

7. Contagion and Epidemics in Twentieth-Century Thought

A Hypothesis about Bergson

▼ **ABSTRACT** In the twentieth century, as in previous centuries, there was also much talk, at various levels and in the most diverse cultural fields, of epidemics and, more generally, of contagion. After some references to authors and works dealing with epidemics and contagion in the literary, philosophical, and human sciences fields, the essay focuses specifically on the theme of contagion and on one of the greatest thinkers of the early twentieth century, Henri Bergson, in whose works this theme is very present, albeit in a very peculiar form. Bergson often resorts to terms and concepts such as those of influence, diffusion, propagation, and transmission, when dealing with: psychological and gnoseological issues, the central theme of the evolution of life, and anthropological, ethical, and religious themes. In conclusion, it is hypothesized that in Bergson there is not simply a metaphorical use of the idea of contagion, but the presence of an original theoretical model of interpretation of reality consisting of a dynamic of interaction and transfer, which constitutes a conceptual structure characteristic of his thought.

1. Literature, Philosophy, and the Human Sciences

Since ancient times, the topic of epidemics and, more generally, contagion has been very present in the cultural production of Western civilization. The twentieth century, in this sense, is certainly no exception: epidemics, pandemics, and infectious diseases in general, real or fictional, have been the subject of various descriptions, representations, treatments, and interpretations; and the idea of contagion, extrapolated from its medical context, has been widely used in the most diverse fields to indicate and

define dynamics similar to those of the diffusion and transmission of a pathological phenomenon in the strict sense.¹

In a literary context, the most famous example in terms of contagious diseases is certainly the novel *La peste* (1947) by Albert Camus, in which the epidemic at the centre of the narrative is, on the one hand, the metaphor of the World War and of the Nazi horror that had haunted Europe for years; on the other hand, it is an opportunity for a series of broader reflections on the problem of evil and on the absurdity and incomprehensibility of the human condition.² But an infectious disease plays a far from marginal role in two other twentieth-century literary masterpieces: *Der Tod in Venedig* (1912) and *Der Zauberberg* (1924) by Thomas Mann. In the former, the cholera epidemic that is spreading in Venice is the background — and counterpart — to the protagonist's insane amorous passion and the last days of his life;³ in the latter, the scenario in which the narrated event takes place is a tuberculosis sanatorium where the protagonist himself has been hospitalized.⁴ The dating of Mann's two above-mentioned novels is reflected in that of two other works: *The Scarlet Plague* (1912), a short apocalyptic novel in which Jack London foreshadows a distant future in which humanity is almost entirely wiped out by a pandemic of colossal proportions;⁵ and *Semmelweis* (1924), the dissertation in Medicine in which a young Louis-Ferdinand Céline retraces the biography of the brilliant but unheeded discoverer of the true causes of puerperal infection.⁶ Two years after *La peste* by Camus, Curzio Malaparte's *La Pelle* (1949) was published, a raw and shocking portrait of the city of Naples freed by the Allies and overwhelmed by a plague epidemic that does not corrupt the body but the spirit.⁷ And in the second half of the last century other important narrative works appeared that revolve around epidemics of various kinds, whether they had actually occurred or were imaginary: from *Le hussard sur le toit* (1951) by Jean Giono to Marcel Pagnol's *Les Pestiférés* (1977, published

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- 1 For a recent and comprehensive historical-social framework of the phenomenon of epidemics, see Frank M. Snowden, *Epidemics and Society: From the Black Death to the Present* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019); see also *Epidemics and Ideas: Essays on the Historical Perception of Pestilence*, ed. by Terence Ranger and Paul Slack (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992). Regarding the idea of contagion in particular, see *Contagion: Perspectives from Pre-Modern Societies*, ed. by Lawrence I. Conrad and Dominik Wujastyk (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000); Saul Jarcho, *The Concept of Contagion in Medicine, Literature, and Religion* (Malabar: Krieger, 2000); *Contagion: Historical and Cultural Studies*, ed. by Alison Bashford and Claire Hooker (London and New York: Routledge, 2001); *Imagining Contagion in Early Modern Europe*, ed. by Claire L. Carlin (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); Antonio Lucci, 'Ansteckung. Plädoyer für eine Ethik der Kontingenz', in *Die Corona-Gesellschaft. Analysen zur Lage und Perspektiven für die Zukunft*, ed. by Michael Volkmer and Karin Werner (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2020), pp. 357–67.
- 2 Albert Camus, *La peste* (Paris: Gallimard, 2021).
- 3 Thomas Mann, *Der Tod in Venedig* (Frankfurt a. M.: Fischer, 1992).
- 4 Thomas Mann, *Der Zauberberg* (Frankfurt a. M.: Fischer, 2003).
- 5 Jack London, *The Scarlet Plague* (New York: Macmillan, 1915).
- 6 Louis-Ferdinand Céline, *Semmelweis* (Paris: Gallimard, 1999).
- 7 Curzio Malaparte, *La pelle* (Milano: Adelphi, 2010).



posthumously), from *El amor en los tiempos del cólera* by Gabriel García Márquez (1985) to *Ensaio sobre a Cegueira* by José Saramago (1995).⁸

There have been quite a few philosophers who have spoken, in various senses, of contagion and contagious diseases. Just a few examples, among the many possible. At the beginning of the century, Otto Weininger, in a part of the concluding section of *Über die letzten Dinge* (1903), the collection of writings published immediately after his death, sees malaria as the symbol of an 'innerer Versumpfung' ('interior swamping'), that is, of an unhealthy condition in which the current of life can flow: in fact, 'die Gefahr des Flusses ist die Versumpfung. Dort sind die Mücken und das Fieber' ('the risk for the river is to end up in the swamps, where there are mosquitoes and fever'); and a little further on he still uses the image of the insect carrier par excellence of malaria to allude to the sense of persecution of those who have committed a crime: 'der Verbrecher halluziniert die giftige Mücke und stirbt an falscher Furcht durch Herzschlag' ('the criminal has the hallucination of the poisonous mosquito and dies of a broken heart from an unfounded fear').⁹ In a chapter of *Histoire et utopie* (1960) Emil Cioran identifies the reason for Russia's superiority over the West in its being immune from the contagion of the 'virus de la liberté' ('virus of freedom') and argues that, by virtue of its rampant imperialist ideology, it extends beyond its own borders like 'une épidémie, salutaire parfois, souvent nuisible, toujours fulgurante' ('an epidemic, sometimes healthy, often harmful, always meteoric'); while, in another chapter of the same work, he lashes out against the act of procreation and against the cult of the human species: 'la chair se propage avec l'impudeur d'un fléau' ('the flesh spreads with the impudence of a scourge') and all our thoughts appear 'contaminées par la présence de l'humain' ('contaminated by the presence of the human'), as well as unable to grasp any truth since 'cette pestilence asphyxie l'esprit et le rend impropre à considérer autre chose que l'animal pernicieux et fétide dont il subit les émanations' ('this pestilence suffocates the spirit and makes it unfit to consider anything other than the pernicious and fetid animal whose emanations it suffers').¹⁰ And in the introduction to *Mille plateaux* (1980), the sequel to the better known *L'anti-Œdipe*, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari refer, among other things, to viruses to explain the nature of the rhizome (one of the key notions of the work) and, more precisely, its characteristic of linking together very heterogeneous elements or beings: since through a virus genetic information of an organism can be transferred to another organism even of a completely different species, across the board with respect to lines of biological evolution, then it can be said that 'nous faisons rhizome avec nos virus,

8 Jean Giono, *Le hussard sur le toit* (Paris: Gallimard, 1995); Marcel Pagnol, *Les Pestiférés* (Paris: Éditions de Fallois, 2020); Gabriel García Márquez, *El amor en los tiempos del cólera* (Barcelona: Bruguera, 1985); José Saramago, *Ensaio sobre a Cegueira* (Lisbon: Caminho, 1995).

9 Otto Weininger, *Über die letzten Dinge* (Munich: Matthes & Seitz Verlag, 1997), pp. 186–87.

10 Emil M. Cioran, *Histoire et utopie*, in *Œuvres* (Paris: Gallimard, 1995), pp. 979–1061 (pp. 1001, 1004, 1020–21). And note that, to define the scope of politics and history as it appears in Cioran's vision, the author of the afterword to the Italian translation of *Histoire et utopie* uses the expression 'universe of total contamination': Mario A. Rigoni, 'Contaminazione totale', in Emil M. Cioran, *Storia e utopia* (Milan: Adelphi, 1982), pp. 147–59 (p. 153).

ou plutôt nos virus nous font faire rhizome avec d'autres bêtes' ('we make rhizomes with our viruses, in fact our viruses make us make rhizomes with other beasts'); and they conclude: 'nous évoluons et nous mourons de nos gripes polymorphes et rhizomatiques, plus que de nos maladies de descendance ou qui ont elles-mêmes leur descendance' ('we evolve and die because of our polymorphic and rhizomatic fevers, rather than from our diseases transmitted by descent or which have their own descent').¹¹

Michel Foucault, who dealt with epidemics and contagion in some of his most important works, deserves a special mention. 'À la fin du Moyen Âge, la lèpre disparaît du monde occidental' ('At the end of the Middle Ages, leprosy disappeared from the Western world'): this is the opening sentence of the first chapter of the first part of the *Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique* (1961).¹² The thesis that Foucault argues in the subsequent pages is that this terrible infectious disease disappeared from the European scenario in the fifteenth century and that its place was first taken (in the sixteenth century) by venereal diseases, but only in a, so to speak, provisional form and in the sense that those who were affected by them were housed, at least initially, in leper hospitals by then devoid of lepers; and later (in the seventeenth century) by madness, which can be considered the heir of leprosy in a much deeper sense. In fact, according to Foucault, during the period of its 'grand renferment' ('great confinement'), that is, in the heart of the modern age, madness was the object of the same exclusion mechanism to which leprosy had previously been subjected during the Middle Ages. This is a mechanism for which the act of exclusion, of forced separation from the community, entails at the same time a purification, a form of salvation: just as once the removal of the leper left him alone with his disease, which was a punishment for his sins and, as such, brought him closer to the grace of God, so now the imprisonment of the madman is what, in addition to preserving the world of reason from the risk of being confused with madness, offers him an opportunity for the redemption from a mental disorder which is considered a moral guilt.¹³ But madness also inherited something else from leprosy: the contagion dimension. Foucault dedicates the first chapter of the third part of the work to the 'grande peur' ('great fear'): towards the mid-eighteenth century people began to fear that, from the places of the confinement of madness, the contagion of a disease, both physical (the so-called 'fièvres des prisons', 'fevers of prisons') and moral (the depravity of inmates), that infects the body and the spirit and causes the decomposition of the flesh and the corruption of morals, could spread.¹⁴ In the second chapter of *Naissance de la clinique* (1963), several pages deal with the eighteenth-century medical study

11 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Mille plateaux. Capitalisme et schizophrénie 2* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1980), p. 18.

12 Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique* (Paris: Gallimard, 2017), p. 15.

13 Foucault, *Histoire de la folie*, pp. 15–21, 76–80, 112, 120–21, 179–85.

14 Foucault, *Histoire de la folie*, pp. 445–53 (but also pp. 153–54). Of this work we should also remember, among others, the pages in which Foucault deals with syphilis, which is mixed with madness in the places of the 'great confinement' (pp. 116–21), and the relationship between 'sympathy' — that is the ability of the internal organs of the human body to interact and receive stimuli — and nerve diseases (pp. 366–74).



of epidemics. In the context of the analysis of the progressive overcoming of a classification-based medicine, Foucault outlines, in this regard, a very precise picture. The epidemic differs from individual disease not by its nature or typology, but because it affects many people at the same time, that is, it is distinguished on the basis of a perception — writes Foucault — not ‘essentielle et ordinale’ (‘essential and ordinal’), but ‘quantitative et cardinale’ (‘quantitative and cardinal’); it is therefore a question of identifying not the general form of the disease, but the variable and singular element that unites all those affected by it. In this perspective, the contagion factor is of little importance: it can certainly be one of the causes of the epidemic, but it is only one of the many aspects of the issue. In any case, as epidemics have their own historical specificity and are collective phenomena, they require a detailed description on the one hand and a multiple point of view on the other hand, but also constant and constricting intervention, that is, a policing action. This experience of epidemics is thus at the origin of the definition of a political statute for medicine and the establishment of a medical awareness with both information and monitoring tasks.¹⁵ This last point is taken up and developed in *Surveiller et punir* (1975), where the phenomenon of epidemics is examined in relation to the development, especially between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, of the techniques for applying the discipline. In particular, the inspection, recording and surveillance practices that medical and political powers adopt to combat the plague are seen by Foucault as the answer to the real and imaginary disorder that the latter embodies; and the disciplinary schemes generated by the plague are also compared — and here Foucault’s discourse is linked not to the *Naissance de la clinique* but to the *Histoire de la folie* — with the rituals of exclusion to which, at the time, leprosy had been subject.¹⁶

Moreover, the idea of contagion enjoyed a widespread currency, especially between the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, in the context of studies on magic and the sacred in ancient or primitive societies. Suffice it to mention James Frazer, who, in his famous *The Golden Bough* (published in several volumes and in subsequent editions between 1890 and 1915, but also in a reduced version of great circulation in 1922), studies, on the one hand, the principles and the manifestations of ‘contagious magic’, which is based on the assumption that things that have once come into contact continue to interact at a distance, even when the contact has ceased; on the other hand, religious practices by means of which it is believed to be able to free an individual from the misfortunes or diseases (often of an epidemic nature) that afflict him, transferring them (almost always through physical contact, direct or indirect) on to inanimate objects, animals or other individuals.¹⁷ Or consider Émile Durkheim, who, in *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse* (1912), to explain the system of religious prohibitions, uses the principle (which had already been studied in previous years by other authors, including Frazer himself) of the

15 Michel Foucault, *Naissance de la clinique. Une archéologie du regard médical* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2007), pp. 21–26.

16 Michel Foucault, *Surveiller et punir. Naissance de la prison* (Paris: Gallimard, 2020), pp. 228–33.

17 James Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1990), esp. Chapters 3 and 55.

‘contagiosité du sacré’ (‘contagiousness of the sacred’): both in totemic religions and in the more advanced ones, the need to keep the profane and the sacred worlds strictly separate depends on the exceptional tendency of the latter to spread and be transmitted, even through superficial and mediated contact, to everything that surrounds it; and this contagiousness, this capacity of the sacred to pass from one body to another, is in turn made possible by the fact that the forces that are at stake here, that is, the religious forces, are conceived as something external and independent of the person in whom they act and, therefore, as something extremely mobile that can easily transfer itself to another person, contaminating him.¹⁸ Nor can we forget René Girard, who in much more recent years, while investigating the phenomenon of ritual sacrifice in *La violence et le sacré* (1972), identifies in the contagious character of violence the cause of religious impurity, also contagious: the objective of sacrificial practices is to take precautions to prevent violence from spreading and to protect, as far as possible, those who have already been contaminated by it and are therefore impure; and the fact that these precautions (which essentially consist in avoiding any form of contact) appear very similar to those adopted by modern medicine to combat epidemics is the reason why many scholars have seen in them a sort of anticipation of scientific empiricism.¹⁹

But there was also talk, again during the twentieth century, of ‘emotional contagion’ (to indicate the passive and involuntary forms, that is, without cognitive mediation, of affective sharing) in the context of psychology studies in general;²⁰ more specifically, there was talk — but also in this case, as in that of studies on magic and the sacred, as early as the nineteenth century — of ‘psychic contagion’ (or ‘mental’, ‘moral’, ‘social’) in the field of the psychology and sociology of the masses (an aspect which will be discussed later); Max Weber spoke of ‘methodologische Pestilenz’ (‘methodological pestilence’) with regard to the risks of over-reflecting on the method to be adopted in the field of historical-social research;²¹ Victor Klemperer spoke of a deviated form of the German language as a pathogen, not only as a symptom, but also a vehicle of contagion of that Hitlerian rhetoric in particular and of that Nazi ideology in general that spread in Germany in the 1930s with the virulence

18 Émile Durkheim, *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse. Le système totémique en Australie* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1990), pp. 453–64.

19 René Girard, *La violence et le sacré* (Paris: Grasset, 1972), pp. 47–55. By Girard see also ‘The Plague in Literature and Myth’, *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 15 (1974), pp. 833–50. Regarding contagion in Girard, see Ann W. Astell, ‘Saintly Mimesis, Contagion, and Empathy in the Thought of René Girard, Edith Stein, and Simone Weil’, *Shofar*, 22 (2004), no. 2, pp. 116–31.

20 On the subject, see first of all Elaine Hatfield and others, *Emotional Contagion. Studies in Emotion and Social Interaction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

21 Weber uses the above expression in a work of 1913: Max Weber, ‘Beitrag zur Werturteilsdiskussion im Ausschluß des Vereins für Sozialpolitik’, in *Max Weber-Gesamtausgabe*, I/12: *Verstehende Soziologie und Werturteilsfreiheit. Schriften und Reden 1908–1917*, ed. by J. Weiß und S. Frommer (Tübingen: Mohr, 2018), pp. 329–82. See Christopher Adair-Totef, ‘“Methodological Pestilence”: Max Weber’s Devastating Critique of Stammler’, *Max Weber Studies*, 14 (2014), no. 2, pp. 245–68; Edoardo Massimilla, ‘La “pestilenza metodologica” e la “maledizione del pospo”’: Max Weber lettore di Gustav Meyrink’, *Archivio di storia della cultura*, 31 (2018), pp. 263–72.



of an epidemic...²² Therefore, in the face of such a complex topic and such a vast panorama, I intend to focus on the idea of contagion, on the early decades of the century in question (but, at least in part, also on the last ones of the previous century), and on a single thinker, Henri Bergson, in whose works the theme of contagion is present in various ways, at different levels and probably — as I will hypothesize in conclusion — in an overall very peculiar form.

2. The Young Bergson and the Plague of Lucretius

It can be said that Bergson is among the authors who inaugurated the thought of the twentieth century: there was the successful *Le rire. Essai sur la signification du comique* (1900);²³ the 1901 essay 'Le rêve', which appeared shortly after Freud's *Traumdeutung*;²⁴ then there was in 1903 the 'Introduction à la métaphysique', a synthetic but very detailed manifesto of his philosophical method;²⁵ above all, from 1907 is the very famous *Évolution créatrice*, one of the pre-eminent books of the twentieth century, destined to exert an enormous influence in the most diverse fields of culture and knowledge.²⁶ However, it is also true that Bergson's activity had already begun in the last years of the previous century, with fundamental works such as the *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience* (1889) and *Matière et mémoire* (1896), in which the main presuppositions of his philosophical reflections are already fixed.²⁷ And also dating from the nineteenth century is what can be considered his first significant encounter with the theme of contagion (and epidemics): in fact, in 1883 there appeared the *Extraits de Lucrèce avec commentaire, études et notes*, a commented anthology of *De rerum natura* for use in schools (Bergson was at that time a high-school teacher) in which the French philosopher also dwells on the plague of Athens described, following in the footsteps of Thucydides, by the Latin poet.²⁸

As is well known, in Lucretius's vision (having a Democritean and Epicurean imprint), epidemics, as well as other events that are considered calamities such as earthquakes, volcanic eruptions or floods, should not be attributed to divine anger (this was the prevailing explanation in the previous tradition), but have purely natural causes, which ultimately depend on the modalities of aggregation and disaggregation of

22 Victor Klemperer, *LTI. Notizbuch eines Philologen* (Berlin: Aufbau-Verlag, 1947), esp. pp. 91–92. See Sergio Givone, 'Quando contagioso è il linguaggio', in *Metafisica della peste. Colpa e destino* (Torino: Einaudi, 2012), pp. 50–65.

23 Henri Bergson, *Le rire. Essai sur la signification du comique*, in *Œuvres* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1959; seconde édition 1963), pp. 381–485.

24 Henri Bergson, 'Le rêve', in *L'énergie spirituelle. Essais et conférences*, in *Œuvres*, pp. 811–977 (pp. 878–97).

25 Henri Bergson, 'Introduction à la métaphysique', in *La pensée et le mouvant. Essais et conférences*, in *Œuvres*, pp. 1249–1482 (pp. 1392–1432).

26 Henri Bergson, *L'évolution créatrice*, in *Œuvres*, pp. 487–809.

27 Henri Bergson, *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience*, in *Œuvres*, pp. 1–157; *Matière et mémoire*, in *Œuvres*, pp. 159–379.

28 On the Athenian plague, see chapter 1 of this volume.

the atoms, that is, of those tiny and invisible entities that form all existing bodies. In the specific case of epidemics, things are simply like this: ‘Primum multarum semina rerum | esse supra docui quae sint vitalia nobis, | et contra quae sint morbo mortique necessest | multa volare. Ea cum casu sunt forte coorta | et perturbarunt caelum, fit morbidus aer’ (‘First of all I explained earlier that there are germs of many substances which are vital for us, and on the contrary, many must be swirling around which bring disease and death. When by chance the latter rise compactly and cloud the sky, the air becomes infected’).²⁹ The distress that assails men in the face of such phenomena is therefore completely unjustified, just as the attribution of responsibility to the gods is unjustified: in order not to incur such errors, it would be sufficient to follow the atomistic conception of reality, thus learning really to know nature and to free oneself from any kind of superstition.

In his commentary on the Lucretian poem, Bergson refers to the verses concerning the plague on three separate occasions. First of all, in the short but important preface, he programmatically declares that he does not want to limit himself to extrapolating, from the text, the ‘descriptions à effet’ (‘striking descriptions’), in order not to run the risk of making the reader of the anthology believe that Lucretius is ‘un poète qui a décrit la vie des premiers hommes, ou les effets de la foudre, ou la peste d’Athènes, pour le plaisir de les décrire’ (‘a poet who described the life of the first men, or the effects of lightning, or the plague of Athens, for the pleasure of describing them’). Lucretius, on the contrary, ‘n’a jamais décrit que pour prouver; ses peintures les plus saisissantes sont uniquement destinées à nous faire comprendre, à nous faire accepter quelque grand principe philosophique’ (‘has always used descriptions to prove something; his most successful representations are only destined to make us understand, to make us accept some great philosophical principle’).³⁰ On this first occasion, therefore, the example of the Athens plague, alongside others, is useful to Bergson to corroborate his idea that the numerous descriptions which embellish the Lucretian work are never ends in themselves, but are always directed at demonstrating a philosophical assumption (which, in the case of the Athenian epidemic, is the completely natural origin of the disease).

Then, at the end of the substantial introduction, concentrating on Lucretius’s originality as a philosopher and as a poet, the reference to the plague of Athens is functional to underlining the profound difference which, according to Bergson, exists, beyond the many similarities, between the vision of Lucretius and that of Epicurus. If the doctrine of the latter aims at achieving a serenity, a form of happiness that derives from the elimination of melancholy and disturbances of the soul, superstition and all fear, Lucretius draws instead from the atomism of a Democritean matrix — from which Epicurus himself also draws inspiration — a very different conclusion:

Comme la fatalité des lois naturelles est ce qui l’a surtout frappé dans la doctrine des atomes, le poète a été pris, malgré la sérénité qu’il affecte, d’une pitié

²⁹ Lucretius, *De rerum natura*, ed. by Cyril Bailey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), VI. 1093–97.

³⁰ Henri Bergson, *Extraits de Lucrèce*, dixième édition (Paris: Delagrave, undated), p. v.



douloureuse pour cette humanité qui s'agite sans résultat, qui lutte sans profit, et que les lois inflexibles de la nature entraînent, malgré elle, dans l'immense tourbillonnement des choses. Pourquoi travailler, prendre de la peine? Pourquoi lutter, pourquoi se plaindre? Nous subissons la loi commune, et la nature se soucie peu de nous. Qu'un vent chargé de germes empoisonnés souffle sur la terre, une épidémie naîtra, les hommes mourront, les dieux n'y pourront rien faire. Et c'est sur l'épouvantable description de la peste d'Athènes que le poème se termine. Lucrece a voulu nous montrer l'impuissance des hommes et des dieux en présence des lois de la nature; il a voulu que le tableau fût effrayant, que la tristesse envahît notre âme, et que ce fût notre dernière impression.³¹

In short, the prevailing sentiment in Lucretian philosophy would not be that of a serenity that is within man's reach, but that of compassion for a humanity completely at the mercy of events and irremediably subjected to immutable natural laws; and it is no coincidence that *De rerum natura* ends — argues Bergson, who does not believe that the poem is unfinished — with the dramatic image of a humanity more suffering and helpless than ever, which the description of the plague in Athens conveys in a striking and irrefutable way.

Finally, in the anthological part, Bergson introduces the long passage of the poem concerning epidemics in general and the plague of Athens in particular, pointing out that, if the ancients explained the 'maladies épidémiques' ('epidemic diseases') by attributing them to the wrath of the gods, Lucretius, instead, traces them back to absolutely natural causes; recalling that the author of *De rerum natura*, in dealing with the Athenian disease, constantly keeps in mind the model represented by Thucydides; noting the fact that the Lucretian hypothesis on the origin of epidemics (according to which germs first spread in the atmosphere and then develop in the human body) has found a first confirmation in recent scientific observations.³² And again, in the footnotes that refer to individual verses, he dwells on a series of specific issues: Lucretius's exclusive use of the term *pestililitas* (instead of the more common *pestilentia*); the relationship between certain epidemics and the characteristics of certain places, more favourable than others to the multiplication of germs; the difficulty of establishing with certainty which was the infectious disease that really struck Athens (and which scholars have from time to time identified as scarlet fever, yellow fever, smallpox, etc.); the possibility of comparing these pages of Lucretius with those of other classical authors on a similar subject (from Virgil to Ovid, from

31 Bergson, *Extraits de Lucrece*, p. xxii: 'Since it is above all the fatality of natural laws that struck him in the doctrine of atoms, the poet [Lucretius] is seized, despite the serenity he flaunts, by a painful compassion for this humanity that gets agitated without result, that struggles without profit, and that the inflexible laws of nature drag by force into the immense vortex of things. Why work, why bother? Why fight, why complain? We undergo the common law and nature pays us little attention. It is sufficient for a wind loaded with poisonous germs to blow on the earth and an epidemic will be born, men will die, the gods will not be able to do anything about it. And it is regarding the frightening description of the Athens plague that the poem ends. Lucretius wanted to show us the powerlessness of men and gods in the presence of the laws of nature; he wanted the picture to be terrifying, that sadness should invade our souls, and that this should be our last impression.'

32 Bergson, *Extraits de Lucrece*, p. 147.

Lucan to Silius Italicus); Lucretius's intention to demonstrate the gods' disregard for men through the description of 'le plus terrible de tous les fléaux' ('the most terrible of all scourges').³³

3. From the *Essai* to *La pensée et le mouvant*

If, in the *Extraits de Lucrèce*, Bergson considers the idea of contagion understood in its proper sense, that is relative to the specific field of infections and epidemics, in many other places in his work, that is, those in which he deals with various phenomena of interaction, propagation, and transmission, this same idea reappears, although extrapolated from its original context and formulated more or less explicitly. This can be accounted for through a selection of particularly significant passages, taken from some of the French philosopher's most important texts.

As regards the nineteenth century, both the *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience* and *Matière et mémoire* should be mentioned. In the first chapter of the *Essai*, in the context of the discussion on the intensity of psychological states, Bergson talks about the way in which 'un obscur désir' ('an obscure desire') is gradually transformed into 'une passion profonde' ('a deep passion') by penetrating an ever increasing number of psychic elements and 'les teignant pour ainsi dire de sa propre couleur' ('dyeing them, as it were, with its own colour'); in treating in general the aesthetic feelings and the way in which they develop, he repeatedly resorts to the concepts of sympathy, influence, suggestion, and imitation, as well as the comparison with the effects of hypnosis; and, referring in particular to the plastic arts, he writes that they 'obtiennent un effet du même genre par la fixité qu'ils imposent soudain à la vie, et qu'une contagion physique communique à l'attention du spectateur' ('obtain an effect of the same kind [as that caused by poetry] through that fixity that they suddenly impose on life and which a physical contagion communicates to the spectator's attention').³⁴ In the second chapter, which concentrates on the multiplicity of the states of consciousness, in order to convey the idea of the reciprocal influence between the perception of the 'extériorité sans succession' ('exteriority without succession') of spatialized time on the one hand and the reality of the 'succession sans extériorité' ('succession without exteriority') of our interior duration on the other hand, Bergson brings into play, by analogy, 'ce que les physiciens appellent un phénomène d'endosmose' ('what physicists call a phenomenon of endosmosis'), that is the diffusion of a solvent in a solution.³⁵ Finally, in the third chapter, in which the

33 Bergson, *Extraits de Lucrèce*, pp. 147–49, 156. On the success of Lucretius in nineteenth-century France and, in particular, on Bergson's interpretation, see Salvatore Grandone, *Lucrezio e Bergson. La ricezione del 'De rerum natura' in Francia nel XIX secolo* (Rome: Aracne, 2018); see also Marie Cariou, *L'atomisme. Gassendi, Leibniz, Bergson et Lucrèce* (Paris: Aubier Montaigne, 1978); Patrick Healy, 'The Birthing of Things: Bergson as a Reader of Lucretius', *Footprint*, 8 (2014), pp. 29–39. On the Lucretian theory of epidemics, see Vivian Nutton, 'The Seeds of Disease: An Explanation of Contagion and Infection from the Greeks to the Renaissance', *Medical History*, 27 (1983), pp. 1–34 (pp. 9–11).

34 Henri Bergson, *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience*, in *Œuvres*, pp. 1–157 (pp. 9, 11–16).

35 Bergson, *Essai*, p. 73. Other references to endosmosis appear on pp. 75, 143, 149.



philosophical and psychological problem of freedom is directly addressed (on the basis of the theoretical acquisitions of the two previous chapters), the example of hypnotic suggestion is used here once again, to demonstrate that sometimes we can indeed undergo the influence of someone else's will, but this does not in any way mean that our will cannot function freely; moreover, in the final pages, we read that the idea of force, which within our consciousness we perceive as free spontaneity, when instead it is transposed into the external world and overlaps with the idea of necessity, it is 'imprégnée' ('impregnated') with the latter, and, therefore, conceived by us as if it necessarily determined the effects that derive from it.³⁶

But let's consider *Matière et mémoire*. In the first chapter, dedicated to the selection of images for representation, it is the act of perception and that of remembering which, according to Bergson, in a sort of mutual contagion, 'se pénètrent donc toujours, échangent toujours quelque chose de leurs substances par un phénomène d'endosmose' ('always interpenetrate each other and always exchange something of their substances through a phenomenon of endosmosis').³⁷ At the beginning of the second chapter, dealing with the recognition of images, the ideas of influence, conduction, and transmission refer, in a paragraph summarizing what was previously said, to the body: 'le corps, interposé entre les objets qui agissent sur lui et ceux qu'il influence, n'est qu'un conducteur, chargé de recueillir les mouvements, et de les transmettre, quand il ne les arrête pas, à certains mécanismes moteurs, déterminés si l'action est réflexe, choisis si l'action est volontaire' ('the body, interposed between the objects that act on it and those that it influences, is only a conductor, charged with collecting the movements and, in the event that it does not block them, transmitting them to certain motor mechanisms, determined if the action is reflected, chosen if the action is voluntary').³⁸ In a passage in the third chapter, dealing with the survival of images, Bergson hypothesizes that, in some cases, the memory of a sensation acts, in relation to a sensation in its nascent state, like the hypnotist who exercises a suggestion; while, in another passage, he takes it for granted that 'maladies infectieuses' ('infectious diseases') often provoke madness.³⁹ Finally, in the fourth chapter, concerned with the delimiting and fixation of images, we find the passage in which we read that our spirit 'a contracté l'habitude utile de substituer à la durée vraie, vécue par la conscience, un temps homogène et indépendant' ('has contracted the practical habit of replacing true duration, experienced by consciousness, with a homogeneous and independent time');⁴⁰ but it should also be noted that, in many of his writings, Bergson refers several times to the act of contracting a habit⁴¹ (as well as, after all, to the ideas of influence, transmission, and propagation themselves, also in *Matière et mémoire* itself).⁴²

36 Bergson, *Essai*, pp. 104, 142.

37 Henri Bergson, *Matière et mémoire*, in *Œuvres*, pp. 159–379 (p. 214).

38 Bergson, *Matière et mémoire*, p. 223.

39 Bergson, *Matière et mémoire*, pp. 278–79, 313.

40 Bergson, *Matière et mémoire*, p. 342.

41 See e.g. Bergson, *Essai*, pp. 73 and 141.

42 See Bergson, *Matière et mémoire*, *passim*.

To move on to the twentieth century, we can first of all state that in *Le rire* the principle — which is also, as we know, a commonplace — of the contagiousness of laughter is not explicitly theorized; but, also in this text better known than others to the general public, Bergson does not fail to use, in various ways and in different contexts, ideas such as those of suggestion, infiltration, propagation, communication, fascination, and imitation: all ideas which — it is easy to understand — are very close to that of contagion.⁴³ In the first decade of the century, however, what we find in the *Évolution créatrice* is much more important. In this work that is almost unanimously considered Bergson's masterpiece, in fact, the idea of transmission, in all its significance, plays an absolutely fundamental role in defining what is probably the culminating concept — certainly the most famous — of his philosophy: the *élan vital* ('vital impetus'). Bergson first reviews the main evolutionary theories of his time, from neo-Darwinism to neo-Lamarckism, subjecting them to close scrutiny; he then outlines the contours of a new and original evolutionism, of a theory of evolution that is truly capable of explaining — and, we can certainly add, of adequately celebrating — the powerful creative charge of novelty that accompanies and characterizes life. In this perspective, he rejects the principle, dogmatically understood, of the hereditary transmissibility of acquired characteristics as well as of contracted habits, but he does not at all dismiss the idea of transmission in itself, on the contrary: in fact, it is precisely the *élan vital*, life itself, which passes from one generation of germs to the next, through the highly-developed organisms that are like its carriers. Bergson speaks specifically of a 'courant de vie' ('current of life') which is also a 'courant de conscience' ('current of consciousness') and a 'courant d'existence' ('current of existence'): 'ce courant de vie, traversant les corps qu'il a organisés tour à tour, passant de génération en génération, s'est divisé entre les espèces et éparpillé entre les individus sans rien perdre de sa force, s'intensifiant plutôt à mesure qu'il avançait' ('this current of life, passing through the bodies that it has gradually organized, passing from generation to generation, has divided itself among the species and scattered itself among the individuals, without losing any of its strength, in fact becoming more intense as it advanced').⁴⁴ Finally, life is 'un fluide bienfaisant [qui] nous baigne' ('a beneficial fluid [that] bathes us'), 'une onde immense qui se propage' ('an immense wave that spreads'), something — we can conclude — that, just like the virus of a colossal epidemic, or rather of an unstoppable pandemic, spreads everywhere, vivifying and contaminating all beings.⁴⁵

Particular mention should be made of the lecture entitled "Fantômes de vivants" et "recherche psychique", which Bergson gave on 28 May 1913 at the Society for Psychical Research in London. In this lecture, the text of which would be published six years later in the collection of essays and lectures *L'énergie spirituelle*, Bergson aims, on the one hand, at unmasking the metaphysical prejudice that generates the diffidence, derision, and objections encountered by investigations that deal with

43 See Henri Bergson, *Le rire*, passim.

44 Henri Bergson, *L'évolution créatrice*, in *Œuvres*, pp. 487–809 (pp. 516, 649, 652).

45 Bergson, *L'évolution créatrice*, pp. 657, 720.



psychic phenomena — such as telepathy and the so-called true hallucinations, that is the apparitions of sick or dying people to relatives or friends who are at a great distance — whose actual existence is in fact questioned by many; on the other hand, he argues that these phenomena are in reality of the same kind as those which constitute the object of the natural sciences and that ‘recherche psychique’ (‘psychic research’) simply studies them following a method which, compared to that adopted by the natural sciences, is very different. Well, in this real apologia for parapsychology — an apologia which, among other things and as is well known, provoked a lot of criticism of Bergson — there is talk of influence, diffusion, and similar dynamics at different points and at different levels. First of all, in general, the phenomenon of true hallucinations is connected with telepathy, that is to the action that a certain consciousness can exercise on another consciousness, communicating with it without a visible intermediary; and telepathy is compared to electricity: ‘Nous produisons de l’électricité à tout moment, l’atmosphère est constamment électrisée, nous circulons parmi des courants magnétiques; pourtant des millions d’hommes ont vécu pendant des milliers d’années sans soupçonner l’existence de l’électricité. Nous avons aussi bien pu passer, sans l’apercevoir, à côté de la télépathie’ (‘We produce electricity at all times, the atmosphere is constantly electrified, we circulate in the midst of magnetic currents; and yet millions of men have lived for thousands of years without suspecting the existence of electricity. Similarly, we could have passed close to telepathy without noticing it’).⁴⁶ Then, more specifically, the legitimacy of ‘psychic research’ would also be justified by the fact that memories which are defined ‘de rêve’ (‘as dreams’), as well as perceptions that are defined as ‘inconscientes’ (‘unconscious’), could creep into consciousness.⁴⁷ Once again, the ‘empiètement réciproque’ (‘mutual interpenetration’) of our consciousnesses is traced back to the ‘échanges’ (‘exchanges’) and ‘intercommunication’ (‘intercommunication’) which characterize the aforementioned phenomena of endosmosis.⁴⁸ And, lastly, mention is made of ‘la thérapeutique par suggestion, ou plus généralement par influence de l’esprit sur l’esprit’ (‘therapy through suggestion or, more generally, through the influence of the spirit on the spirit’).⁴⁹ But it can also be added that at the beginning of his lecture, while speaking of the mistrust of official science towards ‘psychic research’, Bergson notes: ‘Rien n’est plus désagréable au savant de profession que de voir introduire, dans une science de même ordre que la sienne, des procédés de recherche et de vérification dont il s’est toujours soigneusement abstenu’ (‘There is nothing more unpleasant for the professional scientist than seeing research and verification procedures — introduced in a science of the same order as his own — from which he has always carefully abstained’); and he concludes, in a succinct way: ‘Il craint la contagion’ (‘He fears contagion’).⁵⁰ And another passage that may be interesting is

46 Henri Bergson, “Fantômes de vivants” et “recherche psychique”, in *L’énergie spirituelle. Essais et conférences*, in *Œuvres*, pp. 811–977, 860–78 (p. 863).

47 Bergson, “Fantômes de vivants”, p. 874.

48 Bergson, “Fantômes de vivants”, p. 874.

49 Bergson, “Fantômes de vivants”, p. 876.

50 Bergson, “Fantômes de vivants”, p. 862.

found towards the end, when Bergson states that, in the history of science, it is thanks to mathematics that ‘le besoin de la preuve s’est propagé d’intelligence à intelligence’ (‘the need for proof has spread from intelligence to intelligence’).⁵¹

As regards the rest of Bergson’s corpus, this work confines itself for the moment to a crucial passage from ‘La signification de la guerre’, the lecture given by Bergson on 12 December 1914 at the Académie des Sciences morales et politiques in Paris; and to some passages from *La pensée et le mouvant*, a collection of essays and lectures published in 1934 (especially from the substantial second part of the introduction, entitled ‘De la position des problèmes’ and dated January 1922). The text of the Académie lecture is undoubtedly the most famous of Bergson’s so-called *écrits de guerre* (‘war writings’): in it, the ongoing conflict between France and Germany is presented as a momentous, almost metaphysical, clash between civilization and barbarism, moral strength and material strength, spirit and mechanics. At a certain point, in trying to imagine what the questions that Germany had posed on the threshold of the declaration of war must have been, Bergson — through a pressing series of rhetorical questions — envisages the looming extension of German materialism from its homeland to the whole of humanity in terms which, at least in part, do not seem very different from those that could be used to talk about the spread of a disastrous pandemic:

Qu’arriverait-il si les forces mécaniques, que la science venait d’amener sur un point pour les mettre au service de l’homme, s’emparaient de l’homme pour le convertir à leur propre matérialité? Que deviendrait le monde si ce mécanisme se saisissait de l’humanité entière et si les peuples, au lieu de se hausser librement à une diversité plus riche et plus harmonieuse, comme des personnes, tombaient dans l’uniformité comme des choses? Que serait une société qui obéirait automatiquement à un mot d’ordre mécaniquement transmis, qui réglerait sur lui sa science et sa conscience, et qui aurait perdu, avec le sens de la justice, la notion de la vérité?⁵²

51 Bergson, “‘Fantômes de vivants’”, p. 877. On Bergson and ‘psychic research’, see Camille Pernot, ‘Spiritualisme et spiritisme chez Bergson’, *Revue de l’enseignement philosophique*, 15 (1964), no. 3, pp. 1–23; Thibaud Trochu, ‘Bergson et Freud: la “recherche psychique” et l’“exploration de l’inconscient”’, in *Bergson et Freud*, ed. by Brigitte Sitbon (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2014), pp. 197–215.

52 Henri Bergson, ‘Discours en séance publique de l’Académie des Sciences Morales et Politiques’ (‘La signification de la guerre’), in *Mélanges* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1972), pp. 1107–29 (p. 1115): ‘What would happen if the mechanical forces, which science had brought to a point to place them at the service of man, took possession of man to convert him to their own materiality? What would the world become if this mechanism took over all of humanity and if peoples, instead of rising freely to a richer and more harmonious diversity, like people, fell back into uniformity like things? What would a society be that automatically obeyed a mechanically transmitted watchword, that regulated its science and conscience on that watchword, and that had lost, together with the sense of justice, the notion of truth?’. Among the studies worth citing, which deal with Bergson’s *écrits de guerre*, apart from the fundamental Philippe Soulez, *Bergson politique* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1989), there are also the more recent ones: Vincenza Petyx, *Bergson e le streghe di Macbeth. Dagli ‘écrits de guerre’ a ‘Les deux sources de la morale et de la religion’* (Alessandria: Edizioni dell’Orso, 2006); Florence Caeymaex, ‘Les discours de guerre (1914–1918). Propagande et philosophie’, in *Annales bergsoniennes VII* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2014), pp. 143–66.



In *La pensée et le mouvant*, on the other hand, the idea of transmission is certainly present in its various aspects. In the first part of the introduction to the book, entitled 'Croissance de la vérité. Mouvement rétrograde du vrai' and undated, Bergson writes: 'Nous transmettons aux générations futures ce qui nous intéresse, ce que notre attention considère et même dessine à la lumière de notre évolution passée' ('We pass on to future generations what interests us, what our attention considers and also shapes in the light of our past evolution').⁵³ In the above-mentioned second part of the introduction, we find a reference to the 'transmission héréditaire' ('hereditary transmission') of what is innate; we are warned that 'il ne faut pas croire que la vie sociale soit une habitude acquise et transmise' ('we must not believe that social life is an acquired and transmitted habit'); we read that 'le langage transmet des ordres ou des avertissements' ('language transmits orders or warnings').⁵⁴ While, at the beginning of 'La perception du changement' (a text that brings together two lectures held at the University of Oxford between 26 and 27 May 1911), Bergson expresses his gratitude towards the institution that has invited him, describing it as 'un des rares sanctuaires où se conservent, pieusement entretenues, transmises par chaque génération à la suivante, la chaleur et la lumière de la pensée antique' ('one of the rare sanctuaries in which the warmth and light of ancient thought are preserved, maintained with devotion, transmitted from one generation to the next').⁵⁵ But in the second part of the introduction there are still two points that are worth dwelling on. In the first place, the phenomenon of endosmosis — which, as we have seen, is the object of frequent references when Bergson wants to allude to the interaction between consciousnesses — is even, so to speak, removed from the sphere of relevance of physical chemistry and delivered without mincing words to that of psychology: 'La sympathie et l'antipathie irréfléchies, qui sont si souvent divinatrices, témoignent d'une interpénétration possible des consciences humaines. Il y aurait donc des phénomènes d'endosmose psychologique' ('The unreflective sympathy and antipathy, which are often diviners, testify to a possible interpenetration of human consciousnesses. There would therefore be phenomena of psychological endosmosis').⁵⁶ And, in the second place, to respond to the criticism made by Julien Benda, who had accused his philosophy of being a 'justification de l'instabilité' ('justification of instability') inasmuch as it saw in the 'permanence de la substance' ('permanence of substance') nothing other than a 'continuité de changement' ('continuity of change'), Bergson formulates the following paradox: 'Autant vaudrait s'imaginer que le bactériologiste nous recommande les maladies microbiennes quand il nous montre partout des microbes' ('We might as well imagine that the bacteriologist is recommending diseases deriving from microbes when he shows us microbes everywhere').⁵⁷

53 Henri Bergson, *La pensée et le mouvant. Essais et conférences*, in *Œuvres*, pp. 1249–1482 (p. 1266).

54 Bergson, *La pensée et le mouvant*, pp. 1298, 1320, 1321.

55 Henri Bergson, 'La perception du changement', in *La pensée et le mouvant*, pp. 1365–92 (p. 1366).

56 Bergson, *La pensée et le mouvant*, p. 1273.

57 Bergson, *La pensée et le mouvant*, p. 1328. Bergson is referring to Julien Benda, *Une philosophie pathétique* (Paris: Cahiers de la quinzaine, 1913), pp. 80–81.

4. Between 'Psychic Contagion' and Moral Imitation

This, albeit partial and concise, reconnaissance of Bergson's corpus may perhaps be sufficient to be able to say that in it, due to the recurring use of terms and concepts such as those — among others — of influence, diffusion, and transmission (but also because of some, more or less occasional, references to infectious pathologies), the idea of contagion — although understood in a rather broad sense — is markedly present (and is on several occasions strictly functional to the development of reflection). But there is more. In some ways, in fact, it can be said that Bergson is included, with his originality, in the line of studies on 'psychic contagion' — in the social sphere — which has already been mentioned in the opening section.

There are several authors who, at the end of the nineteenth century, gave an impetus to this line of studies.⁵⁸ Let's just consider a few of them. In *Les lois de l'imitation* (1890), his best known work, Gabriel Tarde argues that all human societies are based on the principle of imitation, which consists in a phenomenon of suggestion, in an assimilation of innovations that is the fruit of the action at a distance exerted by one mind on another, in a repetition which is simultaneously a multiplication, in a real contagion that spreads following a geometric progression (and, to further clarify its nature, he also speaks — as well as, in fact, of contagion — of hypnotism, sympathy, fascination, magnetization, polarization...).⁵⁹ It is in *Folla delinquente* (1891) that the Italian Scipio Sighele identifies in imitation, understood as a natural instinct, the origin of what can be called the 'anima della folla' ('soul of the crowd'); and specifies that, if this imitation occurs at an unconscious level, it can certainly be explained — as others have already done — with the notion of 'contagio morale' ('moral contagion'), provided that — however — it is recognized that the latter has a physical basis in the reflective receptivity of the psyche, that is, in a form of suggestion that recalls fascination and hypnotism and which, if it concerns not one but many individuals, generates real epidemics.⁶⁰ And Gustave Le Bon, in a widely-read work, *Psychologie des foules* (1895), writes that, when a person wants to sway the crowd and induce it to perform certain actions, if there are favourable circumstances and if he has sufficient prestige, he only has to rely on example; but, otherwise, he must resort to the obsessive repetition of particular and peremptory statements, thus triggering the unnatural mechanism of contagion, which reduces the individual to the condition of the hypnotized person in the hands of the hypnotist: in fact, ideas, emotions, and beliefs are, if spread among crowds, as contagious as microbes.⁶¹ It is then hardly necessary to say that Freud, in *Massenpsychologie und Ich-Analyse* (1921) also dealt with 'psychic contagion' in the social sphere: starting from the text of Le Bon, the founder of psychoanalysis refutes that in order to explain the behaviour of the individual in a throng it is necessary to hypothesize the existence of a psychic entity

58 For further discussion of links between crowd psychology and contagion in the late nineteenth century, see section 3 of chapter 10 of this volume.

59 Gabriel Tarde, *Les lois de l'imitation. Étude sociologique* (Paris: Alcan, 1890), esp. pp. 82–98.

60 Scipio Sighele, *La folla delinquente* (Milan: La Vita Felice, 2015), esp. pp. 27–54.

61 Gustave Le Bon, *Psychologie des foules* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2020), pp. 72–76.



free from the drives studied by individual psychology; and in particular, considering the conceptual categories of suggestion, imitation, and contagion unsatisfactory, he prefers to resort instead to the notion of *libido*, in the belief that both the essence of the subjective psyche and that of the so-called collective psyche must be sought in love relationships and in emotional ties.⁶²

Bergson was well acquainted with and appreciated the theories of social imitation of Tarde, whom he succeeded as holder of the chair of Modern Philosophy at the Collège de France. In fact, he stated in the speech he gave on 12 September 1909, on the occasion of the inauguration of a monument dedicated to him: 'Sans doute, les sociétés humaines sont traversées par des courants; mais à l'origine de chaque courant il y a une impulsion, et l'impulsion vient d'un homme' ('Without a doubt, human societies are crossed by currents; but at the origin of each current there is an impulse, and the impulse comes from a man'); he then added, along the lines of the analogy between the subjective and collective levels: 'Comme l'histoire de chacun de nous s'explique par les initiatives qu'il a prises et par les habitudes qu'il a contractées, ainsi la vie des sociétés est faite des inventions qui ont surgi çà et là et des modifications durables que ces inventions ont amenées en se faisant adopter' ('Just as the story of each of us is expressed through the initiatives he has taken and through the habits he has contracted, so the life of societies is made up of the inventions that have arisen here and there and of the lasting changes that these inventions have brought about by being adopted'); and finally he exclaims: 'Grande et importante idée!' ('A great and important idea!').⁶³ He also wrote in the preface to a French anthology of selected pages of Tarde published in the same year: 'L'imitation ne manifeste en effet ni une impulsion mécanique ni même, à proprement parler, une attraction morale. C'est une certaine action *sui generis* qui s'exerce d'esprit à esprit. C'est une certaine contagion psychologique se propageant dans une certaine direction déterminée' ('Actually, imitation does not reveal a mechanical impulse or, properly speaking, a moral attraction. It is a kind of *sui generis* action that is exercised from spirit to spirit. It is a kind of psychological contagion that spreads in a certain determined direction').⁶⁴

But, above all, it is worth remembering here the research on great personalities conducted by William James in the essays 'Great Men, Great Thoughts, and the Environment' (1880) and 'The Importance of Individuals' (1890); as well as the pages dealing with the influence exerted on other men by saints and mystics in the

62 Sigmund Freud, *Massenpsychologie und Ich-Analyse / Die Zukunft einer Illusion* (Frankfurt a. M.: Fischer, 1993), Chapters 2 and 4. What can be considered an updated version of the line of studies on 'psychic contagion' established itself in the last decades of the twentieth century: see in particular Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976; second edition 1989); Daniel C. Dennett, *Consciousness Explained* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1991); Richard Brodie, *Virus of the Mind: The New Science of the Meme* (Seattle: Integral Press, 1996); Aaron Lynch, *Thought Contagion: How Belief Spreads through Society* (New York: Basic Books, 1996).

63 Henri Bergson, 'Discours sur Gabriel Tarde', in *Mélanges*, pp. 799–801 (p. 800).

64 Henri Bergson, 'Préface', in *Pages choisies de Gabriel Tarde*, in *Mélanges*, pp. 811–13 (p. 812).

work entitled *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902).⁶⁵ Bergson refers to the content of this latter work both in the preface to the French translation (1911) of the famous *Pragmatism* of his American friend and correspondent: ‘Nous baignons, d’après James, dans une atmosphère que traversent de grands courants spirituels. Si beaucoup d’entre nous se raidissent, d’autres se laissent porter. Et il est des âmes qui s’ouvrent toutes grandes au souffle bienfaisant. Celles-là sont les âmes mystiques’ (‘We are immersed, according to James, in an atmosphere crossed by great spiritual currents. While many of us stiffen, others let themselves be carried away. And there are souls who are totally open to the beneficial breath. These are the mystical souls’);⁶⁶ and in the preface to the French translation (1924) of a collection of extracts from the New York philosopher’s correspondence: ‘Il ne voulait rien sacrifier de l’expérience; et comme il croyait à des courants de réalité multiples, plus ou moins indépendants les uns des autres, se juxtaposant et s’entrecroisant pour faire un “univers pluralistique”, il allait les chercher dans les consciences individuelles qui en subissaient l’influence et qui les manifestaient’ (‘He did not want to sacrifice anything to experience; and since he believed in multiple currents of reality, more or less mutually independent, that became juxtaposed and intersected to create a “pluralistic universe”, he went to look for them in the individual consciousnesses that were influenced by them and manifested them’).⁶⁷

Now, also on the basis of suggestions like these, Bergson develops his own precise conception of moral exemplarity and the action it exercises on humanity. This conception emerges at various times and in various writings.⁶⁸ For example, in the text of the conference ‘La conscience et la vie’, held at the University of Birmingham on 29 May 1911, he states:

Supérieur est le point de vue du moraliste. Chez l’homme seulement, chez les meilleurs d’entre nous surtout, le mouvement vital se poursuit sans obstacle, lançant à travers cette œuvre d’art qu’est le corps humain, et qu’il a créée au passage, le courant indéfiniment créateur de la vie morale. L’homme, appelé sans cesse à s’appuyer sur la totalité de son passé pour peser d’autant plus puissamment sur l’avenir, est la grande réussite de la vie. Mais créateur par excellence est celui dont l’action, intense elle-même, est capable d’intensifier aussi l’action des autres hommes, et d’allumer, généreuse, des foyers de générosité.⁶⁹

65 See William James, ‘Great Men, Great Thoughts, and the Environment’, *The Atlantic Monthly*, 46 (1880), no. 276, pp. 441–59; Id., ‘The Importance of Individuals’, *Open Court*, 4 (1890), pp. 2437–40; Id., *The Varieties of Religious Experience. A Study in Human Nature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), Lectures 14 and 15.

66 Henri Bergson, ‘Sur le pragmatisme de William James. Vérité et réalité’, in *Œuvres*, pp. 1440–50 (p. 1443).

67 Henri Bergson, ‘Préface’, in William James, *Extraits de sa correspondance*, in *Sur le pragmatisme de William James* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2011), pp. 37–43 (pp. 40–41). On Bergson and James, see at the very least Frédéric Worms, ‘Bergson et James, lectures croisées’, *Philosophie*, 64 (1999), pp. 54–68; *Bergson et James. Cent ans après*, ed. by Stéphane Madelrieux (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2011).

68 On this conception of Bergson, see in particular Maria Teresa Russo, *Esperienza ed esemplarità morale. Rileggere ‘Le due fonti della morale e della religione’ di Henri Bergson* (Pisa: ETS, 2017); see this book also for its thorough comparison between Bergson’s position and that of Tarde, James, and other authors: Chapters 5 and 6.

69 Henri Bergson, ‘La conscience et la vie’, in *L’énergie spirituelle*, pp. 815–36 (pp. 833–34): ‘The point of view of the moralist is superior. Only in man, and especially in the best of us, does the vital movement unfold without



To give another example from the 1910s, taken from the text of the lecture on George Washington held in the United States on 22 February 1917: 'Il y avait en elles je ne sais quelle des réserves de une force invisible, je ne sais quelle puissance indéfinie de rayonnement. Elles étaient chargées d'une espèce d'électricité qui se propageait comme par induction et qui magnétisait et aimantait tout un peuple' ('There was in them [the deeds and words of extraordinary personalities like those of Joan of Arc and Washington himself] I do not know what reserves of an invisible force, I do not know what indefinite capacity for reasoning. They were charged with a kind of electricity that spread by induction, magnetizing and attracting an entire people').⁷⁰ But it is in the *Deux sources de la morale et de la religion* (1932), the work in which Bergson extends his reflection to the sphere of the life of man in society, that the idea of the diffusion as if by contagion of a superior ethical-religious message finds its most complete and detailed formulation. The bearer of this message is above all the figure of the mystic and, in particular, of the Christian mystic. Already in the first chapter, the reason why the saints have so many imitators and the great propagators of good manage to influence entire crowds into following them is identified in the appeal exercised by their own existence, an existence in which the mystics permit the flow of a beneficial flux that 'à travers eux' ('through their person') tends to win other men and that takes the form of an outburst of love: 'amour qui pourra aussi bien se transmettre par l'intermédiaire d'une personne qui se sera attachée à eux ou à leur souvenir resté vivant, et qui aura conformé sa vie à ce modèle' ('love which can equally be transmitted through another person tied to them or to their surviving memory, and that has modelled his life on theirs').⁷¹ However, it is in the third chapter — in which there are also, among other things, references to the magnetization and the suggestion caused by hypnosis — that attention is focused precisely on Christian mysticism, on the current of life and love that arises from it, as well as on its means of propagation.⁷² And the fourth chapter, in which Bergson again dwells on the diffusion of Christian mysticism, ends with some pages dealing with phenomena — such as 'manifestations télépathiques' ('telepathic manifestations') or those on account of which 'quelque chose passe' ('something passes') from the outside to the inside of both the body and the consciousness — which are concerned with that 'psychic research' which had been the subject of a broader discussion in the above-mentioned 1913 conference.⁷³

obstacles, launching the infinitely creative current of moral life through that work of art that is the human body, which the vital movement itself has created in passing. Man, constantly called to base himself on the totality of his past in order to have greater weight in the future, is life's great success. But the creator par excellence is the one whose action, intense in itself, is also capable of intensifying the action of other men, and generously igniting clusters of generosity'.

70 Henri Bergson, 'Conférence du 22 février 1917: Anniversaire de Washington devant l'American Club' ('L'éloge de G. Washington'), in *Correspondances* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2002), pp. 715–20 (p. 715).

71 Henri Bergson, *Les deux sources de la morale et de la religion*, in *Œuvres*, pp. 979–1247 (pp. 1003, 1059–60).

72 Bergson, *Les deux sources*, pp. 1158, 1164–65, 1168–79.

73 Bergson, *Les deux sources*, pp. 1238, 1243–45. It is also worth bearing in mind that in the second chapter Bergson, in considering studies of ethnology and anthropology, deals extensively with the belief among primitive peoples in a force that spreads in nature and that allows the exercise of influences of various kinds: pp. 1115–29.

Influence, diffusion, propagation, transmission...: even when dealing with the important theme of moral exemplarity and mysticism, Bergson therefore uses massively, as we have seen him do in several other places in his corpus, what we can call the lexicon of contagion (and, among other things, he often resorts, on this as on other occasions, to the same analogies — from magnetism to hypnosis — to which those who interpret imitation or social manipulation in terms of ‘psychic contagion’ resort). It seems, then, that even Bergson, like so many others have done, has taken up a mental scheme belonging to the medical-scientific field to use it in his studies; and the objective presence of the idea of contagion in his writings — which scholars have not failed to notice — seems to confirm this.⁷⁴ However, there is another quintessentially lexical fact that must not be overlooked. Unlike those who have spoken of ‘psychic contagion’ (but also those who have spoken of ‘contagious magic’, of ‘contagiousness of the sacred’, and so on), that is, unlike those who have clearly stated their debt to the contagion of infectious diseases, Bergson almost never uses the term *contagion* itself, neither with regard to moral and religious imitation, nor the other times in which he draws abundantly from the lexicon that gravitates around the contagion of infectious diseases. And perhaps this is not accidental. Perhaps his case is different. What we see in Bergson, in fact, does not seem, all in all, to be so much — and simply — an indirect, derivative, and metaphorical use of the idea of contagion (as happens, in fact, in all the other authors), as instead the systematic adoption of a theoretical model of the interpretation of both material and spiritual reality (a model consisting of a sort of dynamic of interaction and transfer) which has almost everything in common with the act of contagion in its proper sense, but which — first of all and independently from this act, whose so-to-speak official denomination (namely, that of *contagion*) actually rarely appears — constitutes an autonomous conceptual structure, characteristic and recurring, of his own thought.⁷⁵ And this is a conceptual structure that underpins his philosophical discourse — as we have tried to show, through some examples — whether dealing with consciousness and psychological states, perception and representation, when focusing on the evolution of life, or dealing with so-called paranormal phenomena, and when the time comes to tackle the ethical and religious issue...

If therefore — as it seems — this is the case, that is, if this conceptual structure really exists and is active in Bergson’s thought, then the originality of the position of the author of the *Évolution créatrice* is evident: the idea of contagion is not in fact present in his thought as an external element that is called into question to explain certain phenomena, but is a constitutive aspect of it. In other words: a theoretical

74 For example, there are references to the idea of contagion in Bergson in the following recent works: Andrew Hewitt, *Social Choreography: Ideology as Performance in Dance and Everyday Movement* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), pp. 100–01; Joshua Gunn, ‘Canned Laughter’, *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, 47 (2014), no. 4, pp. 434–54 (pp. 436–37); Wesley H. Burdine, ‘Feeling Out of Time: Phenomenal Bodies and Temporality in *fin de siècle*’ (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Minnesota, 2016), Chapters 1 and 4. See also Luciana Parisi, ‘Biotech: Life by Contagion’, *Theory, Culture & Society*, 24 (2007), no. 6, pp. 29–52 (pp. 31, 33–36, 47).

75 On contagion in a metaphorical sense, see in particular Donald Beecher, ‘An Afterword on Contagion’, in *Imagining Contagion*, pp. 243–60.



option that in practice coincides with the idea of contagion is an organic and essential component of Bergson's philosophy. But precisely for this reason we can then say that, in considering Bergson, we are confronted by a very peculiar case — but no less significant, on the contrary — of the presence of the motif of contagion between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

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