actualized, separated condition as organisms, one life runs through them and keeps on creating. We see this reflected in the fact that "throughout the whole realm of life [there is] a balancing between individuation and association." In the evolution of multi-celled organisms then there is a strange relation of cell and organism: did individual cells band together to form organisms (a sort of biological "social contract") or do individual organisms make cells by dissociation and specialization? B prefers the latter, but in that case, individual organism experience "a haunting [*une hantise*] of the social form."
11. LIFE, SELF-REFLECTION, AND THE BRAIN. Man is where the natural drive of life to creation becomes free, that is, life as consciousness becomes self-consciousness. Life's project is "paradoxical" in that it tries to "create with matter, which is necessity itself, an instrument of freedom." Humans alone succeed here, because of our brains, our language and our social life. With our *brains*, what happens is that habit creates mental mechanisms or "automatisms" that set consciousness free (bcs we don't have to think in order to walk) but ultimately weigh us down and trap us in cliché and repetition. But we can get free by using one mental mechanism against another. *Language* is then for our consciousness like "an immaterial body in which to incarnate itself." (Andy Clark has been working on language as "scaffolding" and as "turbocharging" our cognition). And *social life* "stores and preserves efforts as language stores thoughts." In this way we can see man as the "end" of evolution. (But there is too much contingency to have man as the pre-planned "goal" of evolution, nor

can we say that the rest of nature exists for our sake.)

12. INTELLECT AND INTUITION. So life is consciousness working through matter (tension / detension) and man is consciousness set free to become self-conscious. But we have to remember that most of human consciousness is intelligence directed to practical action and utilitarian reification, that is, to matter. Intuition, directed like instinct to life, is “almost completely sacrificed to intellect,” so that it survives in a “vague” and “discontinuous” manner. But these flashes do occur and philosophy needs to seize upon them, expand them, and unite them together. It will thus see that intuition is “mind [*esprit*] itself” and even “life itself.” Intelligence has been cut out of intuition / spirit the way matter has been cut out of duration: by slacking off of attention. We thus find in intuition the “unity of the spiritual life,” as we can get to intellect by slacking off of intuition, but we can never get to intuition via intellect (just as we can’t get to motion by adding together spatial positions).

If we abandon the unity of spirit and body, intuition and intellect, we separate spirit from body and risk having a philosophy of intuition that will be only a “negation” of science doomed to being superseded by science. But if we do concentrate on the unity of spirit and body (matter as detension of duration), then we have seen organisms as congealing of life. Life as a whole will have to be our object, as a flowing current animating matter, pulling it back up the slope it slides down. But in passing through matter life as consciousness adapts itself to matter: this is intellect. And when intellect looks at life, it does so with the materialist, mechanistic categories it develops for practical action: “it will therefore always perceive freedom in the form of necessity; it will always neglect the part of novelty or of creation inherent in the free act.”

When we develop our philosophy of intuition, we are no longer separated from the rest of nature. Just as the smallest grain of dust is bound to all material nature, all organized beings are evidence of a single impetus, the inverse of the movement of matter. All life and all humanity are united, ready to overcome any obstacle, “perhaps even death.”