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What is it to Live? Critical Considerations with Regard to Badiou and Bergson Concerning Life Theory and its Language

En vain nous poussons le vivant dans tel ou tel de nos cadres.

Bergson, *L'évolution créatrice*

Nowadays, philosophy is marked by a paradigm all creative thinking has to cope with: the intertwinement of cultural theory and life sciences. As a remarkable renewal of 19th century positivism, today one believes in the objectivity of scientific data provided by technological empiricism. The discursive turn that locates newly created theoretical substrates of technique, life, and thinking in the human brain is carried out by neuroscience, which is now considered to be the ideal way of understanding human affairs. The reigning master-discourse is delivered by the “converging technologies” in which neuroscience is brought together with biotechnology, molecular nanotechnology, and information technology, creating an interdisciplinary cluster to administer the progress of biochemistry, neurophysiology, psychology, and genetics. Allegedly, here new answers are given to conceptual questions raised by a philosophy of mind, for example the notions of consciousness, memory, cognition, mind, emotion, etc.

The philosophical situation of this leading framework, which includes all kinds of cultural phenomena as extensions of the human mind, can be represented by a technique coming from the old science of *phrenology* (which is literally Greek for “knowledge of mind”). Considering the self-presentation of leading life-science-laboratories, one might think that the new phrenological discoveries of computer-generated tomography are nothing but a technical optimization of late 18th century Franz Joseph Gall’s medical philosophy of life which described the brain as the centre of all vital and mental functions. A curious effect in the humanities, which today are eager to catch up with the epistemological status of the (socially more valuable) natural sciences, is the creation of new fractions of art history and literary studies based on neuroscience. Representatives of these branches “visualize” the neurons “firing” in specific areas of the brain, while a man (or a woman) is looking at Botticelli’s painting *The Birth of Venus*, listening

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to Bach's Violin Partita No. 3 in E major, watching David Lynch's movie *The Darkened Room*, or reading Proust's novel *In Search of Lost Time*...¹

Notwithstanding the curiosity brought forth by the new constellation of the relationship between the social and natural sciences, one has to state a principal problem of conceptualization inherent to the biotechnological paradigm of life science. As a reconfiguration of early Enlightenment's body-mind problem (which is, with reference to Descartes and Aristotle, more precisely a problem of life and soul), the implicit philosophical reference of this suggestion is the positioning of the mechanist materialism developed by Julien Offray de La Mettrie in *L'homme machine* 1748. In an immanent manner, life – particularly human life – is considered to be a self-sufficient entity driven by a movement of self-improvement that can be (nowadays surely better than in the 18th century) technically “optimized” for purposes of individual, social, and thus political “health”. The interface of *organism* as the molecules of a living body and *algorithm* as a network of computing machines can be seen as the latest translation of the old dualism of substances in interaction. The more techniques of optimization and controlling improve in this interface, the better it is for the sake of human life and its perfectible social interaction in a political environment.

This new thinking of progress, hence inheriting a combined teleology of 18th century materialism and 19th century positivism – and managing the heritage with the means of 21st century technology – enables a (postmodern) philosophy of “biopolitics” that wipes out all metaphysical or transcendent *mysteries* of life. The conceptual challenges towards the limits of intelligence exceeded by the notion of life which were formulated in the 20th century by philosophy of life (Bergson), phenomenology (Husserl, Merleau-Ponty), anthropology (Plessner, Gehlen), symbolism (Cassirer), semiotics (Uexküll), structuralism (Foucault), and history of science (Canguilhem) now seem to be reducible to the mathematics of a digitalizable language emitted by the human brain, the “central computing unit” of the most complex cellular organism existent. This language is, philosophically, built on a narrow interpretation of the concluding remark of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, which turns the requirement of “where one cannot speak, one must pass over in silence”² into

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¹ I eschew the quotation of the analysts' names.

² “Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muss man schweigen.” Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*, in: *Werkausgabe*, Vol. I (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1988), p. 85.

the hope that one *can* pass over without further analysis. Not having to speak about the unexplainable nature of life, banned by the new encyclopaedia of computer generated facticity, one has, free from life-threatening concerns, the advantages of intelligible, desacralized, and utile bodies playing their (more or less diverting) part according to the rules of a “human park” (Sloterdijk).³ The loss of life as a philosophical concept is offset by the prospect of the technical possibility of repressing the fear of death.

The problem in this constellation is that there is no longer need for a philosophy of life. And as life is one of the oldest and most important philosophical questions, there is hence no need for philosophy at all. So, if the task is to preserve philosophy, the main challenge right now is to keep on *thinking* life. But to think life is, as it has always been, not to rely on the neutral facticity of constructible language (like automatons), but to count on the imperfect and uncanny truth of living. Henri Bergson, the pioneer of “philosophy of life” at the beginning of the 20th century, who first developed the modern philosophical concept of life, introduced a few years earlier by Friedrich Nietzsche, raised the issue of the “intellectually unrealizable and unaccomplishable conceptualization of life”⁴ as the very reason for mankind’s creativity. Based on Bergson, one has to retain three basic theorems of an appropriate “life theory” (in contrast to life science) – which are requirements of general philosophical thinking as well as the test questions for the re-entry of converging cultural studies to the community of thinkers:

1) There is no monist sense of life as such. Every life – from the protozoon to Shakespeare – has to be lived individually. 2) Life cannot be considered without death. This theorem is not a hypostasis of intangible death as a human condition (in distinction from God), but a methodological necessity to conceptualize the progress of the human being as the incorporation of a specific “duration”, which is, for Bergson, the condition *sine qua non* of memory, consciousness, and freedom. Imagine a biotech lab discovering a technique (e.g. a cellular tissue) en-

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³ Peter Sloterdijk, “Regeln für den Menschenpark: ein Antwortschreiben zu Heideggers Brief über den Humanismus (Rules for the Human Park. A Response to Heidegger’s Essay *On Humanism*)” (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1999), is a post-Nietzschean interpretation of Plato’s *Politikos* showing how the era of biotechnology can be understood as the latest historical step (after humanism and eugenics) of “anthropodicy”, consisting in the self-controlled production of “domesticated” and “cultivated” men.

⁴ Henri Bergson (1907), *L’évolution créatrice*, ed. Arnaud François (Paris: P.U.F., 2007), p. 52 et seq.

abling physical deathlessness. How could the happy few who profit from this immortalizing machine pretend to be “living” as subjects in a social or political context? Cut off from time, they would neither be able to age nor to renew. A duration that extinguishes death, as Benjamin puts it, has nothing but the “bad infinity of an ornament”.⁵ 3) Life is a concept that exceeds intelligence. The intelligible part of life is that of the constructible language, e.g. the biophysics of *l’homme machine*. The other part is the intuitive knowledge of the subject which is the “differentiating” instance (or agency) in the dysfunctional connection of matter (concrete or abstract material transmitted to the brain) with the needs, perceptions, imaginations, and memories of living human beings. Therefore, “intuition” in the sense of Bergson is far more than a simple inspiration of feeling; it has to be unfolded as a philosophical method “to transform life by understanding it”.⁶

The difference that exists in the philosophical concept of “understanding” life, stretched by the gap between objective data and imaginative intuition, could be obscured by the essentialistic wording of the (nominal) question “What is life?” – which opens the floodgates for biopolitics – and would in this case be better stated by emphasizing the subjective part of the understanding process: “What is it to live?”.⁷ The philosophy of Alain Badiou, who carried out this modification in the last chapter of the second volume of *Being and Event*, does not stand, at first glance, in an obvious succession of 20th century philosophy of life. Nonetheless, this major work of fundamental onto-phenomenology only recently accomplished presents a perfect touchstone for verifying the three alleged theorems of life theory. Considering with Badiou the philosophical consequences of a “subjective” concept of life that exceeds intelligence, challenges death, and is able to think individual durations of time, my aim is to demonstrate moreover that there is an implicit but “vital” link from Badiou to Bergson that proceeds via the “vitalistic ontology” of Gilles Deleuze. Both of them – Badiou and Bergson – respond to the thesis of positivist materialism by referring to an antagonism explored by Nietzsche: the antagonism between natural situations (knowledge of life) and historical situations (deeds of living men) as the fissuring hiatus of all

⁵ “Die durée, aus der der Tod getilgt ist, hat die schlechte Unendlichkeit eines Ornaments.” Walter Benjamin, “Über einige Motive bei Baudelaire”, in: *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. II (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp 1991), p. 643.

⁶ Gilles Deleuze, *Le bergsonisme* (Paris: P.U.F., 1966), chap. 2: “L’intuition comme méthode”.

⁷ Alain Badiou, “Qu’est-ce que vivre?”, in: *Logiques des mondes. L’être et l’événement 2* (Paris: Seuil, 2006), pp. 529–537.

philosophical edifice concerning mankind: “History has to be *done* for the *sake of life* [...] One has to understand the sentence that life needs the service of history to the same extent that the excess of history harms the living.”⁸

In Badiou’s Ontology the Nietzschean antagonism is given by the hiatus of being (the encyclopaedia of scientific knowledge) and event (the self-constitution of acting subjects). The notion of life does not figure at the centre of his ontological framework which defines philosophy as the “meta-ontological” instance of thinking the subjective “truth procedures” of events (in politics, science, art, and love) that “interrupt” the structured (and mathematically legible) language of being.⁹ But there is a genuine reason why this notion (re)appears at the end of the work as a *prima materia* of philosophy. It is related to Badiou’s claim, in analysing Deleuze’s interpretation of Bergson, that life is an appropriate *name* of being.¹⁰ The process of “naming what is”, according to Badiou, belongs to the crucial decisions of “intervening” subjects in their respective truth procedures. “Drawing names from the void” (presenting what is not represented in “situations”) is the essential action by which the subject, on its faithful way to truth, generates itself. Hence the name of being itself is the crucial decision of the philosopher who has to propose “a conceptual space” in which the naming of the new can take place. This is the first “intuitive” answer to the question of the appropriateness of life as the “name of being” shared by Bergson and Badiou (via Deleuze): the name of life – representing the question “What is it to live?” for the philosophical subject – combines a conceptual emphasis on “radical novelty” and a fascination of the “new-born”¹¹.

⁸ “Wenn wir nur dies gerade immer besser lernen, Historie zum Zwecke des *Lebens* zu treiben! [...] Dass das Leben aber den Dienst der Historie brauche, muss eben so deutlich begriffen werden als der Satz [...], dass ein Uebermaass der Historie dem Lebendigen schade.” Friedrich Nietzsche: “Vom Nutzen und Nachtheil der Historie für das Leben” (On the Use and Abuse of History for Life), in: *Kritische Studienausgabe*, Vol. I (München/Berlin: dtv/de Gruyter, 1988), p. 257 et seq.

⁹ Badiou, *L’être et l’événement* (Paris: Seuil, 1988), Introduction. Idem: *Manifeste pour la philosophie*, Paris, 1989.

¹⁰ “L’être mérite le nom de *vie*”, idem: *Court traité d’ontologie transitoire* (Paris: Seuil, 1988), p. 63. Cf. idem: “De la vie comme nom de l’être”, in: *Rue Descartes 59, Gilles Deleuze: immanence et vie* (Paris: P.U.F., 2006).

¹¹ Badiou says: “Prends soin de ce qui naît”, *Logiques des mondes*, p. 529. Bergson says: “Il semble que la vie, dès qu’elle s’est contractée en une espèce déterminée, perde contact avec le reste d’elle-même, sauf cependant sur un ou deux points qui intéressent l’espèce qui vient de naître”, *L’évolution créatrice*, p. 168. This sentence, by the way, is perfectly legible in terms of Badiou’s ontology.

Besides the intuition however – with regard to the holistic thesis of materialistic positivism, which Badiou calls “democratic materialism”¹² –, we have to consider the philosophical consequences of the ontological effort to retain the concept of life. Let’s summarize, therefore, the outcome put forward by Badiou in his concluding synopsis at the end of *Logics of Worlds*. The greater context is the panorama painted in both volumes of *Being and Event* concerning the very possibility of philosophical thinking based on mathematics – the most objective language existing – stretched between the set-theoretical axiomatics of existence itself (being or life as such) and the topology of an existential phenomenology (being or living in the world).¹³ In this theoretical situation, to call a being a living being is to compel living beings to “position” themselves with regard to the question “What is it to live?”. So the philosopher (the subject of the philosophical situation), only assuming that “it is possible to live”¹⁴, analyses the different logics of the developments of all living “appearances in situations”: as an unfolding of objects, facts, and ideas that are interrupted by “evental” reconfigurations in the power structure of their representations (ontology) and as developments of intensity in the processes of subjective self-constitutions that follow or oppose the truth procedures triggered by these interruptions (phenomenology).

The logical implications on both sides of the philosophical approach can be generalized as follows. I reduce the 15 sentences of Badiou’s concluding chapter to the three main points which will afterwards be revisited from a Bergsonian perspective: 1) If life is the name of being, the possibility to live belongs to every being-in-the-world. This is the principle of the equality of individuals which is fundamental for ethics and politics. 2) If every being-in-the-world is living, the conceptual edifice of the philosophy of life faithful to equality must be able to transcend the antagonism of life and death. This is the principle of (potential) im-

¹² “Il n’y a que des corps [immédiats] et des langages [disponibles]”, *Logiques des mondes*, p. 9, p. 531.

¹³ The only prerequisite of the constructability of such an edifice is what Badiou calls his “wager”, i.e. the supposition that “ontology is mathematics” (*L’être et l’événement*, p. 27). The fundamental goal is to describe “situations” in the most basic and most general sense, analysing the existence or non-existence of “elements” in situations (first volume) and searching for logics of their appearances and durations (second volume). So, my critical objective here is to confront two philosophical decisions in their axiomatic connection to ontology: (mathematics is the language of being) and (life is the name of being).

¹⁴ “Vivre est possible”, *Logiques des mondes*, p. 536.

mortality: to live is (with Aristotle) “to live as immortal”.¹⁵ The transcendence of the antagonism of life and death is the most appropriate way not to think life without death! According to Badiou, to live as immortal means that for truth procedures only the present exists: a subject has to “resuscitate” by “incorporation” into that present while the differentiating instance is not time as such, but the “degree of intensity” (which in fact is a Bergsonian term)¹⁶ of the appearing elements. This point is crucial for the philosophy of time which in Badiou’s ontology occurs as a subcutaneous contention with the Pre-Socratics. The first category of thinking is not time, but truth, on which depends the intensity of the appearing of more or less faithful subjects. Hence the sequences of time are subjective *creations* of the present. Time as such is *not* (the infinity of sequences as a whole is uncountable), so there is neither past nor history as such: “l’Histoire n’existe pas”.¹⁷ History is what has to be done for the sake of life as the principal matter of the sequential creations of presents. This creation is possible *and* necessary, insofar as life is what “irrupts” in present time-sequences (and if the intensity of such a creation is maximal, the present has the “amplitude” of eternity).

Within this conceptual frame, life is cut off from time except for the moment it (re)emerges as living in a present. The intensity of a present depends on the appropriation (perception, action, or impact) of “ensembles” that come into being. The neutrality of this formula complies with the concept of objectivity in sciences: living beings embrace humans, animals, plants, even cells (as objects transferable to signals of movement whose transcriptions can be immobilized and stored). But it goes beyond that, too. In the topological field of phenomenology, appearing “beings” that change the intensity of the situations of life also include abstract objects, ideas, or even “the pure acts of naming” which suddenly occur as “intensities” brought forth by new subjects (or parts of the same subject), while the first imagining, thinking, or simply naming subject can be dead for a long time. So “true life” comprises natural life, but transcends it at the same time by covering a scheme of immanent and creative *autopoiesis* that

¹⁵ “Vivre en Immortel”, *ibid.*, p. 529. It also transcends the difference between the organic, the biology of living bodies, and the inorganic, the physics to which dead bodies return.

¹⁶ Bergson, *L'évolution créatrice*, p. 98 (and *passim*).

¹⁷ Badiou, *Logiques des mondes*, p. 531. Or in other words: “Il n’y a aucun réel de l’Histoire”. Idem: *L’hypothèse communiste. Circonstances 5* (Paris: Lignes, 2009), p. 190. There are only (present) situations which might prove to be “historical” in the sense that they interrupt the natural movement of appearances.

depends on unpredictable events and has its (crucial) impact in human affairs like science, art, and politics. Hence, for acting subjects, the creation of time is always an experiment: “expérimenter au passé l’amplitude éternelle d’un présent” and “expérimenter au présent l’éternité qui autorise la création de ce présent” (p. 532). And it remains true that this is possible for everybody at any time: “C’est ici est maintenant que nous nous (res)suscitons comme Immortels” (p. 536).

3) If life is the true name of being and if it is true that every being-in-the-world is living (given that truth is eternal), then the philosophical answer to the question “What is it to live?” – as a theoretical situation that is antecedent to nature and history – relies on a “subtractive” concept of the new as radical emergence. The intuition formulated above obtains here its ontological fundament. The concept of the new that philosophy relies on, must be subtractive in the sense that the changes (“leaps”) of life as “events of time” can be so radical that the reliability of thinking itself is brought into question. Philosophical theory must provide for the moments of its own dissolution which make possible (and *force* by “intervention”) the renewal of the possibility of thinking. At this point, it becomes clear why Badiou’s ontological fundament of philosophical thinking – and, in this case, the wager that life is the appropriate name of being – is based on (set-theoretical) mathematics. Beginning with Georg Cantor in the late 19th century (and continued by Dedekind, Hausdorff, Russell, Neumann, Hilbert, Gödel, et al.), mathematics has developed a meta-mathematical branch that proves – in a logical and consistent language – a fundamental inconsistency at the core of its own methodological system. In mathematics there are absolutely undecidable “independencies” which, then, compel subjective or “intuitive” interventions to decide the undecidable. The most famous result of meta-mathematics in the early 20th century is Gödel’s “incompleteness theorem”, the consequences of which have not been understood by most of the scientific methodology based on logical consistency up to today: “Any formal system (any effectively generated theory capable of expressing elementary arithmetic) cannot be both consistent and complete.”¹⁸

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For this reason, Badiou “chooses” the Zermelo-Fraenkel axiomatization of classical set theory in order to formulate a proper model theory of philosophical lan-

¹⁸ “Jedes hinreichend mächtige formale System ist entweder widersprüchlich oder unvollständig.” Kurt Gödel, “Über formal unentscheidbare Sätze der *Principia Mathematica* und verwandter Systeme”, in: *Monatshefte für Mathematik und Physik*, Vol. 38 (1931), pp. 173–198.

guage. In axiomatic set theory, meta-mathematics concurs with philosophy as meta-ontology, both of them being faithful to truth. Starting from the identification of ontology with mathematics, the purely symbolic language of axiomatics (the ten Zermelo-Fraenkel axioms, including the “axiom of choice”) is able to provide both: a conceptual fundament for claims of existence in that the possibility of any being (or appearing element) is based on the mere empty set *and* a framework of positions where the failing consistency of formal language necessitates the “forcing” of the uncountable or the “wager” concerning the power structures involved that withhold the existence of specific impossibilities. This forcing signifies the same movement in symbolic (set-theoretical) language as the wager in natural (phenomenological) language: an intervention first given by a “pure name”, the meaning of which is to be developed by the intervening subject. This dialectical description of the uncountable multiplicity of appearances (in living worlds) is covered by the philosophy of time (analysing the sequences of presents) that connects a concept of emergence, the concept of the radically new drawn from the void, with a concept of eternity: the idea of truth. In Badiou’s edifice, the shifting point between both of them is delivered by the notion of “event”, which is at the same time an unpredictable, sudden “appearance” of a new thinking (in truth procedures like politics, arts, sciences) and a “creation” by truth-linked defenders of this appearance: “Qu’il soit de l’essence d’une vérité d’être éternelle ne la dispense nullement d’apparaître dans un monde et d’être inexistante antérieurement à cette apparition [...] L’éternelle nécessité concerne une vérité en elle-même [tandis que] son processus de création [est suspendu] à la contingence des mondes [et] à la constance d’un sujet [...] Les vérités sont éternelles parce qu’elles ont été créées, nullement parce qu’elles sont là depuis toujours.” (p. 534 et seq.)

Life depends on events of novelty, and to live truly is the acceptance of continuing to work on the outcome of these events.¹⁹ So, with regard to the epistemological question concerning the consistency of language used by life science, the philosophical choice to name being life, with its three ontological implications – the principle of equality, a transcendence of death and time, and a concept of radical novelty –, brings about consequences of major importance. I would like to draw attention to two of them. The first consequence is a valuable clarification

¹⁹ “Vivre suppose [...] qu’on accepte d’œuvrer aux conséquences, généralement inouïes, de ce qui advient.” *Logiques des mondes*, p. 534.

concerning the mathematical fundament of Badiou's own philosophy. One of the most controversial points is the concept of "subtraction", which functions as a catalyst of the (positively "inconstructible") connection between the symbolic language of set-theoretical situations and the "natural" language of particular situations in empirical worlds. It has been argued that a subtractive ontology with "minimal foundations" which are grounded "upon nothing" (the empty set) can only account for novelty in an effective sense, if either the existence of the void had more "ontological validity" than the existence of positively appearing entities (grounded on numbers) or the notion of event, linked to the void and actuator of the new, had to be split into two parts, one directed towards a discernable "situated void" (the inconsistency of the situation) and the other directed towards a point of "escape" beyond the situation.²⁰ The difficulty is whether there can be a situated void or whether "to be subtracted is to not be situated at all". This problem, which consequently has been submitted to both volumes of *Being and Event* – the ontological fundament of being remaining valid for the topology of appearing –, as a matter of fact is best resolved by considering the effect of concentrating the philosophical question on a concept of life (that has to be lived): Life as the proper name of being comprises two parts of one *immanent*, self-constitutive procedure: the transcending movement beyond itself and the interruption of movement at the points of radical emergence which renew parts of (living) existence. The logical equilibration which is necessary for the differences of intensity in the topology of appearing is provided by a (potentially) *equivalent* interaction of positivity and negativity. This is one of the most difficult points in Badiou that the notion of life helps to understand: Subtraction is (uncountably) multiple, too! As there is for every being, there is for every *nonbeing* that might come into being by virtue of subtraction, a *specific* and potentially differentiable "impresentation".²¹

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This is why life as an "inconceivable totality" is able to create as many catastrophes as fortunes (or even more for those who struggle to know what it is to live) and regenerates itself by an unpredictable emergence based on a specific inexistence that can be forced to truth without any predetermination or "intelligent

²⁰ Sam Gillespie, "Giving Form to Its Own Existence: Anxiety and the Subject of Truth", in: Paul Ashton, A. J. Bartlett, Justin Clemens, *The Praxis of Alain Badiou* (Melbourne: re.press, 2006), pp. 180–209, p. 183 et seq.

²¹ "Toute présentation structurée imprésente 'son' vide, dans le mode de ce non-un qui n'est que la face soustractive du compte." Badiou, *L'être et l'événement*, p. 68.

design”. This is also why time (as well as space) has to be thought as sequels of living presents: “Tout présent est fibré.”²² One could say that life must be lived because the elements of the presents are unpredictably *capable of erring*. Life itself must have the chance to be (deadly) mistaken.²³ But from this it follows that neither life nor death are intrinsic questions of physical objectivity: “La vie et la mort ne sont jamais en elles-mêmes des problèmes de physique”.²⁴ So the second consequence is a fundamental challenge to all scientific efforts aiming to define life or to analyse the living. The core of that challenge is a question concerning the limits of language. Being – life! – is anterior to language, as Badiou points out with reference to the “axiom of separation”. Or, to put it in Bergson’s words: “Notre pensée, sous sa forme purement logique, est [...] créée par la vie”.²⁵ Theory itself depends on life and appears to be a living manifestation (in a specific duration of time). Hence, in assessing the necessity to think the appropriate language of life theory, one has to ask whether a technical (even digitalizable) language is able to provide a model that embraces the requisites – equality, emergence, and transcendence – put forward by philosophy. If the language is artificially built, one might presume that it should not be wholly constructible like in materialistic positivism or other consistency-based scientific methodology.

The discovery of the insufficient puissance inherent in language “on the way” to designating beings in life²⁶ – which has also been, of course, a central question of linguistics and philosophy of language since Gottlob Frege or even John Stuart Mill’s *System of Logic* – has never been developed further on the side of today’s philosophy than in Badiou’s twofold proposition of ontology followed

²² Idem, *Logiques des mondes*, p. 530.

²³ This idea refers to a formulation of Foucault that comes very close to Badiou’s concept of the “wandering” or “errancy” of the void: “La vie a aboutit avec l’homme à un vivant [...] qui est voué à ‘errer’ et à ‘se tromper’...”. Michel Foucault, “La vie: l’expérience et la science”, in: *Revue de métaphysique et de morale*, Vol. 90, no 1 (1985), pp. 3–14, quoted from: *Dits et écrits II, 1976–1988* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), p. 1593.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 1592.

²⁵ Bergson, *L’évolution créatrice*, p. VI.

²⁶ While Badiou and Heidegger may represent in actual philosophy the most extreme antagonism possible in ontology and in aesthetics, there is a common ground in their respective theories of language: the critique of metalinguistics and the (subjective) condition of “experience with language”: “Was zu tun übrig bleibt, ist, Wege zu weisen, die vor die Möglichkeit bringen, mit der Sprache eine Erfahrung zu machen.” Martin Heidegger, *Unterwegs zur Sprache* (Stuttgart: Neske, 1959), p. 161.

by topological phenomenology. The language of the mathematical truth procedure this philosophy is faithful to, the axiomatization of set theory (and a Heyting algebra), traces itself back to an eventual shift in philosophical epistemology. Contemporaneous to Bergson's *L'évolution créatrice*, the Zermelo set theory (first published in the same year 1907) is itself situated at the heart of the philosophical "crisis" of European sciences that confront a "technization" of the *Lebenswelt* (the immediately experienced concreteness) with a "positivist restriction of the idea of science".²⁷ The main question, raised most explicitly by Edmund Husserl in 1935, is whether the "mystery of subjectivity" remains conceivable in the era of the (perfected) "mathematization of Nature" which "decapitates" philosophy by cutting the subject out of language.²⁸ The crucial relationship between science and language is in fact an indicator of the whole epoch of the modern period (since Galileo) which can be characterized as a "process structure" enabling a "technicity of mind" that "transforms phenomena into products".²⁹

The turning point of that era as a new condition for philosophy at the beginning of the 20th century can be elucidated by the simple question "What is it to live?", which is our link from Badiou to Bergson. The comparison between the "vital" elements of these philosophies that will round off this essay aims to confront the ontological wager of life as a name of being with the first and most important *immanent* concept of life. Bergson's philosophy of life is the elaboration of a (projective) theory that is able to "reach" life itself. The philosophical project of Bergson aims to expand theory – and the language of theory – as far as possible, so that it expresses a potency as multiple, as puissant, and as unpredictably different as life is for living beings. So the crucial requirement is to forge an "immanent" concept of life, a concept that thinks life from within itself. The name of this concept is "*élan vital*"³⁰, which defies the English translations "vital force" or "vital impetus", as well as the German *Lebenskraft* or *Lebensschwungkraft*. This naming, one of the most influential in 20th century philosophy, is the con-

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²⁷ Edmund Husserl (1935, 1969), *Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendente Phänomenologie. Eine Einleitung in die phänomenologische Philosophie* (Hamburg: Meiner, 1996), p. 3.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 4, 8, 22.

²⁹ "Die Verwandlung von Phänomenen in Produkte ist die essentielle Prozeßstruktur der Technizität des neuzeitlichen Geistes". Hans Blumenberg (1966), *Paradigmen zu einer Metaphorologie* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1998), p. 39.

³⁰ Bergson: *L'évolution créatrice*, p. 80, p. 254 et seq.

ceptual counterpart of the outlined life theory. Where Badiou chooses life as the name for being in order to enlarge philosophical theory to enable an encounter of ontology and phenomenology, Bergson chooses the *élan vital* as a name for life in order to enlarge life theory so that it can reach all beings.

Bergson's *élan vital* is a concept that works as a twofold "differentiating instance"³¹. It comprehends two (multiple) ways of developing the question "What is it to live?". *Élan vital* "means" (is) at the same time the immanent force behind the movement of all beings (or appearances) *and* the immanent reason for the (undecidable) emergence or creation of new beings. "The universe lasts."³² And it does so "in different durations with specific rhythms".³³ The philosophical implications of this conceptual choice – which can be interpreted ontologically, as Deleuze already pointed out in his book *Le bergsonisme* from 1966 – converge to a stunning complementarity with Badiou's thinking of equality, transcendence, and novelty. I would like to emphasize three of them: 1) Life – named *élan vital* – is the movement of being. The fact that "life in general" is identified with "movement itself"³⁴ causes its ability – from within – to "progress and last"³⁵. It follows that every being lives forasmuch it has a specific duration. This is the fundament of Bergson's tacit ontology. It is not named as such, but it establishes the purely conceptual possibility of unlimited and unpredictable manifestations of life (respectively, as Badiou would call it: situations or worlds). The ontological concept comprises *all* possible durations, that of humans, animals, and plants – as well as, on the side of non-living beings, that of objects (sugar) or concepts (the idea of evolution). The difference between the "organisms" is only conditioned by the levels and the quantities of moving energy. The ontological concept of life is at the same time anterior to all those beings: it leaves them and their languages as "forced" creations.

2) If "life in general" is an overarching process of creation that is "unceasingly renewed" in its manifestations, then the *élan vital* requires that the "forms of life"

³¹ Deleuze, "Cours sur le chapitre III de *L'évolution créatrice* de Bergson" (21 March 1960), in: *op. cit.*, pp. 662–669, p. 664.

³² "L'Univers dure." Bergson, *L'évolution créatrice*, p. 11.

³³ "En réalité, il n'y a pas un rythme unique de la durée; on peut imaginer bien des rythmes différents". Idem, *Matière et mémoire*, in: *Œuvres*, ed. Henri Gouhier (Paris: P.U.F., 1970), p. 342.

³⁴ "La vie en général est la mobilité même." *L'évolution créatrice*, p. 128 et seq.

³⁵ "La vie, elle, progresse et dure", *ibid.*, p. 51.

are created in the same way as the ideas and concepts reflecting these forms.³⁶ So the (tacitly ontological) philosophy that provides the appropriate language for life theory and avoids reducing the potentiality of subjective “processes of consciousness” has only one goal: to think – following the “synergy” of intelligence and intuition – the “real durations” of time as (creative) emergences and (continual) developments of individual presents. Creation and continuity are the two main antagonistic but complementary functions of “evolution” that fuse – in the name of *élan vital* – into the immanent concept of life. While life is what “in every moment creates something” – which in fact can be a negative thing not coming into being (or dying shortly after being born) –, to understand what it is to live, is to consider the different places where time “inscribes itself” as presents: “Partout où quelque chose vit, il y a, ouvert quelque part, un registre où le temps s’inscrit” (p. 16). This phrase contains the clue that resumes the whole philosophy of Bergson, which is fundamentally a project of understanding the relationships between time and space under different perspectives, from the *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience* (1889), which discovers the concepts of duration and extension as unassailable coordinates of the perception of living (caught between coercion and liberty), to *Matière et mémoire* (1896), which explores the dialectics of nature and mind, matter and memory, bodies and souls, etc. as (Cartesian) “product sets” of extension and duration.³⁷ The concept of *élan vital* that motivates *L'évolution créatrice* breaks radically with the remnants of the metaphysical overvaluation of time (as aspects of mind) over space (as aspects of matter) presupposed in these earlier books. It reunites both, time and space, as effects of a moving multiplicity that “constitutes intellectuality and materiality by reciprocal adaptation”.³⁸

³⁶ “L'évolution est une création renouvelée, elle crée au fur et à mesure, non seulement les formes de la vie, mais les idées qui permettraient de la comprendre, les termes qui serviraient à l'exprimer”. *Ibid.*, p. 104.

³⁷ The problem of the “philosophical sequel” between main works that has been posed with regard to Badiou by Bruno Bosteels, Justin Clemens, Oliver Feltham, and others is an even harder task with regard to Bergson. Including *Les deux sources de la morale et de la religion* (1932), there are four stages in the journey, the last one delivering a very late metaphysical development of the ethical and religious consequences of the twofold concept of life developed by *L'évolution créatrice* and the position of mankind in it. The “chef de file” of today’s Bergsonism who works on this linkage is Frédéric Worms, *Bergson ou les deux sens de la vie* (Paris: P.U.F., 2004).

³⁸ Bergson, *L'évolution créatrice*, p. 188. This means that the *élan vital* as a differentiating instance finishes with the overvaluation of history as well: “Le mouvement qui parcourt l'Histoire est celui même de la différenciation.” Deleuze, “Cours”, p. 664.

3) If life is the universal movement of all beings and the unceasingly renewed creation of all of its manifestations, then the task of a philosophy that aims to understand life is a “deepening reflection of becoming in general” and hence a “true extension of science”.³⁹ This conclusion is very similar and fundamentally compatible with the result of Badiou’s reflection. The concept of life in general – as the name of being – meets the principle of equality on the same level as Badiou’s situations (*Being and Event I*) or worlds (*Being and Event II*). The *élan vital*, as the movement of creative evolution, encounters the principles of transcendence and novelty on the level of the appearing intensities (or durations) and the events (or emergences) “drawn from the void”. Moreover, one can state a similarity within the philosophy of time (as sets of presents) and the topology of space (“homogenous and void, infinite and infinitely divisible”)⁴⁰, so that in both cases an ontological model of “subtraction” based on mathematical order is expressed. This parallel might be the most surprising and the most interesting for Badiouians. At the core of *L’évolution créatrice* Bergson introduces the notion of “inversion”, which describes the “leaps” of matter jumping from “tension” into “extension” and of mind passing to freedom through “mechanical necessity” (p. 237). Here he refers to a purely negative mathematical order that symbolizes – i.e. negatively “materializes” – the points of interruption of order, where the re-inscription of being is possible: “L’ordre mathématique, étant de l’ordre, [...] paraîtra renfermer quelque chose de positif. En vain nous disons que cet ordre se produit automatiquement par l’interruption de l’ordre inverse, qu’il est cette interruption même.”⁴¹ In this context Bergson also develops – half a century before Paul Cohen – a concept of the “générique” (p. 226) which is the purely conceptual “common ground” of organic and inorganic manifestations of time-space-differentiations driven by the *élan vital*.

³⁹ “La fonction propre de la philosophie [...] est l’approfondissement du devenir en général [...] et par conséquent le vrai prolongement de la science.” Bergson, *L’évolution créatrice*, p. 368 et seq.

⁴⁰ Bergson’s topological philosophy of space renewed by his concept of life is stunningly *congruent* to that of Badiou: “Il y a un *espace*, c’est-à-dire un milieu homogène et vide, infini et infiniment divisible, se prêtant indifféremment à n’importe quel mode de décomposition.” *Ibid.*, p. 157.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 220 et seq. That is also why space has become as important as time at this stage of Bergson’s edifice, “L’unité pure et vide ne se rencontre [...] que dans l’espace: c’est celle d’un point mathématique.” *Ibid.*, p. 258.

So, if the general parameters of ontology and phenomenology are *logically congruent*, it remains to be seen how the *subject* is thought in Bergson's edifice. With the objective to consider the philosophical premises of life theory, it proves advantageous to round off the Badiou-Bergson-comparison by raising a Lacanian question. One has to state that Bergson does not suppose any difference in truth procedures. For him, there is only one generic truth, that of life itself. One has to state furthermore that the position of humans – who can be immortal by their deeds as faithful subjects – is considered in an anthropological perspective which is absent in Badiou's edifice. Man is of *natural* interest for Bergson. With regard to the other beings, man is positioned on a "higher level" of evolution, because his brain is able to "construct an infinite number of drive mechanisms" and to "dominate automatism" (p. 265). Nevertheless, we can find an equivalent to Badiou's subject in *L'évolution créatrice*. Bergson calls it – "due to default of a better word" – the consciousness: "la Conscience" (p. 187). Consciousness is "co-extensive with universal life", so it is essentially linked to movement, motivated by the *élan vital* in the same way as the forms of life. Because they are coextensive with life, the acts of consciousness create and are created as "living beings", but on a conceptual level of "reflection" (p. 261) that casts an "immanent light" on these beings. This "accompaniment" of life by an "immaterial" framework has been interpreted by Deleuze as a "virtual" coexistence. But Deleuze's famous development of the concept hides the fact that Bergson's consciousness is less linked to virtuality than to "real" activity (or praxis, as Badiou would call it): "la conscience est la lumière immanente à la zone d'actions possibles ou activité virtuelle qui entoure l'action effectivement accomplie par l'être vivant" (p. 145). With Bergson's famous battle cry in mind – "there are no things, there are only actions"⁴² – one has to understand the "twofoldedness" of consciousness realized as life is by intelligence and intuition: The *élan vital* of consciousness is a "limited force" that "exceeds itself endlessly" (as intelligence), so it remains always an "inadequate representation" of the achievements it tends to produce.⁴³ But at the same time, it is an unlimited force, a "pur vouloir vivifié" (as intuition) linked to mobility itself that is "interrupted" by the inadequateness of its own representation and thus, exceeding itself, "compelled into action": "Un être vivant et

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⁴² "Il n'y a pas de choses, il n'y a que des actions." *Ibid.*, p. 249.

⁴³ "La force qui évolue à travers le monde organisé est une force limitée, qui toujours cherche à se dépasser elle-même, et toujours reste inadéquate à l'œuvre qu'elle tend à produire." *Ibid.*, p. 127. "Cet inadéquation de l'acte à la représentation est précisément ici ce que nous appelons conscience." *Ibid.*, p. 145.

un centre d'action" (p. 262). So the virtual action "surrounding" the real action sublates the inversion of energy that opposes action and imagination. While the *élan vital* is divided by communicating itself⁴⁴, consciousness is "attached" to this communication by "making itself".⁴⁵ This is the equivalent of Badiou's subject as a subjective procedure linked to life. It is a centre of "free action" – ideally subtracted from all constraints – that can be supported in reality by an individual who "contracts all of his being to push the pure will [the 'making itself'] forward" (p. 238).

In default of a definition of the difference of truth procedures – with Bergson everything that is created in life is a (first) event –, there is only one truth procedure that is differentiated as forced ("pushed") autopoiesis. It is the task of philosophy to do this faithfully. So the philosopher is a true subject, the philosopher who is "faithful to truth" by trying to understand what it is to live. Reality being the very object of philosophy (p. 85), the philosopher pushing forward (or deepening) the reflection of becoming in general (p. 369) is affected by the *élan vital* and engages himself in the continuation of its movement: "Le philosophe est obligé [une fois qu'il a reçu l'élan] de se fier à lui-même pour continuer le mouvement" (p. 239). At the same time, the philosopher is a "communicator" of truth in the sense that he thinks – creates conceptually – the points where the *élan vital* of consciousness is interrupted and recreates itself. But it remains that these points concern all living beings that can "retroactively" (p. 52) understand consciousness and become (possibly) aware of life as "concrete experiences" that have to be pursued. Life is, for all living beings alike, to live their lives actively.

One could perhaps argue that the conclusion of this comparison is slightly "forced" as well. It might seem questionable to conceive – within Badiou's edifice of situations that is based on the ontological framework of set theory and "extended" by logical phenomenology – a *naturalness* of events. Could the requirement of the historicity of the "evental sites" of situations, which interrupt the natural currents of becoming and opens them up for subjective re-creation, be re-orientated "for the sake of life"? Moreover, one has to question the exclusion of anthropology from philosophy that has been put forward in Badiou's book

⁴⁴ "L'élan se divise de plus en plus en se communicant." *Ibid.*, p. 104.

⁴⁵ "Pour que notre conscience coïncidât avec quelque chose de son principe, il faudrait qu'elle se détachât du *tout fait* et s'attachât au *se faisant*." *Ibid.*, p. 238.

L'éthique from 1994.⁴⁶ From a Bergsonian perspective, the question of man as a living being goes further than the ideology of “technical dominion of death”, which irrevocably separates natural (dying) animality from the eternity of truth. One might imagine the (perfectly inconstructible) “situation” of mankind in general, as Bergson does, and argue that a singular man (or a society) that is potentially linked to truth – not as such, but as a living being – can enact a truth procedure by actively and creatively positioning himself with regard to his natural environment (e.g. the planet that has been wasted).⁴⁷ I claim that these are two of the consequences (within a multiplicity) that have to be accounted for, if you call being life or if you conclude a treatise of phenomenology by the question of what it is to live.

Nevertheless, one crucial argument results *for certain* from the comparison of these two fundamental philosophers of life who represent the two ends of a century that is vitally depending on a resolution of the question “What is it to live?”: that is the philosophical challenge posed to the language of life science. It has been said that neither the symbolic language of (meta-)mathematics nor the natural language of social situations are “puissant” enough to express the whole of life in all of its manifestations. They designate only “parts”, the logical or the phenomenological elements of it. The reason behind their insufficient puissance is that the undecidable situations of life and the infinite potentiality of (positively and negatively) disseminated independencies, which are fundamental for life’s own movement of interruptions and recreations (in evolutionary adaptation or in thought) cannot be completely accounted for either on the basis of logical consistency or on the basis of socially encoded “language-games” (Wittgenstein). The rest of the mystery always remains. So, if the task is to preserve philosophy, and if philosophical thinking is to be faithful to the assumption that (all) being is life, then its “capital problem” is to know “how sci-

⁴⁶ This question has been raised by Nina Power: “Towards an Anthropology of Infinitude: Badiou and the Political Subject”, in: Ashton/Bartlett/Clemens, *The Praxis of Alain Badiou*, pp. 309–338.

⁴⁷ Badiou reads Bergson too rigidly in a Deleuzian direction when he claims that in “the line of thought” of the philosophers of life – “de Nietzsche à Deleuze en passant par Bergson” – the eternity of truth is a “lethal fiction”. Badiou: *Petit manuel d'inesshétique* (Paris: Seuil, 1998), p. 62. He is more in line with the founder of life theory when he analyses “local energy” as the origin of the “affirmative courage” that the subject needs in order to follow the truth procedure: “Se saisir d’un point, et le tenir.” *Ibid.*, p. 117 et seq.

ence is possible”.⁴⁸ Bergson responds: Positive science being the “work of pure intelligence” (p. 196) and intelligence being the “faculty of connecting the same to the same” (p. 52), a “science of life” is a *contradictio in re*. The neutral facticity of constructible language only targets the “laws” of being (p. 230), not being itself. “Consciousness lies dormant when life is condemned to automatism” (p. 262). Badiou only radicalizes the same answer. The language of life theory – the philosophical question of being – cannot be scientific at all! Science is a truth procedure that constructs its language in the simplest manner possible (feigning clear understanding). It does not care about language. To care about language is to continue to create it in the direction of independency. That is the “inaesthetical” task of poetry. To visualize the neurons in the brain of a man (or a woman) who is reading Mallarmé’s *Un coup de dés* like counting the letters of the poem.

⁴⁸ “Le problème capital de la théorie de la connaissance est en effet de savoir comment la science est possible”. Bergson, *L'évolution créatrice*, p. 232.