Bergson, Politics, and Religion
Frédéric Worns, “Le clos et l’ouvert dans Les deux sources
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in Etudes de langue et littérature françaises 94 (2009).
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We are grateful for the funding provided by the Social Sciences Research Council of Canada, the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at Carleton University, the School of Social Sciences at the University of New South Wales, and the School of Philosophical and Historical Inquiry and the School of Social and Political Sciences at the University of Sydney. We would like to thank the anonymous reviewers of the manuscript, in addition to our editor, Courtney Berger, whose support for this project was invaluable. We give warm thanks to Melissa McMahon who cheerfully responded to all manner of translation questions that went well beyond the call of duty. Joanne Lefebvre assisted throughout the preparation of the manuscript. This volume is dedicated to our daughter, Beatrice, who is continually opening and closing.
The following abbreviations have been used throughout. Page references are made first to the English translation, followed by the corresponding reference to Henri Bergson, Œuvres, ed. André Robinet, with an introduction by Henri Gouhier (Paris: PUF, 1959).

Henri Bergson is an extraordinary political philosopher. By this we mean two things: on the one hand, he is a philosopher who has had an extraordinary impact on the political, and, on the other hand, he is an extraordinary philosopher of the political. Now we are aware that this claim may seem doubtful to an English-speaking audience for whom Bergson’s political thought is relatively unknown. Indeed, *Bergson, Politics, and Religion* is the first volume in English dedicated to the political and religious aspects of his thought. In order to introduce Bergson, let us turn to the historical record and begin with his influence on the politics of his time.

**Impact on the Political**

The first phase of Bergson’s career is not especially “political,” however one wishes to take the term. His early books, which established his reputation as the preeminent philosopher of France, do not expressly address political (or religious) themes: *Time and Free Will* (1889) develops a notion of time (“duration”) from lived experience and extends it to mathematics; *Matter and Memory* (1896) addresses the age-old problem of the relationship between consciousness and matter through a new concept of memory; and *Cre-
ative Evolution (1907) elaborates the idea of duration into a theory of evolution (the “élan vital”). In 1896 he was appointed to the Collège de France, where his public lectures enjoyed tremendous success. Packed with students and cultivated society, Bergson’s lectures treated ideas already presented in the books that had made him famous (e.g., a course on memory in 1903, and another on freedom in 1904). In short, Bergson enjoyed the life of an extremely successful academic whose research and teaching concentrated on problems of philosophy and science.

But in 1916 his life took an unexpected twist: the French government entrusted him with a series of diplomatic missions, first to Spain, and then again decisively, to the United States in 1917. The purpose of this second assignment was to strike up a personal relationship with Woodrow Wilson in order to persuade the United States to enter the First World War. Here it is interesting to ask why France would entrust such a momentous task to a philosopher. Philippe Soulez and Frédéric Worms, Bergson’s biographers, offer a startling answer to this question: Bergson was chosen precisely because he was a philosopher; because he could, in a sense, stand above the political fray and reflect back to Wilson his own (i.e., Wilson’s) idealized vision of the end of war and the founding of an international community: “In essence, Bergson says to Wilson: ‘you are philosopher, prophet, and king. For the first time in human history these three figures are one.’ And if Bergson is persuasive, it is because he believes what he says. In this sense, Bergson is truly ‘witness to the truth’: he presents Wilson the very image he would like to have of himself. He is witness to Wilson’s desire; or in other words, he guarantees Wilson’s ideal self. Only a philosopher can provide this guarantee.”

Thus it is perhaps misleading to divide Bergson’s career into two distinct phases: first philosopher and then political figure, as if the latter was simply a different hat. Rather, if we follow Soulez and Worms, Bergson is an effective political actor—one who initiated, it is no exaggeration to say, a world historic event inasmuch as the United States’ entry into the First World War was the decisive factor in ending the war—foremost because he is a philosopher, because he incarnates an ideal. This volume will explore the nature of this ideal in detail, but for now we wish only to signal this actualization of philosophy within politics.

Bergson’s political career did not end with the First World War. During the drafting of the Treaty of Versailles, he continued to serve as a key intermediary between the French and American governments. But his
main postwar political contribution was his work with the Wilson administration to establish the League of Nations. In 1922 he was appointed president of the League’s International Commission for Intellectual Cooperation, which was precursor to UNESCO. The primary purpose of this institution was to promote international collaboration between scholars—such as the famous exchange between Freud and Einstein, “Why War?” in 1932—in the hope that the spirit of internationalism would kindle in the nations themselves. To this end, Bergson worked tirelessly to ensure that the commission was not merely an abstract ideal and dedicated himself to practical down-to-earth tasks such as coordinating the international exchange of publications, bibliographies, and scientific results, as well as ensuring financial support for the commission. But driving these practical activities we can see a principle dedicated to the prevention of war through enhanced understanding, one that Bergson would later on make explicit: “Anyone who is thoroughly familiar with the language and literature of a people cannot be wholly its enemy. This should be borne in mind when we ask education to pave the way for international understanding” (TS 286/1218). Thus, in these two positions—as emissary to the United States and as president of the International Commission for Intellectual Cooperation—we can see the multifaceted nature of Bergson’s political accomplishment: a philosopher who affected the highest levels of policy and an administrator who labored for a philosophical ideal.

**PHILOSOPHER OF THE POLITICAL**

Our claim that Bergson is an extraordinary political philosopher may seem strange in light of the fact that he did not write a book of political philosophy. Where his early work addresses the nature of time, memory, and evolution, his last book—*The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* (1932)—frames a series of political problems in terms of a treatise on morality and religion. What, then, is the basis for our claim?

Here, two great readers of Bergson are especially helpful, both to assist in understanding the nature of Bergson’s political thought and, perhaps more importantly, to know what to do with it today.

In a chapter translated for this volume, Philippe Soulez argues that it is no coincidence that Bergson did not write a traditional book of political philosophy. As he puts it, “it is doubtful in fact that Bergson was ever tempted to write a book of ‘political philosophy,’ in the sense of a specific
philosophical discipline. What interests him are problems rather than a subject matter or discipline.” Certainly this observation is borne out by Bergson’s previous books. Creative Evolution, for example, engages the biological sciences according to its governing problematic of how to conceive of evolution as open-ended creative duration. Likewise Two Sources has its own organizing problem: to what extent can the drive to war be turned aside? Two Sources, then, can be considered a work of political philosophy because it treats political themes through the horizon of this problem. A goal of this introduction is to sketch Bergson’s original formulation of the problem of war and observe how it transforms or even dissolves received political and religious problems.

Thus, on the one hand, while Soulez describes Bergson’s own method of working through problems, Gilles Deleuze states that Bergson’s contemporary relevance depends on renewing him along new lines of inquiry: “A ‘return to Bergson’ does not only mean a renewed admiration for a great philosopher but a renewal or an extension of his project today, in relation to the transformations of life and society, in parallel with the transformations of science. Bergson himself considered that he had made metaphysics a rigorous discipline, one capable of being continued along new paths which constantly appear in the world.” Deleuze gives us a directive of what it means to be Bergsonian: to extend, and indeed transform, Bergson’s thought by cultivating new problems that respond to the challenges of today. In this sense, faithfulness is re-creation.

To carry on with Bergson, and to honor his way of doing philosophy, it is necessary to actualize his work through the invention of novel problems. This is why a Bergsonian school of thought—whether in philosophy, psychology, or politics—is nonexistent and perhaps unthinkable. Take the case of Georges Sorel. Reflections on Violence (1908) is certainly the most famous text of political philosophy directly inspired by Bergson, and yet, for all that, Bergson (glowingly) denies, in a letter to Gilbert Maire in 1912, that Sorel was ever a disciple: “[He] is, it seems to me, too original and too independent an individual [esprit] to join this or that camp; he is not a disciple. But he accepts some of my views and, when he cites me, he does so as a man who has read me attentively and who has understood me perfectly” (M 971). In fact all of Bergson’s great political readers—such as Charles Péguy, Karl Popper, John Humphrey, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, and William Connolly—could be similarly
categorized: they are Bergsonians in the spirit of extending Bergson to new problems, rather than adhering to the letter of his text.

Soulez and Deleuze offer two perspectives that ground this collection’s reassessment of Bergson’s political and religious thought. On the one hand, the volume is exegetical. It identifies, clarifies, and develops the problems that occupy Bergson in *Two Sources*. Such work is timely as many of Bergson’s core concerns are at the forefront of contemporary scholarship, such as the significance of emotion in moral judgment, the relationship between biology and society, and the entanglement of politics and religion. A key ambition of this book, therefore, is to foster Bergson’s entry into these debates and demonstrate the importance of his contribution. On the other hand, this volume extends Bergson’s thought in new directions. One benefit, of course, is to disseminate a Bergsonian perspective on problems hitherto unconsidered by him, but another, equally important benefit is to show that Bergson does not just offer a new solution to already established problems but, in keeping with the methodological privilege he gives to them, he dissolves or reconfigures the formulation of the problem itself. In short, the aims of this volume are to clarify central problems of Bergson’s political and religious thought and connect them to current debates and to present Bergsonian scholarship that reconfigures problems in topics as diverse as human rights, Judaism, environmental ethics, sovereignty, and aesthetics.

**The Problem of War**

We proceed in the next two sections to outline Bergson’s formulation of the problem of war in *Two Sources*. Our aim is to make explicit a key point of reference that many of the chapters in this collection presuppose: the relationship Bergson establishes between biology or life on the one hand and politics and religion on the other.

We claim that war is the coordinating problem of *Two Sources*. Now, on a first reading of this text, it is not altogether obvious that Bergson is principally interested in *this* problem. The first three chapters are philosophical in tone and treat the topics of moral obligation, static religion, and dynamic religion respectively. Only in the final chapter, dedicated to a practical discussion of contemporary political issues, is the problem of war presented urgently in and of itself. But with it Bergson snaps the book
into focus: “The object of the present work was to investigate the origins of morality and religion. We have been led to certain conclusions. We might leave it at that. But since at the basis of our conclusions was a radical distinction between the closed and the open society, since the tendencies of the closed society have, in our opinion, persisted, ineradicable, in the society opening itself up, and since all these instincts of discipline originally converged toward the war-instinct, we are bound to ask to what extent the primitive instinct can be repressed or turned aside” (ts 288/1220; emphasis added and translation modified).

Here Bergson makes it apparent that the search for the origins of morality and religion is in service of an immediate goal: to thwart the natural tendency to war. But why, might we ask, does Bergson find it necessary to bring such a formidable theoretical apparatus to the task? Because, he would say, we have an imprecise, all-too-comforting impression that war is irregular and unnatural: “Oh, I know what society says... It says that the [moral] duties it defines are indeed, in principle, duties towards humanity, but that under exceptional circumstances, regrettably unavoidable, they are for the time being inapplicable [suspendu]” (ts 31/1000–1001). This view, common to liberalism at the turn of the century as well as today, is governed by two assumptions: first, that peace is normal and war exceptional; and second, that moral obligation extends to all human beings. Bergson’s objection is that this view is at once imprecise and hypocritical. It is imprecise because it does not offer a satisfactory explanation for the outbreak of war. If we recognize basic moral duties to all, how could war so much as start? It is hypocritical because the cosmopolitan ideal that we claim to cherish is cast aside the moment it is most desperately needed. What Bergson has exposed is a false problem and its consequence: if we see moral obligation as universal but only suspended in times of war, then the origins of war are inexplicable, and our strategies to deter it are misguided.

War, therefore, exposes a dangerous confusion in our everyday idea of morality: on the one hand, moral duties are ostensibly universal, but, on the other hand, these same duties—as the fact of war brutally reveals—apply strictly to a specific group. In Bergson’s terms our everyday idea of morality is composite: it misleadingly groups together tendencies that differ in kind (here, moral universalism and particularism). There is, in other words, a distinct moral tendency to preserve and protect the group exclusively and another distinct moral tendency to love, respect, and care
for all human beings as such. Bergson calls the first tendency “closed” and the second tendency “open.” The aim of *Two Sources*, then, is to achieve a clear and distinct view of each tendency, to warn against collapsing them, and, with these two tendencies in sight, to provide an appropriate solution—not in order to avert war as such, for as Bergson acknowledges this natural tendency is ineradicable, but to mitigate its effects and frequency by placing the two tendencies in opposition to one another.

**BIOLOGICAL ORIGINS OF MORALITY AND RELIGION**

If war is the practical problem that unites the myriad themes of *Two Sources*, the question of the origins of morality and religion is the philosophical problem that underlies them. As the very title *Two Sources* announces, morality and religion are not self-grounding. At the heart of the book is Bergson’s claim that *the origin of morality and religion is life* (*TS 101/1061*). As we will see, it is in its connection to life that the problem of war receives its definitive formulation.

Life, for Bergson, is not a single source. Once again his title is instructive. It proclaims that there are *two* sources of morality and religion. He names these sources the “closed” and the “open” tendencies of life. These two tendencies are the origin of morality and religion.

Let us ask, as plainly as possible, why life has two tendencies. What does it mean to say that one tendency is “closed” and the other “open”? In using these terms, Bergson draws on two meanings of their ordinary usage. On the one hand, we say something is closed when it is bounded and exclusive. On the other hand, we say something is open when it is indeterminate (“open-ended”) and inclusive. For Bergson, life exhibits both of these tendencies in both of their senses. In *Creative Evolution* he emphasizes the first sense of each tendency: boundedness and indeterminacy. Life tends toward self-preservation, reproduction and stability, *and* toward continuous and unpredictable change. In this way Bergson captures both the bounded stability and open-ended dynamism of evolution. In *Two Sources* Bergson picks up the second sense of each tendency: exclusion and inclusion. Human societies tend toward exclusion, group solidarity and war, *and* toward love and care that reaches beyond the limited bounds of the social group.

Let us pause and consider the relationship Bergson establishes in *Two Sources* between morality, religion, and war in the closed and open ten-
dencies of life. The cornerstone of his reflections is that human beings are living beings. This means, first and foremost, that the defining aspects of human life—whether sociability, morality, religion, or reason—are products of evolution; they are evolutionary responses to vital needs. Consider morality and religion. The evolutionary function of morality, based on Bergson’s account, is social cohesion: obligation creates the solidarity and discipline of the group. Because its purpose is to ensure the cohesion of a particular society, morality is always an in-group phenomenon.7 Near the end of the book, Bergson gives a stark overview: “The closed society is that whose members hold together, caring nothing for the rest of humanity, on the alert for attack or defense, bound, in fact, to a perpetual readiness for battle” (TS 266/1201). The evolutionary function of religion intensifies that of morality but in a different register: it overcomes egoism and attaches the individual more firmly to the group, and through rites, ceremonies, and myths, it distinguishes the group from others (TS 206/1151). Given these functions of morality and religion, the nature of the war instinct comes to light. Bergson’s originality, of course, does not lie in the claim that war is natural or that human beings have a natural propensity for it. Rather, his insight is that the evolutionary function of morality and religion inevitably leads us to war. Or, put in a different way, by virtue of their evolutionary origin, the love and affection characteristic of closed morality and religion is fully compatible with hatred: “Homo homini deus and Homo homini lupus, are easily reconcilable. When we formulate the first, we are thinking of some fellow-countryman. The other applies to foreigners” (TS 286/1219).

But this is not the whole story. It is a fact, one that Bergson never tires of recording, that throughout history individuals have existed who are able to love without partiality and exclusion. The significance of individuals such as Socrates, Jesus Christ, and Joan of Arc is that they exemplify, and also alert us to, a capacity that lies in each of us: to love beyond the narrow bounds prescribed by evolution.8 Bergson calls these individuals “mystics.” The closed tendency of life cannot account for them. But then what does?

Recall Bergson’s evolutionary perspectivism: closed morality preserves the group by checking egoism and defending against enemies. What biological need, then, does love without preference—that is, “mysticism”—fulfill? Although Bergson does not explicitly make this point, the whole of Two Sources tends toward it: mysticism is life’s solution to the problem of
war. Love breaks us out of the rut of war. Consider a loveless world, one without the means to transcend closure: “at once individual and social, the soul here moves round in a circle. It is closed” (TS 38/1006). Time and again in Two Sources Bergson favors the image of love as breaking us out of a cycle of hostility to which closed morality condemns us: “all aimed at opening what was closed; and the group, which after the last opening had closed [repliait] on itself, was brought back every time to humanity” (TS 267/1203); “there will be the hope that the circle may be broken in the end” (TS 53/1019); “you had a circle from which there would have been no escape, if one or several privileged beings . . . had not broken the circle and drawn the society after them” (TS 74/1038); “individual and society thus condition each other, circlewise. 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” (TS 199/1144). Circle and cycle are always coordinated: society and individual form a tight-knit circle, which leads to a never-ending cycle of war. The paradox of closed morality is that it exists in order to preserve the species, and it also introduces a desperate need to transcend it. And, as Bergson makes clear, with the advance of deadly new technologies—indeed, he anticipates the atomic bomb (TS 312/1241)—this need has become imperative. Hence the urgency of the problem of war and the need to address it from the proper theoretical perspective: we must confront the fact that our natural morality has put us at a dire crossroads, and we must realize the source from which it can be effectively countered.

Now there are two key consequences to draw from love being an evolutionary response to the problem of war. On the one hand, Bergson’s appeal to love is not abstract or sentimental. From his point of view, the root of major contemporary political institutions, such as human rights and democracy, is open morality or love. His point is that such institutions would be unimaginable (in terms of genesis) and incomprehensible (in terms of everyday practice) were we not able to see at their core a nonpreferential love irreducible to closed morality. In Bergson’s treatment, therefore, love is a concrete and practical political force. Or, to put it another way, mysticism is not only present in politics but is also the foundation of the institutions that can divert war.

On the other hand, Bergson broadens the fact of open morality into a radical biological and theological argument. His claim is nothing less than that love transfigures, or indeed transcends, the human species: “Let
a mystic genius but come forward, he will draw after him a humanity already vastly grown in body, and whose soul he has transfigured. He will yearn to make of it a new species, or rather deliver it from the necessity of being a species; for every species means a collective halt and complete existence is mobility in individuality” (TS 311/1240; emphasis added and translation modified). All species, for Bergson, are caught in a cycle of uncreative repetition: once created, they are fated to turn around and around on the same spot. But, as the means and ferocity of warfare demonstrate, the natural morality and religion of human beings traps us in a particularly destructive cycle. Love is a momentous fact for Bergson because it interrupts the logic of preservation, hostility, and closure. Hence his quite astonishing claim that the mystic—or rather, the mysticism dormant in each of us—has the potential to deliver us from the fate of speciesshood as such. Or, positively put, love enables human beings to participate in the essence of life itself: creation, unpredictability, newness.

Bergson’s originality is to devise an argument whereby human beings transcend the species without departing from animality or biology. The transfiguration of humanity is entirely immanent to life’s powers, a fact reflected in the human species becoming creator. In sum, we are simultaneously animal and creator, a point captured in the remarkable closing lines of Two Sources: “Mankind lies groaning, half crushed beneath the weight of its own progress. Men do not sufficiently realize that their future is in their own hands. Theirs is the task of determining first of all whether they want to go on living or not. Theirs the responsibility, then, for deciding if they want merely to live, or intend to make just the extra effort required for fulfilling, even on their refractory planet, the essential function of the universe, which is a machine for the making of gods” (TS 317/1245). This incarnation of the theological in the political, and their essential entanglement, is a theme taken up repeatedly by the contributors to the volume. It is also a central reason why Bergson has been resisted by the mainstream tradition in Anglo-American political philosophy, to which we now turn.

BERGSON, POLITICS, AND RELIGION

If we are correct that Bergson is an extraordinary political philosopher, then it is indeed extraordinary that he has been ignored by an English-speaking audience. Our aim in this final section is to account for this
neglect and, more importantly, to explain how each chapter in this collection renews the vitality of his political and religious thought.

This is the first volume in English dedicated to politics and religion in Bergson. We can think of at least three reasons why his work has been underappreciated. First, he does not treat standard themes of political theory head on. *Two Sources*, for example, rarely addresses subjects such as the justification and limits of power, or the principles of a just society, and even less so through the standard traditions in political philosophy. Second, *Two Sources* has had a difficult reception within continental philosophy. Its publication was initially met with mixed reviews and bewilderment for its reliance on mysticism; Bergson’s immediate successors such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Georges Canguilhem were indebted primarily to his early works; and in the contemporary revival of Bergson, due in large part to Deleuze, *Two Sources* is underplayed almost to the point of exclusion. Third, while Bergson has never found much of a home within analytical philosophy, the argument of *Two Sources* intensifies the points of resistance. Bertrand Russell’s attack on Bergson as an irrationalist seemed all the more warranted with the publication of *Two Sources*, in which love and creative emotion are given priority in morality and politics.

Since this volume is intended for an English-speaking audience, it behooves us to explain why Bergson was initially resisted, and eventually forgotten, in the Anglo-American tradition. We focus on an exemplary piece of criticism that follows in Russell’s footsteps: Judith Shklar’s “Bergson and the Politics of Intuition” (1958). Our interest in this essay—a minor piece by a major liberal theorist and already more than fifty years old—is heuristic. We do not wish to criticize or refute it as such. Shklar’s argument, in sum, is that Bergson is impertinent and dangerous for political theory. He is impertinent because he fails to engage with recognized and meaningful political categories, and he is dangerous because he imports “aesthetic” concepts—such as creativity, emotion, and mysticism—into the political realm. For Shklar, Bergson is a dead end for the traditional problems that have defined politics.

The virtue of Shklar’s essay for readers of Bergson today is that she has a keen sense of his originality. Time and again she zeros in on themes that make Bergson timely for contemporary thinking about politics and religion: the necessity of pluralism and creativity for political life, the centrality of affect for individual and group action, and the entanglement of
politics and religion. And yet her assessment of Bergson is disappointing because it remains caught in problems and oppositions he had intended to upset. To bring out this impression, let us see how Shklar frames Bergson as destructive of political thought and life. She raises three distinct objections, which are coordinated by a single concern that Bergson transforms politics into a space of irrationality.

1 *Creativity eliminates political judgment.* As Shklar states: “Creativity is too indefinite a notion to be a standard of judgment in ethics. In political matters, it is, if anything, an even more meaningless term. In neither case, moreover, can creativity as such acquire concrete expression in some definable form of behavior. Ultimately any sort of exhibitionism can parade around as creative morality” (BP1 333).

2 *Emotion eliminates rational deliberation.* As with Russell, Shklar characterizes Bergson as a philosopher of “moods” rather than ideas (BP1 319): “Free actions . . . are not only personal, they are distinctly non-rational. They occur on those rare occasions when we act in defiance of reason and calculation to follow some inner urge of our hidden self. Above all, [for Bergson] freedom can only be felt, not discussed. . . . Certainly a form of freedom that defies discussion is not in the realm of social activity. In everyday life freedom depends on the number of genuine alternatives of action open to the individual, not on the possibility of creating a new, future self out of nothing, nor on the occasional moment of self-expression” (BP1 325).

3 *Mysticism eliminates the political.* On Shklar’s account, mysticism, which she characterizes as prediscursive intuition, undermines philosophy and politics: “An inner apprehension of truth that is ineffable, unobstructed by the bonds of logic or communal expression can hardly be called philosophy. . . . [A mystic] could not be an actor on any political stage, which must necessarily be confining. He was, rather, the man who wants to end all politics, to dissolve the ‘closed society,’ and to create that ‘open society’ which embraces all mankind” (BP1 320, 333).

If Shklar is correct in her reading of Bergson, then no wonder she rejects him. But so too would Bergson! One way to put this is that they are both afraid of the same things: creativity, emotion, and mysticism as Shklar takes them to be. If creativity is seen as voluntarism, if emotion is seen to negate reason, and if mysticism is seen as the private and privileged access
to truth, then Bergson would be the first to deny their place in political and religious life.

The heuristic value of Shklar’s essay is that it shows that Bergson cannot be appreciated from the perspective of already given problems. If political philosophy, for example, has traditionally opposed emotion to reason and religion to politics, then Bergson’s contribution is surely not to insist on the priority of emotion or religion within the terms of that opposition. Our point is that to read Bergson effectively, perhaps nowhere more so than in politics and religion, his orientation to problems must be appreciated. His aim is to convert rather than intervene, to remake rather than accept.

The contributors to this volume exemplify this approach. The book is divided into three parts: “Closed and Open,” “Politics,” and “Religion and Mysticism.” To introduce each part, we show how Bergson recasts the problems identified by Shklar and thereby clears the terrain for the collection’s contributors.

Let us begin with the problem of creativity. In Shklar’s reading of Bergson, creativity is a normative standard of political judgment: institutions are good to the extent that they foster creativity. Shklar places Bergson within a tradition of political philosophy—one that he inherits from Marx and another that he initiates with Sorel—that advocates change. The trouble with this interpretation, however, is that for Bergson creativity is an ontological rather than a normative category. In fact he anticipates such a misreading in Creative Mind: “Because I called attention to the mobility at the base of things . . . it has been said that my doctrine was a justification of instability. One might just as well imagine that the bacteriologist recommends microbial diseases to us when he shows us microbes everywhere . . . A principle of explanation is one thing, a maxim of conduct is another” (SM 88/1328). Bergson thus shifts the place of creativity in politics and religion. He is not a voluntarist that urges change to a particular end; nor is he an advocate for change as such. His point is, rather, that the substrate of politics and religion is mobility, and successful institutions must acknowledge and work within that reality. As Bergson says, “One could almost say that the philosopher who finds mobility everywhere is the only one who cannot recommend it, since he sees it as inevitable, since he discovers it in what people have agreed to call immobility” (CM 88/1328). Bergson’s genius, we might say, is at once to assert the reality of change and to exhort prudence in dealing with it.
The chapters in part I, “Closed and Open,” begin from the necessity and reality of creativity. Frédéric Worsms surveys the whole of Two Sources from the perspective of the distinction it introduces between closed and open. His claim is nothing less than that this distinction changes everything—not merely in the book but in our lives! He means this in two interrelated senses. On the one hand, Two Sources shows how this distinction has been effective throughout the history of morality, religion, and politics. Its purpose is to make this distinction explicit, to set out its criteria, and to demonstrate its force. And on the other hand, the goal of Two Sources is to show the immediate, practical, and everyday application of this distinction, such that ordinary people, then and now, can respond to the immediate challenges of mechanization and war. Suzanne Guerlac also insists on the urgency of the distinction between closed and open. This distinction allows Guerlac to affirm Bergson as “nonmodern,” that is, as a thinker who refuses the classical antitheses of modern social and political thought, first and foremost among these, the distinction between nature and culture. Bergson offers, then, a nonmodern perspective on quintessentially modern problems. Guerlac’s chapter first considers the problem of human rights through Bergson’s critique of the French sociologist Emile Durkheim and proceeds to examine the problem of “the void,” that is, the imbalance of a body empowered by modern technology and a soul as yet unequipped to guide it.

John Mullarkey’s chapter uses the distinction between closed and open to present a concept of equality and democracy that affirms their essential openness and indeterminacy. Democracy, in this account, is productively “vague” in that it is the central political institution that provides latitude for the moral creativity and inventiveness that liberty and equality require. Bergson’s contribution, says Mullarkey, is to provide a notion of equality that avoids the circularity at the heart of the concept: rather than equality “equaling” anything in particular, it ultimately remains open and receptive to the vagueness of politics. Claire Colebrook addresses the distinction between closed and open within aesthetics. She considers whether modernist art can create a sensibility able to release the human intellect from its self-serving, self-enclosed nature. In answering “yes,” Colebrook uses Bergson to see in modernism the potential—always uncertain and liable to fail—to make contact with the open tendency of life, that is, with life irreducible to its already actualized forms, to yield an aesthetic sense that interrupts habitual rhythms of the intellect.
To introduce part II, let us consider the longstanding accusation that Bergson is an irrationalist, one that Shklar voices in a political register. Her criticism is that emotion kills rational deliberation in two ways. First, it makes dialogue pointless because it defies the reason and calculation upon which deliberation is built. Second, it makes dialogue impossible because it is prediscursive, private, and fractures the shared space of deliberation. On the basis of this strong opposition, emotion simply shoulders out reason, and politics is transformed into a space of irrationality. But this mistakes the nature of Bergson’s problem, as Paola Marrati points out: “Bergson is not calling for a morality and a politics of irrational emotions or sublime sensibility. His claim is rather that no morality and no politics—be it Open or Closed—can ever take place within the limits of reason alone.”

It is perhaps helpful to see the role of emotion in Two Sources as akin to what Montesquieu calls a “principle” in Spirit of the Laws: a set of affects that puts politics and religion in motion. For example, at the root of human rights, democracy, and institutions under the sway of the open tendency more generally, love inspires action and universal fraternity (TS 234/1173–74). Closed morality and religion, for their part, are structured by fear, a fear of others, egoism, death, and uncertainty (TS 122/1078, 131/1086). The implications of Bergson’s reconfiguration of the problem of emotion can be stated in different ways. In seeing the affective core of moral action, Bergson fills the motivational deficit that haunts practical philosophy. In so doing, he anticipates findings in neuroscience that people only reach decisions if they have an emotional attachment to the options before them.

Bergson also furnishes a distinctly post-Cartesian conception of the subject, in that emotion is no longer seen as a derivative modality of an essentially rational subject. Indeed, for Bergson, human beings are sui generis not because of reason, language, or society but because of love: we are the animal that loves. Last, though we are defined by love, Bergson makes the devastating point that it is a fragile achievement, one that must be nursed. He thus transforms a natural and ineradicable tendency into an urgent project: it is altogether possible that human beings can lose, perhaps indefinitely, their love not only of the world (i.e., their attachment to life) but love in the world (i.e., those institutions that actualize it).

The chapters in part II contend with the affective constitution of politics. Philippe Soulez’s chapter is an impressive survey of Bergson’s political thought. On the one hand, it distinguishes and interweaves
Bergson’s remarks on the political (le politique—which are drawn primarily from the first three chapters of Two Sources) and politics (la politique—which are drawn primarily from the concluding chapter of Two Sources). And, on the other hand, it repeatedly situates Bergson within established traditions of political philosophy (Aristotle, Hobbes, Spinoza, and Rousseau), all the while demonstrating his originality. The major substantive preoccupation of the chapter is war, and it is in this context that the priority of emotion reveals itself. For in framing the problem of war in terms of countervailing affective “forces” or “energetics,” Soulez shows that for Bergson it is only by highlighting the affective dimension of politics that we can confront the real and terrifying threat of extermination. Leonard Lawlor’s contribution also concentrates on the problem of war in Two Sources, but he approaches it from the perspective of two distinct ways that human beings have “cheated” or exceeded nature: sexuality and love. Bergson’s claim is that because modern sexual practice has separated pleasure from procreation, sexuality has become an end in itself such that our entire civilization has become “aphrodisiacal” (ts 302/1232; translation modified). For Bergson, this prepares the conditions of war because it yields a culture obsessed with luxury and the sterile repetition of pleasure. But following Bergson, Lawlor adds that this is not the only time that we have tricked nature. Love, that is, the unique human ability to love beyond the group, also cheats nature by escaping the original closure of morality and religion. War, then, is framed by the disequilibriums we have created, such that human beings are now enfolded by these two primary passions.

Hisashi Fujita directly confronts the political legacy for which Bergson has most often been termed an irrationalist: his influence on Georges Sorel. Fujita starts by questioning an opposition that interpreters from Schmitt to Shklar say marks Bergson as a “misologist”: either rational discussion (i.e., parliamentarianism and deliberation) or immediate action (i.e., violence). But rather than accept this opposition between violence and language, Fujita argues that the true question for Bergson is the violence of language. This means two things: language is violent because it cuts up the world according to our needs, and any attempt to think with duration, that is, with “precision” and “clarity” in Bergson’s sense, must do violence to language. It is here that Fujita establishes the link to Sorel. In Reflections on Violence, Sorel distinguishes the language of force from the language of violence. The first serves to maintain established powers,
whereas the second, which includes myths and images that create bonds of sympathy between people, breaks through these powers to form a new social organization. The purpose of the chapter, therefore, is to observe that Sorel’s Bergsonism consists in the idea that a new political articulation of the real confronts the language of force with the language of violence. Paulina Ochoa Espejo's chapter is a powerful example of how Bergson can be used to dissolve false problems. Here, Ochoa Espejo addresses a central paradox of contemporary democratic theory: the problem of the people. In a nutshell the paradox is that the demos appears to be both cause and consequence of the democratic people. On the one hand, democratic institutions must be created by the governed through their consent, but, on the other hand, for individuals to express their consent, democratic institutions must already exist. Ochoa Espejo escapes from this impasse by turning to Bergson to develop a concept of the people held together by habits and rules, but whose self-creative drive derived from the lived experience of time and nature enables them to evolve. It is this drive, called “creative freedom,” that Ochoa Espejo argues is the suprarational, indeterminate foundation for democratic legitimacy and justification.

Carl Power’s and Alexandre Lefebvre’s contributions turn to the affective core of practical reason and human rights. Power’s chapter carefully reconstructs Bergson’s extraordinarily condensed criticism of the major schools of modern practical philosophy: Kantian deontology, empiricism, and rational intuitionism. Contrary to these rationalist positions, Bergson regards morality as lived before it is explicitly thought, as embodied in collective habits and emotions, and as immediately constituted by extrarational forces. Power concludes by comparing Bergson’s views on human rights (and ethical universalism more generally) with those of Alain Badiou. Lefebvre’s chapter argues that, despite the small number of pages Bergson dedicates to human rights, they are the culmination of his political philosophy and the institution that most purely embodies the open tendency. In practice, however, human rights are a composite phenomenon that actualizes both the closed and open tendencies of life. Because of this composite nature, Lefebvre argues that human rights have two essential and distinct functions: to protect human beings from our natural tendency toward closure, hatred, and war and to initiate human beings into open, universal love. Lefebvre defines human rights as the institution that protects us from hate and converts us to love.

To introduce part III, “Religion and Mysticism,” let us attend to
Shklar’s criticism that Bergson’s concept of mysticism is designed to end politics. Mysticism, in her view, is essentially escapist. Concerned as it is with “an inner apprehension of truth that is ineffable,” mysticism holds itself above, and is thus irrelevant to, the concrete cares and concerns of political life (BpI 320). Worse, because Shklar empties mysticism of any attachment to political reality, the call to realize the open society can only be a mysterious leap into an abstract “post-political” state. But we must remember that Bergson’s starting position is not to oppose mysticism to politics but rather to insist on the mystical source of existing institutions. Consider how Soulez and Worms give voice to Bergson’s interest in the League of Nations: “While we do not know a priori how far the League of Nations will go, we do nevertheless know where the idea comes from, and, in Two Sources, Bergson will trace it all the way up to a mystical and religious origin, higher than any political project.” Bergson thus remakes the problem. Politics and religion are neither opposed to one another as they are, say, in liberal political thought, nor are the concepts of modern politics secularized theological concepts. Instead, certain political institutions (such as human rights) are, in a sense, religious; they are the actualization, hence the bearer, of an irreducible mystical intuition.

Part III opens with a translation of a wonderful piece by one of Bergson’s foremost interpreters: Vladimir Jankélévitch’s “Bergson and Judaism,” originally written in 1956. This chapter is concerned less with Bergson’s specific observations on Judaism (say in Ts 76–77/1039–40) and more with identifying the key points of contact between Bergsonism and Judaism. The chapter assesses the compatibility of Bergson’s conception of time and that found in Jewish theology. Jankélévitch finds that while duration is at odds with biblical time, with its emphasis on absolute beginning and prophecy, it is in the notion of the “plenitude of becoming” (rather than the “plenitude of being” we find in Platonism and Christianity) that we recognize a deep connection between Bergson and Judaism. As Jankélévitch puts it, the plenitude of becoming, affirmed by both Bergson and Judaism, roots us in a condition of transience and immanence. Keith Ansell-Pearson and Jim Urpeth bring Bergson into dialogue with Nietzsche on the grounds that they are the two major thinkers to undertake a naturalistic account of religion that does not fall prey to a reductive sociobiology. The chapter begins with a comprehensive overview of Bergson’s conception of static and dynamic religion and proceeds to treat key points of Nietzsche’s evaluation of religion that both comple-
ment and challenge Bergson’s analysis. Ansell-Pearson and Urpeth conclude with a discussion of the shared attempt by Bergson and Nietzsche to fuse a theory of religion together with a theory of life.

Frédéric Keck and G. William Barnard both turn to the psychological and spiritual dimensions of religion in Bergson. Keck’s chapter analyzes notions of assurance and confidence in Two Sources by situating them within a genealogy of the French debate on responsibility that was fundamental to the French school of sociology. Keck argues that static religion and dynamic religion sustain two different conceptions of assurance. Static religion provides human beings with a sense of assurance necessary to act in a world where outcomes are always uncertain. Dynamic religion, on the other hand, transfigures assurance into confidence by making perceptible the totality of the intellectual structures engaged in political action. Barnard turns to the spiritualist dimensions of Bergson’s thought, and takes two lines of inquiry. First, Barnard carefully reconstructs the spiritualist currents in Bergson’s writings which, though central and vital to his thought, are underrepresented in scholarship today. Second, Barnard proposes a bold rereading of Matter and Memory toward a tentative explanation of extraordinary religious phenomena. In particular he uses Bergson’s “filter” theory of perception, along with what he calls the “radio reception theory of consciousness,” to envisage the etiology of a wide range of non-ordinary experiences such as telepathy, clairvoyance, mediumship, possession states, mystical states, and so on.

The volume concludes with a chapter by Paola Marrati on time and openness in Bergson and William James. Her contribution directly challenges a picture of time deeply embedded within theology. Whether called teleology, finalism, or eschatology, Marrati criticizes that family of concepts that takes the future to be guided by a divine plan. Contrary to this picture, Marrati argues that James and Bergson’s affirmation of the openness of time undercuts not only the foundation of finalism but with it any psychological correlate of optimism or pessimism for the future. Marrati is especially concerned with countering the impression of James and Bergson as ontological optimists. There is, in their philosophy, nothing to sustain a belief in the necessity of progress (nor, of course, a belief in the necessity of regress). A genuine philosophy of time cannot sustain a political or theological temperament of “optimism” or “pessimism.” It leaves us only with an affirmation of openness and a place for responsibility and hope.
NOTES

1 See Lawlor and Moulard, “Henri Bergson.”
2 On Bergson’s political missions to Spain and the United States, see Soulez, Bergson politique.
3 Soulez and Worms, Bergson, 160.
4 See ibid., 186.
5 Deleuze, Bergsonism, 115. See also Deleuze and Guattari, What Is Philosophy?, 28.
6 See Lefebvre, The Image of Law, 51–52. For a reading of Deleuze that applies this principle, see Patton, Deleuzian Concepts, 10–11.
7 Contemporary debates in biology reflect this line of argument. See in particular Frans de Waal’s claim that “morality likely evolved as a within-group phenomenon in conjunction with other typical within-group capacities, such as conflict resolution, cooperation, and sharing. . . . The profound irony is that our noblest achievement—morality—has evolutionary ties to our basest behavior—warfare” (“Morally Evolved,” 53, 55). See also his The Age of Empathy.
8 These are Bergson’s examples but other figures come to mind, real and imaginary: Prince Myshkin, Nelson Mandela, the speaker in Walter de la Mare’s poem “The Titmouse,” who sees a titmouse as company, Donkey from Shrek, and many more. Indeed, it is an open question as to whether the open tendency is confined exclusively to human beings. For Bergson, we take it that the answer is yes: human beings alone have the capacity to love beyond preference. But if we turn to contemporary primatology, it is perhaps not so clear-cut. What should we make of a case such as Kuni, a bonobo at Twycross Zoo in England? “One day Kuni captured a starling. Out of fear that she might molest the stunned bird, which appeared undamaged, the keeper urged the ape to let it go. Kuni picked up the starling with one hand and climbed to the highest point of the highest tree where she wrapped her legs around the trunk so that she had both hands free to hold the bird. She then carefully unfolded its wings and spread them wide open, one wing in each hand, before throwing the bird as hard as she could towards the barrier of the enclosure. Unfortunately, it fell short and landed onto the bank of the moat where Kuni guarded it for a long time against a curious juvenile” (de Waal and Lanting, Bonobo, 156).
9 See John Rawls’s insightful reading of the essential boredom and repetition of war for Thucydides (The Law of Peoples, 28n27).
11 We note here the important exception of Emmanuel Levinas who repeatedly states his debt to Two Sources. See Levinas, Entre Nous, 223–24; and de Warren, “Miracles of Creation.” For the relation between Bergson and phenomenology in general, see Kelly, Bergson and Phenomenology.
12 Deleuze’s Bergsonism, for example, dedicates only a few concluding paragraphs to Two Sources (110–12). To date, the growing and excellent English scholarship on
Bergson has by and large not treated Two Sources. Although Mullarkey’s Bergson and Philosophy and Lawlor’s The Challenge of Bergsonism each devote a chapter to it, Ansell-Pearson’s Philosophy and the Adventure of the Virtual, Guerlac’s Thinking in Time, Mullarkey’s edited volume The New Bergson, and Grosz’s In the Nick of Time seldom make reference to it. In France this situation is changing with a rush of recent publications on Two Sources. See, for example, Worms’s Bergson ou les deux sens de la vie, his edited volume Annales bergsoniennes I, Waterlot’s edited volume Bergson et la religion, and the new critical edition of Deux Sources de la morale et de la religion (2008), edited by Waterlot and Keck.

13 Russell, “The Philosophy of Bergson.”
15 See Lefebvre and White, “Religion within the Bounds of Mere Emotion.”
18 See Damasio, Descartes’ Error.
19 See Marion, The Erotic Phenomenon, 7.
20 See Pippen, The Persistence of Subjectivity, 149.
21 Soulez and Worms, Bergson, 187.