Today, we have a problem with the symbolic. Psychoanalysts explain “abnormal” acts as violations of a symbolic order inscribed in the unconscious by culture, and cognitivists conceive “normal” minds as computational machines manipulating natural symbols through logical inference. Yet we still don’t know what is a symbolic rule or a symbolic norm or symbolic efficacy, and we still need a word to understand how language affects our daily life at the most intimate level. Concepts are not just arbitrary constructions: they point toward a reality, which they can also obscure. They are like dresses on a body; they can become used and old-fashioned, they may have always been badly cut, but we need to use them, otherwise we would be naked and dumb. The concept of the symbolic has become so over-determined that it has uncovered a phenomenon that we have yet to see and describe.

Henri Bergson’s philosophy, since it is a method for identifying problems and clarifying concepts, can be a useful tool that can recast the problem of the symbolic in new terms today. We need to understand the mode of existence of language, the way it affects the life of our body, the constraints it imposes on our freedom, the forms of inventions and repetitions it allows—all themes that are central in Bergson’s philosophy. We can, therefore, find here lines of problematization of the symbolic which might be useful for today. Two lines of problematization can be drawn in Bergson’s work. First, we can show
how the symbolic appears in a field of virtualities around human action, which it tends to fix through intellectual schemas. We would then dissolve the rigid frames of the symbolic in a fluid and dynamic activity. Following this line, the symbol is not a representation of something, but rather an image, connected to other images in a field of movements and actions. It can thus be opposed to the virtual just as the concepts of intelligence are opposed to the images of intuition. This line is particularly enlightening if one reads *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience* or *Introduction à la métaphysique*. Another line would problematize the symbolic not through the field of virtualities it schematizes, but rather through the actuality that it tends to produce, in the sense of the act of consciousness that constitutes itself through symbolic activity, or the actual object that the symbol refers to—the originality of Bergson’s philosophy lies in the fact that object and subject constitute themselves together in the act of symbolization. Following this line, the symbolic could be opposed to the actual as a vague generality is opposed to a precise singularity. This line is particularly enlightening if one reads *Matière et mémoire* or *L’évolution créatrice*.¹

I want to argue that Bergson’s philosophy holds these two lines that tend to be separated in contemporary philosophy in the same work, and that the great tension of this work is to think the symbolic between the virtual and the actual. Bergson proposes a new concept of the symbolic because he doesn’t conceive it as the representation of an object, in a two-strata theory of knowledge, but as a way to express and mediate experience through language, in an image of thinking as a layered reality, composed of several strata or “plateaux.” Therefore, I want to show that the virtual, the symbolic, and the actual are three degrees of experience that are intertwined in complex and productive ways, and that the symbolic is an intermediary level between the virtual and the actual, that allows their interexpression.² Therefore, the symbolic is overwhelmed from beside and from below, and cannot be conceived as an autonomous production. Bergson teaches us that there is no experience outside of language, and that we are stuck inside language as if it was a prison from which we cannot escape, but that we can go to “the turn of experience” where it is in contact with a reality that cannot present itself as such, and which is the place of vital creation.³ This implies that the symbolic is not just a few categorical constraints imposed by a universal subject on pure experience, but rather a way to explore and
I will develop this hypothesis through a reading of Bergson’s last work, *Les deux sources de la morale et de la religion*, published in 1935, twenty years after Emile Durkheim’s *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse*. I assume therefore that Bergson’s notion of the “two sources”—which could be summarized by the notions of virtual and actual—is not only a confrontation of the Durkheimian concept of the symbolic as a set of categorical constraints of the human mind, but also a way, in taking the occasion of this confrontation, to fold along the lines that were drawn in the preceding books, and produce a true philosophy of the symbolic. I will concentrate my reading on the first two chapters, where sociological considerations are central, leaving aside the third chapter, which has been most often commented upon, and which is more theological. I will, however, conclude by addressing the last chapter of this text, which is more political.

I also want to show that the distinction between the virtual, the symbolic, and the actual points to three forms of time, three levels of temporality. If we wish to read “Bergson in time,” we have to link the problems of our time—the problems we have with the symbolic today—with what I would call “the time of structuralism,” a time when Bergson and his theories of time were at the margin of the problematic, and when the symbolic structure of the Kantian and Durkheimian tradition was in the first place, and finally with the human sciences of Bergson’s time. Three layers of historical temporality must therefore be held together: the beginning of the twentieth century, when Bergson conceived the virtual at the crossroads of psychology, biology, and sociology; the second half of the twentieth century, when structuralism gave full rise to the concept of the symbolic at the intersection of cybernetics, psychoanalysis, linguistics, and anthropology; and our present situation, marked by a disenchantment toward the symbolic and a rediscovery of the power of the virtual in the domains of genomics, computer science, and neuroscience. My contention is that if modern techniques give a prominent reality to what Bergson called the virtual, we still don’t know what the actual is. And therefore we need a concept of the symbolic to understand what is actual in our time, to diagnose what happens today. The necessity to hold together the virtual, the symbolic, and the actual as three intertwined degrees of human experience will be a way to raise the problem the symbolic has with time: what is virtual in the symbolic of
When we open *Les deux sources de la morale et de la religion*, we might think that we are entering a theory of the symbolic order relying on the universal fact of prohibition. The book begins with a sentence that links in a crucial way individual memory, collective history, and symbolic prohibition. “Le souvenir du fruit défendu est ce qu’il y a de plus ancien dans la mémoire de chacun de nous, comme dans celle de l’humanité.” Prohibition is, in the Durkheimian school of sociology, for instance in Lévi-Strauss’s famous analysis of the prohibition of incest in *Les structures élémentaires de la parenté*, the primary social fact that reveals a symbolic order whose external constraints contradict the inner tendency of desire. It shows that the symbolic order is entirely social and cultural, constituted by collective laws, and does not come from natural or biological impulses. In the Durkheimian analysis of totemic religions, which is very close on this point to the analysis of Freud, the totem is a symbolic representation of society that reminds human beings, through some form of archaic and unconscious memory, that their individual desires have been repressed and regulated by a higher instance to which they must bow.

But Bergson immediately corrects this anguishing vision: prohibition is only one of the manifestations of social life; most of the time, human beings act without obeying rules; most of the time, they act by habit. “La vie sociale nous apparaît comme un système d’habitudes plus ou moins fortement enracinées, qui répondent aux besoins de la communauté.” Acting by following a habit must be distinguished from acting by obeying a law: human beings can act without thinking about the rule by which they act, and without thinking about the possibility of transgressing this rule, because they follow pragmatically a vital tendency: not a violent impulse of desire, that would bump up against a transcendent law, but a gentle and regular repetition of past behaviors, which produces its own immanent regularity. The first pages of *Les deux sources de la morale et de la religion* must be read as a continuation of the last chapter of *L’évolution créatrice*, in which Bergson criticizes the idea of the negative as a concept of intelligence.
that hinders the real process of life. Prohibition is a negative relation to the social as it is produced by intelligence—and therefore we need it if we are to say what the social cannot be in extreme cases: it is the means by which culture negates nature in order to pose its own order of rules. Yet it must be re-inscribed in the vital proliferation of other forms of social rules that we need in order to act in our daily life without thinking too much about what to do and what not to do: not a staunch negation of nature by culture, but a gentle continuity between the vital and the social.

It has often been remarked that Bergson’s metaphysics is an anthropology of need, not of desire. Phenomenologists and psychoanalysts regret that it does not start from the distanced relation of the subject to an absent object that constitutes her/him as a desiring subject. But for anthropologists, this metaphysics is good enough, for it enables them to describe the way symbols prolong human needs through technical and social space and are informed by them. For Bergson, symbols are tools constructed by the body to act on its environment; they appear to extend natural gestures in an ever-widening field of action, as André Leroi-Gourhan and Gilbert Simondon have brilliantly shown. Perception needs symbols to produce an action: it needs to orient itself by intelligence through a symbolic space. Symbols do not come first, they rather operate in the service of vital needs, and this is why human beings can change their symbols if their environment changes or if they modify their action.

The question then becomes: why do symbols form a rigid space that imposes itself on human action as an external law or a prohibition? This is a central question in Bergson’s philosophy, for if this philosophy does not start from the negative, it must explain why there is negativity in human experience. The reason Bergson gives is this: if human beings acted only according to habit, their ethics would be insufficient, because it would be an ethics of conformity. This is what he calls the ethics of closed societies, which eventually causes war with another closed society whose habits are different. This is why, for vital reasons, another type of ethics is necessary, one that addresses its appeal to all mankind, and breaks the received habits of a close society. The appeal of this moral is in continuity with vital needs; however, because habits have become rigid and have closed in on themselves, because they have lost contact with their vital source, what comes from the same origin—life—appears as two contradictory ethics: the ethics of obligation in closed societies, and the ethics of appeal in open societies. When Moses says “Thou shalt not kill thy
neighbor,” when Jesus says “Do not respond to the offense,” and when
Socrates says “Do not listen to the doxa,” these are acts of life that
create a morality for all human beings, but they become prohibitions
and produce a conflict between nature and culture because social
habits have become rigid. Although morality is what we vitally need, it
can become a limit of desire, and then it is perceived by the
intelligence as a symbolic order coming from outside.

We can thus explain the distinction between the virtual, the
symbolic, and the actual in Les deux sources de la morale et de la religion.
The symbolic is the form through which moral life presents itself to
human consciousness, because it comes from the prohibition by the
law, which reveals the symbolic action of society on the individual. But
the symbolic is overwhelmed on both sides: from below, the symbolic
is contaminated by a proliferation of vital tendencies and non-
rational rules by which human beings act daily without thinking
about it; and from above, the symbolic is overcome by the appeal of
open ethics and religions, which gives an embracing vision of
humankind and life itself in its entirety. The symbolic is an intermedi-
ary space between these two realities that differ in nature, it is the
level at which both project themselves to form this impure mix that is
every existing ethics and religion. As Deleuze says, every act divides
itself into its actual and virtual aspects, which form two series
converging on the field of the symbolic.8 We can add, in a more
Wittgensteinian way, that the virtual is the domain of all these
proliferating rules belonging to a form of life that contaminate the
symbolic “language game” from below, and the actual is the mystical
appeal that breaks the symbolic from above by a singular and
unpredictable act.9 The error of Kant and Durkheim (and, we might
add, a good part of analytic philosophy) is that they have described
morality and religion only at the intermediate level of the symbolic,
which is the necessary limit of the work of intelligence; the effort of
Bergson, after others (Rousseau, Comte, James, etc.), is to re-inscribe
in the domain of morality and religion these virtual and actual
realities that the work of intelligence tends to leave aside.

But why are the virtual and actual so difficult to see in the domain
of morals and religion? Why have they been hidden by the symbolic?
Because the actual is not a thing but an act, it escapes the form by
which it is represented; however, it reveals virtualities in the real by
the forces that it opens. The symbolic hides the actual and transforms
it into a prohibition, and it hides the virtual and transforms it into a
possibility. Bergson has insisted on the distinction between the virtual
and the possible: the possible is an act that is retrospectively placed in
the past (we can say that the figure of Jesus was possible because Israel
expected a Messiah), while the virtual is a reality that acts through a
line of differentiation (Jesus teaching at the Temple is a virtual
Christ, because the Sermon of Beatitudes is already inscribed in this
teaching). The symbolic, because it is a fixed form of language,
inscribes the virtual in a space of possibilities in which every term is in
logical relation with other terms. When Bergson describes the totality
of social obligations as a “virtual instinct,” he means that if every habit
or social rule is in itself arbitrary and follows the hazards of daily life,
these habits, taken together from the symbolic point of view, consti-
tute a totality as simple as the instinct of insects, the difference with
insects being that this virtuality is expressed through language.10 “Le
tout de l’obligation eût été de l’instinct si les sociétés humaines
n’étaient en quelque sorte lestées de variabilité et d’intelligence.
C’est un instinct virtuel comme celui qui est derrière l’habitude de
parler. La morale d’une société humaine est en effet comparable à
son langage.”11 Because humankind is intelligent, it represents the
virtual on the mode of the “as if,” as a logical possibility, and not as a
real force of differentiation. The virtual, for humankind, is the field
of possibilities opened by a simple act of creation through language:
when the saint or the hero creates morals, he/she exercises a “virtual
attraction,”12 which is then expressed through language, but which
escapes language at the moment when it is actualized. The symbolic,
by giving a representation of what happened, blocks the movement of
creation that links the actual and the virtual. As Durkheim and Freud
themselves recognized, the symbolic appears only when the actual
and its virtualities are dead, to remind the living of its presence
through collective representation. This raises the suspicion that the
actual was not real, that the virtual was only a possibility, and that the
representation might be the only thing that exists, as a pure limita-
tion of desire (what Nathalie Sarraute has called l’ère du soupçon).
Then come myth and ritual and their proliferation of symbols, and
language appears as a closed structure, not as a way to configure the
new. The symbolic finally takes the place of the virtual and actual,
instead of constituting their vital relation.

According to Bergson, our difficulty with thinking the virtual and
the actual in moral life comes from our difficulty to describe the
phenomenon of moral feeling, in its constitutive ambiguity. Kant and
Durkheim have missed the reality of moral life because they have
started from a symbolic representation of intelligence, the universality
of moral law, and they have discarded feelings as the place of pathological individuality. But if moral life is so complicated, and cannot be reduced to the simplicity of a rational law, it is because moral feelings present themselves by two faces: affects, that is passive feelings produced by following rules and habits, and emotions, active feelings that create something new. Emotion is not a missed conception: it is a movement, a vital tendency that can express itself through language, but that goes beyond the forms it is given. Emotion is an act that creates virtualities through affects and that can be symbolically expressed. The problem of virtual/symbolic/actual then becomes: how can we link affects, representations and emotions?

This leads me to Chapter 2 of *Les deux sources de la morale et de la religion*, which is more focused on religion and collective representations, rather than moral laws and rules. In this chapter, Bergson is critical towards the virtual, whereas in the first chapter he was more positive about it: and this explains why he has separated the two forms of religion, static and dynamic, in two chapters, whereas he has profoundly linked the moral of obligation and the moral of appeal in the first chapter. If moral action is always a mix of virtual and actual (we act because we imitate the acts of singular characters, even through very long chains of virtual mediations), religion is a dangerous proliferation of the virtual for itself, without any reference to the actual. Indeed, the problem Bergson raises in this chapter is classically that of the rationality of religious beliefs, which appear as an incoherent blending of superstitions (“Quel tissu d’aberrations!”). Bergson refuses, nonetheless, the solution of Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, inspired by Durkheim’s sociology, according to which religion should be explained by a “primitive mentality” that would contaminate the “collective representations” of intelligence by religious affects that link the individual to the collectivity. The question he raises is: in what situations are religious affects produced? What are the differences between these affects? Can we distinguish between passive affects and real emotions?

Bergson analyses an example taken not from extraordinary religious rituals, that constitute the model of symbolic representations such as sacrifice, but from a more daily activity of human societies: hunting. When a man hunts, he uses all his perception and intelligence: he must recognize traces, listen to the noises, measure the strength of his elbow. But he has to face an uncertainty due to the fact that the prey is not ready-at-hand. The distance between the hunter and the prey is therefore compensated by a religious symbol: the
spirit of the animal is invoked so that the arrow attains its shield, which means that this symbol is used as a tool to fill the void between human action and its shield. In that situation, the virtual, the symbolic, and the actual coincide in the simplicity of the act of hunting: the virtual is the distance between the hunter and his prey, the symbolic is the spirit of the prey invoked by the hunter, and the actual is the killing of the prey (if it succeeds). Religion in that perspective answers vital needs: “envisagée de ce premier point de vue, la religion est donc une réaction défensive de la nature contre le pouvoir dissolvant de l’intelligence.” Bergson’s analysis is very close to that of some contemporary cognitivists or anthropologists: human action implies that intentional causalities are attributed to non-human entities, which is added to mechanical causality although it differs from it radically, and this is the vital origin of symbolic activity. But then symbolic activity is produced for its own sake, for the pleasure of inventing symbols, and it can turn itself against life. Symbolic entities are invoked in the activity of hunting because there is a virtual margin of uncertainty between the act and its goal; but this margin can become an abyss if uncertainty leads to the representation of failure or death. Spirits are then invoked, not in specific situations like hunting, but in a more general way to protect oneself against thinking about death. “Envisagée de ce second point de vue, la religion est une réaction défensive de la nature contre la représentation, par l’intelligence, de l’inévitabilité de la mort.” Bergson thus reverses the progressive schema according to which science has replaced religion and superstition as intelligence has replaced emotions: religion is first an intelligent reaction to a specific situation through adequate affects, but it then becomes a generalized fear of non-identified threats, which can be called superstition. The problem is not: is religion good or bad, true or false, but: what has gone wrong in the history of religions?

Bergson’s answer is that there has been a proliferation of virtual entities without any reference to an act, and that this proliferation is due to the power of language. He calls “fonction fabulatrice” the fact that language has produced symbolic entities for its own sake, for the pleasure of creating classifications and differences: as Deleuze would say, it is a line of differentiation that has gone crazy. Bergson compares this proliferation to the stories told by families closed on themselves: they become so inflated and monstrous that it is impossible to distinguish the true from the false, what has corresponded to an actual situation and what comes from exaggeration and imagination.
Religion is then corrupted into magic: spirits are invoked in any situation; they form a virtual totality that has no relation to an actuality. “Comme la mécanique de l’univers est présente à chacune de ses parties, il a bien fallu que l’homme naquit avec une intelligence virtuellement capable d’embrasser le monde matériel tout entier. . . . Il est vrai qu’il y a loin ici du virtuel à l’actuel.” Bergson is very close here to Lévi-Strauss’s analysis of magic as a proliferation of symbolic classifications that is produced by intelligence in societies closed on themselves, and Lévi-Strauss has paid homage to Bergson’s analysis of totemism. For Lévi-Strauss as for Bergson, primitive religions reveal the activity of an intelligence that has virtually explored all the logical possibilities of symbolic combination, before science has turned them into an imperative of production; but what is for Lévi-Strauss the object of aesthetic admiration is for Bergson the sign of a morbid tendency, the human tendency to think without acting, a form of collective dream or hallucination (on this point, Bergson is closer to Sartre’s analysis of “mauvaise foi”). The opposition between the hunter and the storyteller is analogous to the opposition between the dreamer and the active man in Matière et mémoire: it is an opposition between different uses of the mind from the point of view of action.

According to Bergson, this corruption of religion into magic and superstition can only be stopped by one fact: spirits are not only virtual entities, they can become persons when they are confronted with a real act. Religions are not only stories about imaginary entities: they are practices linking individuals to acts that have been accomplished before them, through what anthropology calls rituals. Acts constitute persons because they break the virtual hallucination of the symbolic from the outside. To describe this personal dimension of religious entities, Bergson gives two examples. The first is borrowed from William James: it is his reaction to the San Francisco earthquake of 1906 by a vivid emotion of excitement and a personification of the earthquake.

For ‘science,’ when tensions in the earth’s crusts reach the breaking-point and strata fall into an altered equilibrium, earthquake is simply the collective name of all the cracks and shakings and disturbances that happen. They are the earthquake. But for me the earthquake was the cause of the disturbances, and the perception of it as a living agent was irresistible.

The second is Bergson’s own reaction to the 1914 French declaration of war.
Malgré mon bouleversement, et bien qu’une guerre, même victorieuse, m’apparût comme une catastrophe, j’éprouvais ce que dit James, un sentiment d’admiration pour la facilité avec laquelle s’était effectué le passage de l’abstrait au concret: qui aurait cru qu’une éventualité aussi formidable pût faire son entrée dans le réel avec aussi peu d’embarras.20

We can conclude that personal entities are invoked when an actual enters the real, or when an act breaks the realm of the symbolic and forces us to think in new terms, through some form of troubled emotion. Then virtual entities, which have been developed for their own sake, are once again linked to the actual, through a total reaction of the body to what occurs from outside in its radical unpredictability. Starting from hunting, we have gone to magic as a corruption of religious thinking, and from magic to natural catastrophes and wars, reinvigorating the reactive capacity of hunting at a higher level of complexity. Thus we see that if Bergson’s metaphysics is optimistic, his anthropology is rather pessimistic.

This leads me to the last chapter—skipping shamelessly over the third chapter, although this chapter would give crucial answers to the question of what is actual for Bergson and what is a personal entity, through the mystical experience of God. I quoted these two examples given by Bergson, the earthquake as perceived by James, and the declaration of war as perceived by himself, not only because this brings us back to where we are, somewhere between San Francisco and Paris, but because this also brings us back to our time, to the uncertainties of today. I think that the main difference between Durkheim’s sociology and Bergson’s philosophy, along all the analyses that I proposed in the first two chapters of Les deux sources de la morale et de la religion, is that Durkheim gives very little place to uncertainty in human action, whereas Bergson puts it at the core of his reflection. Bergson’s famous description of “l’imprévisible nouveauté” can be seen as a criterion used to distinguish human action from that of machines, in that it has to face unpredictability. And I think it is not a hazard if Bergson has ended his book on morality and religion with the question of war, which is the most unpredictable phenomenon of social life—particularly in the context in which Bergson writes his book, coming out of a war and entering another war—whereas Durkheim’s sociology collapsed with the two wars and was unable to face them. This is why I will conclude with some short remarks on war.

When we read the second chapter of Les deux sources de la morale et de la religion, we can have the impression that war is the actual, in that the declaration of war wakes us up from a symbolic dream—maybe
the dream of perpetual peace—as a call from the real. But in this last chapter, Bergson shows that war is also a virtual phenomenon: it has its machines and its proliferations of invisible entities (risks, dangers, imaginary enemies) that fill the void between the machines and their absent shields. And we realize that war is also a symbolic phenomenon: it produces its own language, its own propaganda, its own laws and interdictions, which creates new forms of closed societies. I think one of the main interests of Bergson’s analysis of war is that it does not describe war as a rational confrontation between sovereign states—as, for example, Carl von Clausewitz did—but as a vital tendency that produces new lines of differentiation—what we could call, following Foucault, war in a time of biopolitics. According to Bergson, war develops in extreme ways two lines of differentiation that are constantly intertwined: the mechanical, or virtual development of the machines, and the mystical, or actual appeal to emotion. These two tendencies follow what Bergson calls the “loi de double frénésie”: they become mad if they diverge too much from one another; the mystical becomes hysterical, the mechanical becomes destructive. Therefore we need the symbolic to establish a fragile equilibrium between these two tendencies: we need a declaration of war, and we need an international law (remember that Bergson was very active in the creation of the Society of Nations by U.S. President Woodrow Wilson21).

Bergson gives no solutions to the problem of war, but he gives us concepts by which we can formulate the problem in adequate terms to act freely in the sense of democracy and justice. The famous sentence with which the book finishes, “l’univers est une machine à faire des dieux,”22 gives the sense of the problem, in its profound ambiguity: we need machines to act on the world, and we produce gods by so doing, but this proliferation of machines and gods is neither good nor bad, it is our present situation, and it is our task (“L’humanité ne sait pas assez que son avenir dépend d’elle”) to transform this virtual proliferation into just acts; therefore we need the symbols of science, of democracy, of law, ambiguous and rigid as they may be. But who is this “we”? Who has the authority and legitimacy to speak for humanity? Who is able to configure the symbols of today? These are questions left open by Bergson’s philosophy.
NOTES

2 Such a conception of reality as layered in several strata has been proposed by G. Gurvitch in “La théorie sociologique de Bergson” (La vocation actuelle de la sociologie, vol. II [Paris: PUF, 1963]), but without a clear conception of the symbolic.
4 See H. Gouhier, Bergson et le Christ des Évangiles (Paris: Fayard, 1974) and M. Cariou, Bergson et le fait mystique (Paris: Aubier-Montaigne, 1976). A comparison with William James’s Varieties of Religious Experience would be very fruitful; such a comparison has not been made extensively in the French language.
7 Deux sources 2.
11 Deux sources 23.
12 Deux sources 85.
13 Deux sources 105.
14 Deux sources 127.
16 Deux sources 137.
17 Deux sources 179.
19 W. James, Memories and Studies 209–14, quoted in Deux sources 162.
20 Deux sources 167.
22 Deux sources 338.