

## Iris van der Tuin | Past-Present-Future and the 2019-20 Coronavirus Pandemic

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The workings of time and temporality during the corona pandemic are frightening. I write this on April 2, 2020 at 2pm. But what counts is what happened two to three weeks ago. On an individual level: I may be very sick just a few days from now and I may have infected others while I was not having any of the known COVID-19 symptoms and went out to do my necessary grocery shopping last week. My body may have caught the coronavirus in the past, making my future and the futures of those around me uncertain. Right now, while writing, I feel fine. On the population level: our governments' physical distancing strategies of the past few weeks have co-constituted the number of positive tests that are presented to us as the most up to date. Therefore, the data points on the curve representing The Netherlands and other countries that I will get to see on the 8 o'clock news also reference the past. Past behaviors and policies leap into the unknown futures of individual patients, local communities, and entire populations. My question is thus: Where are we at in the present?

The above observations and questions lead me to a Bergsonian approach. In one of the opening essays, written specifically for *The Creative Mind: An Introduction to Metaphysics*, Bergson writes about what gets lost when we spatialize time and he differentiates between evolution and unfolding. Philosophers tend to conceptualize time as (causally) linear. In this case, it is imagined that "the future

is given in the present, that it is theoretically visible in it, that to the present it will add nothing new."<sup>1</sup> When transposed to our current exceptional times, we can easily see that a linear take on time does not apply. The above dynamics within the coronavirus pandemic period demonstrate that the future adds something new even to the past. Not only will it become clear only after the fact that my seemingly innocent shopping trip may have acted as a catalyst for illness. But also, and besides the manifestation of multicausal viral spread, there is a radical plot twist involved in the becoming sick with COVID-19. One's own life and the life of one's network is affected in ways that are "radically new and unforeseeable."<sup>2</sup> We do live in a new reality indeed, as many professionals and tweeterers say these days. So far, I have situated my discussion as part of what Bergson calls externality. On the level of interiority, however, the same dynamics are at work. Philosophers often assume that possibilities are encapsulated in what has already been realized and that choice precedes realization. Again, there is the assumption that "everything is given."<sup>3</sup> Bergson criticizes the rationality of the register of choice. All that one thinks and feels on the way to making a choice feeds into that choice, and thought and felt content modifies constantly. This modifying content feeds into what is ultimately an evolving (not unfolding) decision. Additive logic is exchanged for thick, causally nonlinear experience.

Here, we find ourselves on a dual track. First, there is the aspect of method. Second, there is thick experience itself. When considering method, Bergson argues that his approach calls for something other than philosophy as it is usually done and for something other than scientism. Both traditional philosophy and scientism are fundamentally reductive in their attempt at "cut[ting] out from the universe the systems for which time is only an abstraction, a relation, a number."<sup>4</sup> Bergson proposes an alternative conception of the universe: "If we could grasp it in its entirety, inorganic but interwoven with organic beings, we should see it ceaselessly taking on forms as new, as original, as unforeseeable as our states of consciousness."<sup>5</sup> Nei-

<sup>1</sup> Henri Bergson, *The Creative Mind: An Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. by M.L. Anderson (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, [1934] 2007), 8.

<sup>2</sup> Bergson, *The Creative Mind*, 8.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

ther a non-reductive philosopher nor an inclusive scientist can lean on a pre-established method for such holistic grasping. When discussing method in *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, Bergson presents to his readers two methodological alternatives. One is the interdisciplinary road for the (social) scientist:

The truth is that we have to grope our way tentatively, by a system of cross-checking, following simultaneously several methods, each of which will lead only to possibilities or probabilities: by their mutual interplay the results will neutralize or reinforce one another, leading to reciprocal verification and correction.<sup>6</sup>

The other is an alternative road for the philosopher:

... the main and essential source of information is bound to be introspection. We must search for the bedrock of sociability, and also of unsociability, which would be perceptible to our consciousness, if established society had not imbued us with habits and dispositions which adjust us to it. Of these strata we are no longer aware, save at rare intervals, and then in a flash. We must recapture that moment of vision and abide by it.<sup>7</sup>

Both tentative groping and serendipitous introspection avoid reduction.<sup>8</sup>

The new methods must be strong enough to be able to answer the question: how to access the present in this coronavirus pandemic period when the past and future are written all over it? Both the rationalizations (numbers presented by scientists and other professionals on the 8 o'clock news) and the abstraction of my body as free from COVID-19 symptoms skip the present, as it were, and I find

myself trapped by confusing relations between pasts and futures. Of course, there is the experience of time protracting and contracting, indicated by my impatience with educational technology and/or my calmness about working from home.<sup>9</sup> But what is it that may situate me firmly in the present vis-à-vis corona?

For a different philosophy and an interdisciplinary science, Bergson uses the word "interval" as a concept. Again, in *The Creative Mind*, there is a reaching of thick experience in the interval or the "wait" between the two extremities,  $t_1$  and  $t_2$ . Positive, measurement-based science and philosophy canonized in schools of thought zoom in on  $t_1$  and  $t_2$ , respectively, whereas "[i]n between these simultaneities anything you like may happen."<sup>10</sup> Bergson's entire oeuvre centers around this big question about time as mobility, temporality as duration. Here, I am interested in the *flash* through which we may reach the fundamental principles of our time and give rationalizations, abstractions, and relations their proper place. I have had such a flashy experience, an experience that leapt me out of scientific reasoning, common-sense philosophizing, and action-orientation while I was sitting behind my laptop or using my mobile phone and pondering the many data visualizations that circulate in the news and that are constantly being updated. Two numbers stand out among the many others. In a flash I grasped that only these two numbers refer to the present: the number of ICU beds in use for Corona patients and the number of deaths caused by COVID-19. These two numbers provoke flashes. All other numbers, out there in abundance, throw dust in my eyes and make me believe that as long as I do not feel anything, I am without the virus and it is safe for me and my local community to go outside.

No. Of course not.

Upon formulating a philosophy of duration and the concept of the interval, and in acknowledgement of the existence of irregular flashes that are filled with meaning, Bergson asks: "Suppose we try to find out what it is?"<sup>11</sup> And for this introspection I need, today, Kat-erina Kolozova's *Cut of the Real: Subjectivity in Poststructuralist Phi-*

<sup>6</sup> Henri Bergson, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, trans. by R.A. Audra and C. Brereton with the assistance of W.H. Carter (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, [1932] 1977), 274.

<sup>7</sup> Bergson, *The Two Sources*, 275.

<sup>8</sup> For non-reductive philosophizing, see also: Iris van der Tuin, "Deleuze and Diffraction," in *Posthuman Ecologies: Complexity and Process after Deleuze*, eds. Rosi Braidotti and Simone Bignall (London: Rowman and Littlefield International, 2019), 17-39. For the link between interdisciplinary research and non-reductive philosophizing, see: Frédéric Darbellay, Zoe Moody, Ayuko Sedooka and Gabriela Steffen, "Interdisciplinary Research Boosted by Serendipity," *Creativity Research Journal*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (2014): 1-10.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Bergson's famous example of waiting for sugar to melt in water (Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, 9; Bergson, *The Creative Mind*, 10).

<sup>10</sup> Bergson, *The Creative Mind*, 3.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

*losophy*. Kolozova works with François Laruelle. Both Bergson and Laruelle argue against dogmatizing tendencies in science, philosophy, and the like.<sup>12</sup> Kolozova provides us with tools that may unpack flashy experience and circumvent science as it is usually done, commonsensicality, and action-orientation. Importantly, her book was a writing from an experience that had leapt her out of business as usual as a moving post-mortem that is part of the monograph makes clear.<sup>13</sup> For now, let us consider this fragment:

The real remains indifferent to processes of truth generation. However, thought is affected by the workings of the real. Its arrogance is restrained and its aspirations are disciplined by the undisciplined responses of the disorderly real. At precisely these points (of resistance), thought should proffer its silence, relegate the real to its own domain, and thereof attempt to situate itself with respect to those cracks shoved into the language by that unintelligent and banal real. Those cracks will become the voices of dissonance that may give birth to an unheard of and singular appropriation of language and ultimately, perhaps, contribute to some dramatic transformation of it.<sup>14</sup>

Reading “the real” as having the immediacy alluded to by Bergson, and “cracks” as Bergson’s flashes, I want to suggest with Kolozova that in order to transform our philosophical, scientific, and everyday language as to make it suitable for our pandemic time, we must focus on those “points (of resistance)” that suffice. Those points are the ICU beds in use for Corona patients and the deaths caused by COVID-19. The abundance of information that is broadcasted from the top down and tweeted from the bottom up may suggest access to, or representation of, the disorderly real, but it does not. Situated thought today means having ourselves affected by just those two numbers that may change our methods, our language, and us.

I hope I do justice to the care workers’ united call for responsible behavior and policy with this.

<sup>12</sup> The work of John Ó Maoilearca presents ways in which the two philosophers can be productively read together.

<sup>13</sup> Katerina Kolozova, *Cut of the Real: Subjectivity in Poststructuralist Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 127-29.

<sup>14</sup> Kolozova, *Cut of the Real*, 135.