Bergson and the Aristotelian model of immanent teleology

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Summary in English

Several ancient, medieval and modern philosophers have used final causality or teleology in a transcendental way. This means that everything tends naturally toward its own completion, in harmony with the rest of the cosmos, because of some divine causation. In different ways, they claim that the individual developments and the convergence of all of them in a general equilibrium are made by one divine providential entity. In some of these frameworks the final cause can be conceived as a sign of god's wisdom or a proof of its existence. However, final causality can also be understood in an immanent way, without the participation of any kind of divine artisan or creative god. From that perspective, nature is not seen as a passive matter upon which god works and introduces perfection, but as an innate tendency to completion and perfection. The tendency of a seed towards growth, and ultimately to reach maturity, or the general equilibrium in the cosmos made by the convergence of every perfective tendency, is understood by Aristotle, the father of this philosophical perspective, without the contribution of any providential god. I claim that, in the post-Cartesian and deeply Darwinian era starting around 1900, the influential philosopher Henri Bergson used final causality in an original way, applying it to the restricted field of the biological world.

Although I address the big differences between the Aristotle and Bergson, my main aim is to show the common roots of immanent teleological thought. The main ideas behind this framework are: i) nature is something active, spontaneous; ii) perfection is not restricted to divine or human intelligence, hence nature is to be conceived as composed by an uncountable plurality of beings; iii) immanent teleology implies a naturalistic conception of human beings. For this reason, certain anthropomorphic analogies between humans and their surrounding nature are philosophically permitted. iv) there is individual immanent teleology, expressed in development, growth and plenitude regarding one substance (plant, animal, human). Furthermore, there is a global immanent teleology that makes all the particular flourishing processes converge in one general good. In Aristotle this good can be seen as equilibrium and its everlasting duration. Far from this view of global perfection, in Bergson there is a dynamic and progressive conception of the evolutionary world: life and, ultimately, human life are part of a process that tends toward freedom or contingency. Harmony and stability are not the goal of the cosmos, but rather complexity and freedom.

In opposition to the widespread understanding of Bergson as a philosopher of pure becoming, in Chapter 1, I defend the claim that, in his view of the living world, everything has to be linked to its specific action. As I show in detail in this dissertation, non-human organisms, embryos, human souls, human societies and the whole cosmos are conceived with regard to specific actions, that is Bergson's modern way of interpreting the abstract term "perfection". Furthermore, I defend this claim by appealing to plenty of analogies between the human mind and different natural phenomena.

In Chapter 1, I gather together Bergson's critiques of the excesses of final causality. We can also find these critiques in Aristotle, but unlike to Aristotle in the *Physics*, Bergson focuses his philosophical considerations on teleology only with regard to global teleology. It is true that Bergson rejects certain analogies between nature in general (what he calls Life or the vital impulse) and a human artisan. In addition, he denies that there is any kind of general harmony in the world. I do not disregard these statements, but I believe that they have been overemphasized and we have to contextualize them cautiously. I think it is obvious that Bergson defended the use of analogy between mind and nature, because for him mind is part

of nature, and not an isolated entity. So, he does not reject *all kinds* of analogy. As I show in Chapter 3, Bergson uses analogies constantly for the purpose of illustrating his original final causality. Secondly, Bergson by no means rejects *all kinds* of "general goals" by rejecting the idea of harmony. As I said, the general goal, function or end of the entire cosmos is freedom, according to Bergson. For this reason, Bergson sees the appearance of human beings as a relative success of this tendency. At this point, Bergson introduces another critique of global teleology. It is the most important critique, in fact: for him the global doctrine of final causality can lead to determinism or fatalism. Bergson's theory of the vital impulse is both perfective and relatively unpredictable. Bergson combines openness and directionality, creating some philosophical problems far from Aristotle. It is part of what I call the reform of immanent teleology. In Chapter 1 I also stress the value of some passages from *Creative evolution* in which he finds himself as a reformer of both individual and global teleology. After refuting the a-teleologist readings of Bergson, it is necessary at this point to show what is the classic model of teleology, for having a clear idea of what a reform of it means.

In Chapter 2, I analyze Aristotelian teleology, and also address two closely related topics (the natural scale and Aristotle's theory of chance) that may have importance for Bergson. The line of argument in this long chapter prepares the structure of the following chapters. Section 2.1 deals with Aristotle's argument for endorsing teleology and its structural parts. I do the same in Chapter 3 regarding Bergson. Section 2.2 focuses on the fields of application of teleology in Aristotle; Chapter 4 follows the same order for Bergson.

Aristotle's structural elements of teleology have to be found within his theory of causality in *Physics*.II. The most important feature of final causality is perfection or completion. This term can be interpreted in multiple ways. In Aristotle, perfection is related to the form or the species, the metaphysical substratum of any natural item. For Aristotle one child is imperfect in comparison with its mature form, where the form human has attained the full definition. The form is necessarily linked with another notion, that of function. Attaining a form means, in Aristotle, attaining fulfillment regarding one specific action. Perfection, form and function have a circular relation in this context. Every species and every function is a different form of perfection in Aristotle's pluralistic world.

The second structural element is that of analogy. As I mentioned above, analogy means that human beings are part of nature. There is a plurality in the world, but also a common root that permits analogy. The analogy between the artisan and the process of growth is typical in Aristotle. To this extent, "art imitates nature" since it follows the same teleological model: the goal (perfection, form, function) is at the end of any rational activity. Health, victory and dwelling are the ends of walking, fighting and constructing houses, respectively. Aristotle defends anthropomorphism, if anthropomorphism means that there are features in our mind that can be transferred to the natural world.

The third structural element is implied in the previous argument, and not openly stated. In Aristotle there is no anthropocentrism, since the natural world is not for the sake of human beings and the natural world can be thought with no reference to us. At the same time, according this philosopher, human beings are the most perfect being within the infralunary world. It means that they can establish special analogies with heavenly bodies, for instance. This third element nuances the feature of pluralism: there are multiple kinds of perfection, but some are better than others. The fourth structural element is regularity. It is explicitly used by Aristotle. Regularly, the natural items attain their ultimate goal, form and function. That is why natural failures, such as monsters, are exceptions. For Aristotle, in nature things tend

toward the good or the best. In this section I have also analyzed Aristotle's theory of chance, since it will also play a role in the chapters on Bergson. He thought that non-regular events could also be reconstructed in the framework of teleology. That is what I call secondary teleology, against the primary teleology of regular events.

The domains of teleology illustrate, with different forms, what perfection can mean. Regarding individual teleology, I ascend in the natural scale from the lower levels to the upper ones. Since Bergson will apply teleology exclusively to living beings, I have stressed Aristotle's teleology in the biological realm. Survival (including nutrition and reproduction), and well-being among the superior animals (horse life for the horse) may represent perfection in this field. In the case of humans, well-being means happiness, which includes the fulfillment of the rational faculties. This can also be applied to the heavenly rotatory bodies. The peak of the scale is god, an entity that also has a function: thinking of itself.

The second part of 2.2 shows how we should interpret perfection in the global teleology passages. This meaning is compatible with survival and well-being, although it establishes a second wider perspective. Individual perfection may imply in this context a contribution of some kind to the environment or the cosmos. The mere activity regarding the specific function implies participation in the general order. Also, reproduction implies the stability of the species in an eternal world: Aristotle thinks that through reproduction the individual, perishable, infralunary being participates in eternity. Aristotle uses the Platonic language of imitation when talking about this second form of contribution. In short, these obscure passages, with less use of human analogies, show that perfection can be seen beyond the boundaries of one substance or species.

Chapter 3 is devoted to the structure of the teleological view. I show the different terms that Bergson uses by means of perfection, through analogy with human consciousness. I find four types of analogy in Bergson's entire career. In general terms, two of these imply perfection in the sense of being, of the conservation of being. The other two refer to change, transgression and ontological progress. Bergson sees both tendencies in nature and in us as well. This chapter also deal with the peculiar status of mankind in nature, for Bergson. According to Bergson human beings are natural and, at the same time, special. I also define Bergson's view as mitigated anthropocentrism: human beings are the summary of nature (now from the evolutionary perspective) but also add special faculties that imply special analogies. There are no heavenly bodies to be analogous with here, but every individual being, and especially geniuses, are similar to Bergson's Life or *élan vital*, an overarching composite entity that has to be with the ancient soul of the world, something that is not found in Aristotle. In Chapter 3, I also distinguish two levels of teleology. There is regular teleology, related to conservative teleology: survival and action is as regular among living beings here as in Aristotle. Furthermore, there is a global teleology involved in his view of history of Life and history of mankind. Bergson's global teleology combines primary teleology (since the cosmos, and namely, Life, regularly tend toward contingency and freedom) with secondary teleology: history of Life and mankind is singular, unpredictable and contingent. Although there is directionality and perfection, the concrete forms, outcomes of this evolution, and the final attainment of the goal of the world is uncertain. In comparison with the rest of the living world, humans are a relative success, that is all. The future is open.

In Chapter 4, I illustrate the different forms of perfection noted above. It plays an identical role as 2.2 did. Approximately, individual teleology is linked in Bergson with what I called conservative teleology. Here I use the term destination, as Bergson does. The destination of

living organisms, embryos, humans and societies are analyzed in this section. Concepts familiar to us such as survival, conservation or, a key Darwinian term, adaptation are at stake here.

Furthermore in 4.2 I deal with transgressive teleology which is surely the most original part of Bergson's approach, although it also introduces several problems. Apart from one case, the field of transgressive teleology is history of Life, history or cosmology, that is, global teleology. The non-global field is the human being. While in 4.1 I highlight human's tendency toward survival and adaptation, here I address his or her tendency to overcome already-made limits. For Bergson, human being's ultimate destination is to create something new and unpredictable. In his eudaimonistic perspective, maturity is self-creation: thus, to create something includes us. We are the product of our original choices. As we can see there is directionality, but still openness in this level. In the next levels—that of evolutionary biology, history or cosmology—this paradox is transferred to Life or Consciousness, understood as an overarching entity that progresses through individuals. In Bergson, transgressive teleology must be unpredictable and any success (like human beings) can become a decay.

In my Conclusion, I defend the deep understanding of life that seeks immanent teleology. It is what Bergson took from Aristotle in first place. Bergson's individual teleology is to be understood in terms of his concept of attention to life. Immanent teleology implies both a need to understand living beings beyond concepts and human rationality, and to understand human beings within nature. The organism tends toward life naturally, with no help of reasoning. Life, being on earth, is then perfection. Survival, living-well and all fulfillment of innate potencies are, against death or decay, irreducible notions for understanding the living being from the moment it is alive. Not only the coordination of the parts in view of the whole, but especially the particular good that the whole is seeking are important. These notions are to be found in our consciousness, but the philosophy of immanent teleology does not think that it should lead to a total refutation: human beings are part of nature, and, namely, part of life. Since the root of life is this tendency toward survival, etc., final causality may be thought of as biomorphism, rather than anthropomorphism.

Secondly, transgressive teleology is more original to Bergson, since such a topic is alien to the Aristotelian worldview. While applied to individual persons it tries to combine directionality and eudaimonology with freedom, openness and unpredictability. The result is that happiness is to be found in pure creation. This upshot, expressed as the paradoxical notion of teleology with no goal, becomes much bigger when the field also becomes bigger: in the rest of the cases of transgressive teleology Bergson erects a global immanent evolutionary teleology that combines one regular element (the goal of the world) and contingency (the effective history of Life and mankind). Although submitted to innumerable contingencies and eventual decay, Life or the *élan vital* are directed towards what Bergson considers is perfect. It reproduces the previous paradox (teleology with no goal) in global teleology, a philosophical field seen as archaic and problematic nowadays. Moreover, within Bergson it introduces a new major problem. Given that Life is free, that is, unpredictable and creative, it is difficult to demarcate the limits between this overarching force and individual human beings. When Bergson talks about the heroes, the peak of freedom among humans, he says that they are closer than any other individual to the source of Life. While there is in Bergson an unpredictable creativity in the world, it is not clear *whose* freedom this is. Certainly, the borders between individual transgressive teleology and global transgressive teleology look blurred.