

The Importance of the Conception of Life for the Philosophy of Sustainable Development: Bergson's Contribution

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Bergson's conception of life can provide the basis for the philosophy of the doctrine of sustainable development. The paper distinguishes not only three essential components of the doctrine (ecology, economy, social policy), not only two contexts necessary for its implementation (technologies, culture or a change in the way of thinking), but also the specifics of the inter-relationship among all these structural parts of the doctrine. By analysing two modalities of the experience of life, articulated in Bergson's philosophy, it is shown how the implementation of the doctrine of sustainable development is structurally dependent on them. Each of the components of the doctrine is analysed in interaction with the *élan vital* and its fundamental expression in human consciousness which Bergson calls 'creative emotion'.

Keywords: Bergson, sustainable development, *élan vital*, creative emotion, egoism, technologies

INTRODUCTION

The doctrine of sustainable development is a global project which will determine the future of the humankind. In this paper, we will raise the question of its feasibility from the philosophical perspective. We will highlight its structure in which the feasibility is already pre-programmed on a certain level: the development of economy, ecology, and social policy as well as their mutual moderation will succeed if the potential of new technologies is taken advantage of and if the use of the potential is ethically determined by a certain way of thinking. However, there is another, more fundamental level of the feasibility of the doctrine of sustainable development, the revelation of which belongs to Henri Bergson. The French philosopher wrote his works well before the emergence of the doctrine. When the doctrine emerged in Hans Jonas' texts, especially in his work *The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of Ethics for the Technological Age* (1984), Bergson had already been forgotten, and protagonist intellectuals of the time did not

refer to him. A solid confrontation of Bergson's life and social philosophy with Jonas' biological philosophy, which is laid out in *The Phenomenon of Life: Toward a Philosophical Biology* (1966) and which must be regarded as a philosophical basis of sustainable development, remains not realised. However, even without it, we are convinced that research on the Bergsonian philosophy, which renewed across the globe after 2000, should become part of the historiography of philosophical interpretations of the doctrine of sustainable development. As evidenced by Worms in his work *Bergson ou les deux sens de la vie* (2013), the philosophy is dissected by a double sense of the conception of life, or to be more exact, two modalities of the experience of life. On the grounds of the duality, we raise a hypothesis in this paper that the human relationship with the *élan vital* determines the way of thinking, the direction of the use of technologies, an economic model, social (in)justice, and relationships with nature – all essential components of the doctrine of sustainable development.

The need for the doctrine of sustainable development to be grounded in the philosophy of life has been convincingly demonstrated by Frank Burbage in his master's thesis *Philosophie du développement durable* (2013). Interpreting Jacques Ellul's philosophy of technology within the broader context of economic and anthropological theory, Serge Latouche highlights the inherent contradictions of the concept of development and advances the notion of degrowth (2023). Related lines of inquiry emphasising the idea of 'prosperity without growth' have been pursued by the British economist and philosopher Tim Jackson (2025). One of the most influential contemporary models of sustainable development – aimed at moderating economic dynamics through the social and ecological needs of humanity – has been proposed by Kate Raworth (2017). As is widely acknowledged, the anthropological foundations of these approaches are rooted in the insights of Hans Jonas, which, as previously indicated, we propose to further develop through the philosophy of life articulated by Henri Bergson.

THE CONCEPTION OF LIFE ACCORDING TO BERGSON: TWO MODALITIES OF ITS EXPERIENCE

Bergson substantiated his conception of life in *Creative Evolution* (2008) and analysed experiences of life in personal and social realms in the book *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* (1977).^{*} In this paper, we will highlight those elements of Bergson's conception, which can make the basis of philosophical interpretation of the doctrine of sustainable development. Noteworthy, biological life in this conception coincides with psychological life: 'In reality, life is of the psychological order' (2008: 258). It means that the basis of life is a certain form of *consciousness* and *supra-consciousness*: 'It is consciousness, or rather supra-consciousness, that is at the origin of life' (2008: 261). This fundamental consciousness was defined by Bergson as *élan vital*, which, as if it were *fusée*, creates all forms and kinds of life by permeating the matter. Analysing the process of emergence of biological species and their functioning, Bergson highlights certain finiteness of the *élan vital*. The outcome of the finiteness is two-fold. First, it is the diversity of species (2008: 254–255). But also – and it is particularly important for us – the detachment of the energy of life from the *élan* that inspired it: each species is like the 'matter into a vortex' (2008: 269) of the energy of life, which rotates around itself, despite that the *élan vital* is an essential effort 'to pass through' (2008: 255) the boundaries of a species by a creative impulse. 'Life in general is mobility itself; particular manifestations of life accept

^{*} Within the framework of Bergson's evolutionary and social philosophy, an analysis of Tomas Kačerauskas's monograph *Creative Society* (2023) would be of considerable scholarly interest.

this mobility reluctantly, and constantly lag behind. It is always going ahead; they want to mark time. Evolution in general would fain go on in a straight line; each special evolution is a kind of circle. Like eddies of dust raised by the wind as it passes, the living turn upon themselves, borne up by the great blast of life' (2008: 128). Two possible modalities of the experience of life arise from this. One of them follows life's rotation in itself. Another follows the fundamental impulse of life and surpasses itself. Such is the biological basis of the categories of *closedness* and *openness*. According to our hypothesis, human functioning in line with the category of *openness* is a philosophical basis and an engine of the feasibility of the doctrine of sustainable development.

Biological nature manifests itself as psychological egoism of a species and an individual naturally leading to a conflict both among species and among individuals. 'Each species, each individual even, retains only a certain impetus from the universal vital impulsion and tends to use this energy in its own interest. In this consists *adaptation*. The species and the individual thus think only of themselves – whence arises a possible conflict with other forms of life. [...] Each species behaves as if the general movement of life stopped at it instead of passing through it. It thinks only of itself, it lives only for itself. Hence the numberless struggles that we behold in nature. Hence a discord, striking and terrible' (2008: 51, 255). In *The Two Sources*, Bergson focuses on the social life of the humankind and shows how life's energy, which egoistically rotates in us, becomes manifest in our search for pleasures and luxury, destruction of other species, and wars among different groups of humans. A closer look here will discern all three components of sustainable development – economy, ecology, and social relationships. Life's egoism converts all of them into the forms which make this doctrine an illusion. For this not to happen, it is necessary to ask how one can resist this innate tendency.

The second way of the experience of life, which is rooted in biology (thus, biological nature is twofold) and which also is visible in psychology and social life, resists it. Though with immense effort, but a human being is capable to enter into the contact with the *élan vital* and to break the egoistic tourbillon: 'The circle, intended by nature, was broken by man the day he became able to get back into the creative impetus, and impel human nature forward instead of letting it revolve on one spot [...] Shaken to its depths by the current which is about to sweep it forward, the soul ceases to revolve round itself and escapes for a moment from the law which demands that the species and the individual should condition one another. [...] Then it lets itself go, straight onward. [...] Then comes a boundless joy' (1977: 199, 230). It determines a certain condition of consciousness, which Bergson calls 'open soul'. It manifests itself as a psychological transformation of an individual, which essentially changes a human being's relationship with the world: 1) the need for pleasure and luxury is replaced by the fundamental joy, 2) caring only for oneself and one's group is replaced by goodwill towards other people, groups of people, and all living beings – all nature. 'The other attitude is that of the open soul. What, in that case, is allowed in? Suppose we say that it embraces all humanity: we should not be going too far, we should hardly be going far enough, since its love may extend to animals, to plants, to all nature' (1977: 38). Bergson refers to the inner motion (Latin *motion*) which transforms a personality as fundamental 'creative emotion' (1977: 46).

LIFE AND THINKING

The concept of 'emotion' should not mislead: as 'fundamental' and 'creative', it cannot be confused with superficial sentimentality, and ethics, which arises from it, cannot be confused with the 'moral philosophy of sentiment' (1977: 47). Experienced as the *élan vital*, which acts

in us as a source of life, emotion is experience of the very human being, their deepest vital identity ('soul'): 'The individual then becomes one with the emotion' (1977: 252). Bergson draws a distinction between 'infra-intellectual emotion', which implies emotions in the usual sense ('that is the one which the psychologist is generally concerned...'), and 'supra-intellectual', which is fundamental and characterised by 'priority in time' and 'can alone be productive of ideas' (1977: 44).

The fundamentality and creativity of the emotion that we are talking about manifests itself when it 'gives birth to' all structural psychological elements of a personality: imagination, emotions in the usual sense, acts of will and mind. Our thinking changes essentially, depending on whether we experience our life in detachment from its source (*élan vital*) or in relation to it, experiencing the fundamental and creative emotion. In both cases, thinking retains its logical and analytical character, but experience of supra-intellectual emotion provides it with the fundamental dimension of empathy, that is opening to all other living beings. We are convinced that namely such transformation of thinking is a necessary condition for the doctrine of sustainable development.

LIFE AND TECHNOLOGIES

On the basis of the conclusions drawn in *Creative Evolution*, Bergson articulated the philosophy of technologies in Chapter IV of *Two Sources*, which is emblematically titled 'Mechanics and Mysticism'. The mind not only creates technologies but also chooses how to use them. The choice was of key importance for the life of the humankind when the Industrial Revolution began. The emergence of modern technologies, according to Bergson, is related to the question of mysticism. The technologies were supposed to free the human consciousness from the necessity to devote oneself to the task of survival. When additional input of energy and time arose, it had to create conditions for the development of intuitive capacities of the consciousness, that is, to experience life directly, to establish a contact with the *élan vital* and its principle (the Bergsonian definition of mysticism), to transform thinking in the way described earlier. However, the emergence of modern technologies and industrial revolutions are part of a much broader process of the humankind's history which functions, as Bergson maintains, in line with the dichotomous 'law of twofold frenzy' (1977: 296). The task of survival is realised in the human mind through a double rhythm: when the tendency to seek for pleasure and luxury reaches its limits, it is replaced by the contrary tendency of leading an ascetic way of life. After the sunset of the Middle Ages, the humankind entered that stage of its history, which is characterised by a desire of a luxurious life. This is when modern technologies emerged and their use from the very beginning, as if a mistake was made in regard of their true devotion, was aimed at the realisation of the desire: 'Machinery, through a mistake at the points, has been switched off on to a track at the end of which lies exaggerated comfort and luxury' (1977: 309). Economy of the humankind became the economy of consumerism.

Since the key goal of the doctrine of sustainable development is moderation of the phenomenon of consumerism, to succeed, the doctrine needs a change of the character of technology use. Of course, it is related with transformation in thinking. In other words, we find ourselves in a circle: the 'spiritual' purposefulness of modern technologies means creating conditions for a transformation in thinking; however, it is feasible to put technologies back on the track of this purposefulness only if a transformation in thinking occurs. How do we exit this circle? Through the very historical 'law of twofold frenzy' which transcends this circle.

Bergson spoke of the approaching time when 'there will no longer be pleasure in so much love of pleasure. [...] Let the transformation take place: our life will be both more purposeful and more simple' (1977: 302). The French thinker relates this new stage with a renewed contact with the impulse of life, thus, with the fundamental creative emotion which, in his texts, is always associated with an in-depth joy: 'Our pleasures will still remain, but drab and jejune, because their intensity was merely the attention that we centred upon them. They would pale like our electric lamps before the morning sun. Pleasure would be eclipsed by joy' (1977: 317). Indeed, can we not identify a certain tiredness caused by the search for pleasures in today's humankind and a new tendency to lead a psychologically simple (though, surely, materially provided for) way of life as well as a certain empathy, whose connection with technologies was demonstrated by J. Rifkin (2010)? So far, there is a lack of a sociological basis to state that the tendency will determine the future of the humankind. However, the success of the doctrine of sustainable development is doubtful if the tendency is not established and does not spread.

LIFE AND COMPONENTS OF THE DOCTRINE OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: ECOLOGY, SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS, AND ECONOMY

The Bergsonian conception of life provides an interpretation basis for the three structural components of sustainable development and their inter-relationships: each of the modalities of the experience of life determines, in their own way, the manner how ecology, social relationships, and economy are organised.

Life's egoism naturally transforms into ecological anthropocentrism, which is widely studied nowadays within the frame or the concept of the *Anthropocene*. The roots of human conflict with other biological species, and nature in general, are the view of nature as a thing, as an inanimate object providing resources. It is a viewpoint which is typical of the biological functioning of the mind, which Bergson analysed in-depth in Part III of *Creative Evolution*. However, the viewpoint can be changed by changing the relationship with life itself, that is, by adapting the second modality of its experience. Nature is life. A human being also. Bergsonian philosophy allows to experience nature as a certain subject and to transform the relationship with it by moving from subject/object relationship to subject/subject relationship. 'It is consciousness, or rather supra-consciousness, that is at the origin of life' (2008: 261): the second modality of the experience of life, being a conscious relationship with the *élan vital*, is a relationship of the human consciousness with the fundamental natural consciousness.

In *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, Bergson studied in detail human magical thinking, which we should regard as an extreme of the first modality of the experience and 'objectification' of life which acquires religious forms: personification of natural phenomena or identification of dead ancestors in them become here an object of the pragmatic goal of gain; scientifically studied natural phenomena will also later become such an object. However, even the most archaic religious forms – totemism and animism – can be transformed according to the second modality of the experience of life and become an inter-subjective, but not a magical, relationship with nature. They can be expressions of the fundamental creative emotion. Animism can be ethically practiced as a connection with the consciousness omnipresent in nature, manifest in any animal, plant, and even in formations of non-organic matter, for instance, a stone. Totemism is experienced as an alliance unifying all that is conscious and regulating inter-relationships according to a certain order. Differently from magical thinking, the animistic and totemistic relationship with nature led by the creative emotion gives birth

to not only ethics of mutual harmony, but also an innovative anthropological reality that can be defined by the neologism 'eco-citizenship', which appeared back in the 1970s, or its equivalents 'green citizenship', 'sustainability citizenship' (Naoufal, 2016). C. Lévi-Strauss' category of concomitance, analysed in *Totemism* (1962), can be interpreted as a shape of the Bergsonian creative emotion. 'Food', unifying all that is alive, can be an expression of additionality and mutual care, not mutual competition.

Totemism or animism are not merely forms of religious experience. They can be regarded as fundamental modalities of the relationship between a human being and environment – nature or other human beings, which will later be replicated in thinking which creates technologies and interacts with nature through them. Therefore, in *The Two Sources*, Bergson connected religion and morality unifying them in one of the two modalities of the relationship with life (correspondingly, the *two sources*). This connection has its own social expression. We know it as dialectics of open and closed societies – the main outcome of the Bergson's work. Social policy, in the way as it is configured by the doctrine of sustainable development, must correspond to a certain ideal of humanism. The fundamental creative emotion, which gives birth to open society, is also an engine of this humanism. To highlight the anthropological transformation which is necessary to implement the doctrine of sustainable development we would recommend two political anthropologies forming an antipode: Hobbes' (*Human Nature: or The Fundamental Elements of Policy*) and Bergson's (*The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*). Both view the process of social coherence as an interplay between mind and passion. But their outcomes are different. Conflict and social injustice remain the grounds of Hobbes' society and must be constantly restrained. Bergson's fundamental emotion provides society with another anthropological basis by, essentially, eliminating the factor of conflict. The transformation of consciousness, which arises from the second modality of the relationship with life, enables such social justice that corresponds to the goal of the doctrine of sustainable development.

Bergson has not elaborated his own philosophy of economy, but several allusions to the laws of economy in *The Two Sources*, as well as general tendencies of his philosophy, can be integrated into Keynes' theory (Gruchy 1948) and post-Keynesian economic thought which was further developed by, for instance, Joan Robinson (Culham 2023). In this way, Bergsonism influences the economic dimension of the doctrine of sustainable development and instills in it the outcomes of the change of the experience of life and transformation of thinking arising from it. In 1930, Keynes wrote an essay *Economic Possibilities for our Grandchildren* (1963) where he distinguished two stages of economic development: economic growth, which would solve the problem of poverty, and economic development, which would seek maintenance of life according to a system of new values by detaching from trade-related factors. Keynes thought in stages, but today the doctrine of sustainable development must combine both purposes, that is, economic development and a certain psychological state of consciousness. Only a change in the state of consciousness could realise Keynes' ideal of a new civilisation where empathy, expressed through culture, would replace interpersonal competition and neurotic quest for material good. As if elaborating on Bergson's insights, Keynes linked a change in thinking with the concept of life: 'The strenuous purposeful money-makers may carry all of us along with them into the lap of economic abundance. But it will be those peoples, who can keep alive, and cultivate into a fuller perfection, the art of life itself and do not sell themselves for the means of life, who will be able to enjoy the abundance when it comes. [...] I feel sure that with a little more experience we shall use the new-found bounty of nature quite differently from the way in which the rich use it to-day, and will map out for ourselves a plan of life

quite otherwise than theirs' (1963: 367). According to Keynes, the change will also manifest itself through the relationship with money, the use of which will relate to the vital and psychological purposefulness of the human consciousness (1963: 368). Precisely here Keynes' theory could be supplemented with Patrick Viveret's reflections about the 'new economy' (2003). Their essence is integration of the process of life into economic and monetary development: 'The value, *valore*, is the force of life' (2003: 31). The relationship with money would change the paradigm: the 'power to govern' would be replaced by a symbiosis between rational thinking and sense of life. It would allow one to further increase wealth, but this traditional function of economy, and, thus, mind, would relate to the other function of the mind – to create immaterial wealth: 'An extraordinary profusion of life coupled with intelligence, which produces considerable capacities for wealth, both material and immaterial' (Viveret 2003: 190). This profusion, arising from sense of life, is the essence of the doctrine of sustainable development. The big problem of the implementation of the doctrine is the problem of detachment of material wealth from immaterial wealth in our consciousness. The sense of biological-psychological life solves the problem.

CONCLUSIONS

Bergson's contribution to the doctrine of sustainable development is his highlighting of the vital background of ecology, economy, social policy, technologies, and a way of thinking. The way how we experience biological-psychological life determines the organisation of all five structural elements of the doctrine of sustainable development, their inter-relationships, and historical development. Life that rotates around itself, fundamental egoism, determines closed and conflicting thinking, the use of technologies to satisfy the needs of luxury and war, economy of consumerism, destruction of nature, and social injustice. The contact with the *élan vital*, expressed as the fundamental creative emotion, opens thinking and fosters empathy, enables ethically responsible use of technologies, allows experiencing nature as a partner in life, connects economy with the values cherishing biological-psychological life, and implements social justice. Transition from the first way of experiencing life to the second one is a determinant not only in the successful implementation of the doctrine of sustainable development, but also existence of the future of the humankind.

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Gyvybės koncepcijos reikšmė darnaus vystymosi filosofijai: H. Bergsono indėlis

Santrauka

Henri'o Bergsono gyvybės koncepcija gali suteikti pagrindą darnaus vystymosi doktrinos filosofijai. Straipsnyje išskiriami ne tik trys esminiai šios doktrinos komponentai (ekologija, ekonomika, socialinė politika), ne tik du jos realizacijai būtini kontekstai (technologijos, kultūra arba mąstymo pokytis), bet ir visų šių struktūrinių doktrinos dalių tarpusavio santykio specifika. Analizuojant du gyvybės patyrimo modalumus, išvystytus H. Bergsono filosofijoje, parodoma, kaip darnaus vystymosi doktrinos realizavimas struktūriškai priklauso nuo šių modalumų. Kiekvienas iš doktrinos komponentų nagrinėjamas sąveikoje su *élan vital* ir jo fundamentalia raiška žmogaus sąmonėje, H. Bergsono vadinama „kuriančiąja emocija“.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: Henri Bergson, darnus vystymasis, *élan vital*, kuriančioji emocija, egoizmas, technologijos