

Freedom, Creativity, the Self, and God: Between Rabbi Kook and Bergson's *Lebensphilosophie*

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■ Abstract

In this essay, I examine the intersection between the concepts of freedom, the self, God, and creativity in the works of one of the most prominent twentieth-century Jewish thinkers, Rabbi Abraham Isaac HaCohen Kook (1865–1935), exploring his use of these concepts through the lens of the *Lebensphilosophie* of the French philosopher Henri Bergson (1859–1941). I first draw a historical and thematic parallel between Bergson's and Kook's philosophies that to date has not been considered extensively. I then argue that five different interpretative puzzles related to the topic of freedom in Kook's teachings can be explained against the background of Bergson's thought. This Bergsonian interpretation enables the reader to appreciate in what way different aspects of Kook's thought—the metaphysical, ethical, epistemological, and theological—are interconnected and can be understood as an organic whole. I thereby show that the Bergsonian philosophical and systematic models are an important, and yet unexplored, interpretative tool for the study of Kook's theological and philosophical thought.

■ Keywords

freedom, creativity, authentic self, philosophy of life, Rabbi Kook, Henri Bergson, modern Orthodoxy, religious Zionism

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■ Introduction

In the following pages, I examine the concepts of freedom, the self, and creativity in the works of one of the most prominent twentieth-century rabbinical figures, Rabbi Abraham Isaac HaCohen Kook (1865–1935). Owing to space limitations, I explore these concepts exclusively in the context of, and in relation to, the *Lebensphilosophie* (philosophy of life) of the French philosopher Henri Bergson (1859–1941). Yet it is important to keep in mind that Bergson is cited here as only one representative of this broader philosophical movement.¹ The reading of Kook from the perspective of Bergson's philosophy therefore needs to be expanded to encompass the wider context of other philosophers of life.² My main argument throughout the essay is that five different interpretive puzzles in Kook's thought can be resolved using Bergson's ideas. These are Kook's unique teleology; his organicism and vitalism; his voluntarism; the connection between freedom, the self, and God; and the connection between freedom and creativity. The Bergsonian philosophical context and systematic models are, therefore, important interpretative

¹ *Lebensphilosophie* is a philosophical current that developed between the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th cents. in France and Germany. The main representatives of this current are Dilthey, Nietzsche, Bergson, Simmel, and Klages. The movement placed at the center of philosophical investigation the concept of life. Life in its essence was considered an endless dynamic flow that was continuously changing. For further readings on the *Lebensphilosophie* movement, see Herbert Schnädelbach, *Philosophy in Germany, 1831–1933* (trans. Eric Matthews; London: Cambridge University Press, 1984) 139–251; Ferdinand Fellmann, *Lebensphilosophie. Elemente einer Theorie der Selbsterfahrung* (Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1993); Karl Albert, *Lebensphilosophie. Von den Anfängen bei Nietzsche bis zu ihrer Kritik bei Lukács* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Alber, 1995); Jürgen Große, *Lebensphilosophie* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2010); Giuseppe Bianco, "Philosophies of Life," in *The Cambridge History of European Thought*, vol. 2, *The Twentieth Century* (ed. Warren Breckman and Peter E. Gordon; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019) 153–75; Nitzan Lebovic, *The Philosophy of Life and Death: Ludwig Klages and the Rise of a Nazi Biopolitics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) 1–21; David Midgley, "After Materialism: Reflections of Idealism in *Lebensphilosophie*," Dilthey, Bergson and Simmel," in *The Impact of Idealism: The Legacy of Post-Kantian German Thought*, vol. 2, *Historical, Social and Political Thought* (ed. Nicholas Boyle, Liz Disley, and Karl Ameriks; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013) 161–85. On the connection between *Lebensphilosophie* and gnosticism and *Lebensphilosophie* and Zionism, see Yotam Hotam, *Modern Gnosis and Zionism: The Crisis of Culture, Life Philosophy and Jewish National Thought* (London: Routledge, 2013).

² I use a number of abbreviations in the notes. When referring to Kook's works, SH"K, followed by the volume and paragraph number, stands for Abraham Isaac Kook, שמונה קבצים [Eight notebooks] (ed. 8 vols.; Jerusalem, 4002); OH"K, followed by volume and page numbers, stands for idem, אורות הקודש [The lights of holiness] (ed. David Cohen; 4 vols.; Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1963–64); IG"R, followed by volume and letter numbers: idem, אגרות הראיה, [Letters of Rav Kook] (ed. Zvi Yehuda Kook; 3 vols.; Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1962–1965); A"T: idem, ערפילי שוהר [Mists of purity] (Jerusalem: Hamachon al shem Harav Zvi Yehuda Kook Zal, 1983); *Eder*: idem, אדר היקר ועקבי הצאן, [*Eder ha-Yakar ve-Ikvei ha-Zon*] (Jerusalem, Mossad Harav Kook, 1967). All translations from Kook's works are mine unless stated otherwise. For Henri Bergson's books I use the following abbreviations: CE for Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution* (trans. Arthur Mitchell; New York: Camelot Press, 1911); TFW for idem, *Time and Free Will* (trans. F. L. Pogson; New York: Macmillan, 1913); TSMR for idem, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* (trans. R. Ashley Audra and Cloudesley Brereton; Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1935).

tools for the study of Kook's views on freedom, necessity, the self, and creativity, which are otherwise difficult to understand.

Kook was a theologian, mystic, and celebrated Jewish legal scholar who has been widely recognized as the most significant representative of religious Zionism, an ideology that combines Zionism with Orthodox Judaism.³ Understanding Kook's philosophy, therefore, helps us to shed light on the philosophical roots of the movement as a whole. Moreover, through his example, it is possible to learn about a unique encounter and intersection between Western philosophy and Jewish thought in the twentieth century,⁴ as Kook incorporates in his writings Western philosophical ideas without giving up a traditional Jewish approach or the commitment to halakah (Jewish law).

■ The Place of Western and Kabbalistic Sources

Underlying my proposed Bergsonian reading of Kook's thought is the idea that Kook's works should be viewed and read in the context of Western philosophy in general.⁵ The scholar Eliezer Goldman went as far as arguing that, although Kook was steeped in Jewish tradition, his thought was exclusively influenced

³ Aviezer Ravitzky, *Messianism, Zionism, and Jewish Religious Radicalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Dov Schwartz, *Religious-Zionism: History and Ideology* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2009); *Modern Judaism: An Oxford Guide* (ed. Nicholas De Lange and Miri Freud-Kandel; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

⁴ For similar studies in English on the intersection between Western philosophy and modern Jewish thinkers, consider Miriam Feldmann Kaye, *Jewish Theology for a Postmodern Age* (London: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2019); Daniel M. Herskowitz, *Heidegger and His Jewish Reception* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

⁵ Many scholars have explored Kook's ideas in the light of Western philosophy. See Benjamin Ish-Shalom, "R. Kook, Spinoza and Goethe: Modern and Traditional Elements in the Thought of R. Kook," *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 13 (1996) 525–55 (Hebrew); Shalom Rosenberg, "הראייה והתנין העיוור" [Rav Kook and the blind crocodile], in באורו [In his light] (ed. H. Hamiel; Jerusalem: HaHistadrut Hazionit Haolamit, 1976) 317–52; Smadar Sherlo, "Strength and Humility: Rabbi Kook's Moral System and Nietzsche's Morality of Power," in *Nietzsche, Zionism and Hebrew Culture* (ed. Jacob Golomb; Jerusalem: Magnes, 2002) 347–74 (Hebrew); idem, *The Tzaddiq Is the Foundation of the World: Rabbi Kook's Esoteric Mission and Mystical Experience* (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2012) 123, 128–30, 177, 283, 291, 407 (Hebrew); Jason Rappoport, "Rabbi Kook and Nietzsche: A Preliminary Comparison of Their Ideas on Religions, Christianity, Buddhism and Atheism," *The Torah U-Madda Journal* 12 (2004) 99–129; Dov Schwartz, *Music in Jewish Thought* (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2013) 265–95 (Hebrew). Benjamin Ish-Shalom, *Rabbi Avraham Itzhak HaCohen Kook: Between Rationalism and Mysticism* (trans. Ora Wiskind-Elper; Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993); Elchanan Shilo, "רבדים קבליים," their connection to Hegel's philosophy and the spirit of the times] (MA thesis, Bar-Ilan University, 1991); Tamar Ross, "The Cognitive Value of Religious Truth Statements: Rabbi AI Kook and Postmodernism," in *Tamar Ross: Constructing Faith* (ed. Hava Tirosh-Samuels and Aaron W. Hughes; Leiden: Brill, 2016) 41–85; Daniel Rynhold and Michael Harris, *Nietzsche, Soloveitchik, and Contemporary Jewish Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008) 199, 203; Consider also Cherry's discussion on Kook's view on evolutionary theories: Shay Cherry, "Three Twentieth-century Jewish Responses to Evolutionary Theory," *Aleph* 3 (2003) 250–63.

by nineteenth-century European philosophy. Goldman also claimed that Kook encloded his own ideas with kabbalistic (Jewish mystical) symbolism only later, to gain legitimacy among his traditional readers.⁶

Beyond the influence of the Western philosophical tradition, it is important to underline the fact that Kook was a deeply religious thinker whose outlook was firmly embedded in the Jewish tradition and the teachings of kabbalah. He often employs kabbalistic terminology and images; in fact, some scholars argue that Kook was exclusively a kabbalistic thinker, thereby opposing Goldman's interpretation.⁷

In the debate⁸ about the exclusive influence of either Western or kabbalistic sources in Kook's works, Binyamin Ish Shalom seems to adopt a midway position,

⁶ Eliezer Goldman, "Secular Zionism, the Vacation of Israel and the Telos of the Torah: Rabbi Kook's Articles Published in Ha'Peless between 1901–1904," *Da'at* 11 (1983) 125–26 (Hebrew). Goldman proposes that Kook's main source of knowledge of Western philosophy was Meises's book *Korot ha-Philosophiya ha-Hadasha*. See Eliezer Goldman, "The Structuring of Rabbi Kook's Thought (1906–1909)," in *The Book of the Year of Jewish Studies and Humanities* (ed. Moshe Hallamish; Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1987) 87–121 (Hebrew). Ish-Shalom points out that this book could have been a source for Kook, but "Rabbi Kook may also never have seen it"; see Ish-Shalom, *Between Rationalism*, 242. Goldman also argues, together with Schatz, that Moses Hess, with his book *Rome and Jerusalem*, introduced Kook to philosophical ideas of the time; see Eliezer Goldman, "Kook's Relation to European Thought," in *Yovel 'Orot* (ed. B. Ish-Shalom and S. Rosenberg; Sifriat Eliner: Jerusalem, 1985) 219–21 (Hebrew), and Rivka Schatz-Uffenheimer, "Utopia and Messianism in the Teachings of Rabbi Kook," *Kivunim* (1978) 211–12 (Hebrew). Regarding the connection between Kook and Western philosophy, see also David Cohen in the introduction to *Orot Hakodesh*, OH"K vol. 1, 23; consider also Nathan Rotenstreich, "Symposium: The Contribution of Rabbi Kook's Teaching to Renewed Jewish Thought," in *Yovel 'Orot* (ed. Ish-Shalom and Rosenberg) 349–85, at 369; Nathan Rotenstreich, *Jewish Philosophy in the Modern Era* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1987) 252–76 (Hebrew); Lawrence J. Kaplan, "Rav Kook and the Jewish Philosophical Tradition," in *Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook and Jewish Spirituality* (ed. Lawrence J. Kaplan and David Shatz; New York: New York University Press, 1995) 41–77.

⁷ For instance, Yoseph Avivi has argued that it is possible to find in Kook's thought a coherent kabbalistic system; see Yoseph Avivi, "History as a Divine Prescription," in *Rabbi Mordechai Breuer Festschrift* (ed. Mosher Bar Asher; Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 1992) 709–71 (Hebrew). Tamar Ross has claimed that kabbalah must be the starting point for any adequate interpretation of Kook's views; see Tamar Ross, "Rabbi Kook's Concept of God," *Daat* 8 (1982) 109–28 (Hebrew). At the same time, Ross also examines Western philosophical sources in relation to Kook; see eadem, "The Cognitive Value of Religious Truth Statements: Rabbi AI Kook and Postmodernism," in *Tamar Ross: Constructing Faith* (ed. Hava Tirosh-Samuelson and Aaron W. Hughes; Leiden: Brill, 2016) 41–85. Other scholars have underlined the place of kabbalah in Rabbi Kook's thought: see Hillel Zeitlin, *ספרן של היידיים* [Librarian of individuals] (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1979) 235–37; Yoni Garb, "Rabbi Kook and His Sources: From Kabbalistic Historiosophy to National Mysticism," in *Studies in Modern Religions, Religious Movements and the Bābī-Bahā'ī Faiths* (ed. Moshe Sharon; Leiden: Brill, 2004) 79–80. See also Mordechai Pachter, "Circles and Straightness—A History of an Idea," *Daat* 18 (1987) 59–90 (Hebrew); idem, "The Kabbalistic Foundation of the Faith-Heresy Issue in Rav Kook's Thought," *Daat* 47 (2001) 69–100 (Hebrew); Lawrence Fine, "Rav Abraham Isaac Kook and the Jewish Mystical Tradition," in *Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook* (ed. Kaplan and Shatz) 23–40.

⁸ For an extensive review of this debate, see Matanya Sternberg, "'They Are Given into Your Hands and Not You into Theirs': Rabbi Abraham Itzhak Ha-Kohen Kook's Writings and Self-Awareness as a Kabbalist," *Daat* 85 (2018) 537–61, at 537–42 (Hebrew).

emphasizing the importance of both the influence of kabbalah and kabbalistic symbolism and that of nineteenth- and twentieth-century western philosophy.⁹ I embrace Ish Shalom's approach and claim that, while it is impossible to negate the essential influence that kabbalistic and Jewish religious writings had on Kook's literary production, he was also a man of his time who was aware of modern philosophical ideas and currents and was affected by the zeitgeist. Kook even referred to different Western authors by name, including Bergson, Spinoza, and others.¹⁰

Although, as I said, I do not underestimate the role of kabbalah in Kook's writings, in the present essay I focus only on the Western philosophical aspects of his thought. Previous scholars, while noting the link between Kook and Bergson, have not offered a detailed reading of this connection or explored the hermeneutical significance that Bergson's thought can have for Kook's writings; consequently, they missed an important interpretative tool. In the following pages, I try to fill this gap in a twofold manner. First, I draw a detailed parallel between Kook's and Bergson's ideas on the themes of freedom and creativity, highlighting the similarities between the two thinkers' philosophies. Second, I reread and reinterpret more systematically, through Bergson's *Lebensphilosophie*, some aspects of Kook's conceptions of freedom, necessity, the self, God, and creativity, proposing a new interpretation of these concepts and adding new layers to previous understandings.

This interpretation also enables the reader to appreciate how the different aspects of Kook's thought—the metaphysical, ethical, epistemological, and theological—are interconnected and can be understood as an organic whole rather than in a fragmental manner. In particular, I scrutinize the way Kook's metaphysical-theological understanding of creation is connected to his ethical and ontological views of freedom, the self, and creativity. These conceptions all originate in Bergson's *Lebensphilosophien* notion of life as originally free, dynamic, and self-affirming and as being beyond simple reason.

■ Bergson and Kook: The Historical Connection and Thematic Similarities

The two thinkers were contemporaries: Bergson lived between 1859 and 1941 while Kook was born in 1865 and died in 1935. The connection between them was first noted by Kook's Jewish contemporaries: for instance, in 1912 Aharon Kaminka (1866–1950), a rabbi and intellectual, published a series of chapters in which he described, among other things, his encounter with Kook, at the time rabbi of Jaffa, upon visiting the land of Israel.¹¹ He portrays Kook as an extraordinary individual

⁹ See Ish-Shalom, *Between Rationalism*, 5.

¹⁰ Among the philosophers Kook mentioned by name in his writings are Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Spinoza, Schopenhauer, and Bergson. See SH²K vol. 1, 66, 394, 435; SH²K vol. 4, 68, 124; SH²K vol. 5, 228; IG²R vol. 1, 44; *Eder*, 134–35.

¹¹ These chapters were later gathered and printed in the book *Meine Reise nach Jerusalem*. See

and praises him not only as one of the greatest Talmud scholars but also as one of the most profound thinkers of contemporary Judaism, adding that “the French philosopher Henri Bergson certainly does not know that there is a devout rabbi in Palestine who in his Hebrew essays came very close to his philosophy.” Kaminka thus noted and at the same time informed Kook himself of the thematic similarities between his and Bergson’s writings. In a letter to Kaminka, Kook replied that his ideas were not influenced by Western philosophical thinking but rather “flow . . . solely from the tents of Shem, from the wellspring of Torah.” Despite Kook’s negation, however, I claim the parallelism between the two thinkers is evident.¹² Besides Kaminka, Kook’s student, R. David Cohen, also compares the thought of the two men.¹³

Ish-Shalom has noted the geographical proximity of Bergson and Kook during World War I. At that time, Kook lived for a period in Switzerland and later in England. In both places, the ideas of Bergson and other philosophers of life were well known and extremely popular, and it is reasonable to assume that Kook had heard about them. Ish-Shalom adds that Kook wrote a large part of the passages that were later published in the edited compilation *Orot Hakodesh*—Kook’s collection that is most enriched with elements of the philosophy of life—during this forced exile in Europe and therefore when he was the most immersed in the European cultural atmosphere of the time.¹⁴

Furthermore, it is possible that Kook had actually read some of Bergson’s writings,¹⁵ as the latter was extremely popular both in French and in international circles.¹⁶ As we will see below, many aspects of Kook’s theology appear very close—both in terms of ideas and in their style—to Bergson’s philosophy, which

Hagay Shtamler, “The Sources of R. Abraham I. Kook’s Thoughts as Reflected in His Controversy with R. Dr. Aaron Kaminka,” *Daat* 82 (2016) 321–46, at 322 (Hebrew); See also Rabbi Dr. I. Epstein, *Avraham Yitzhak Ha-Cohen Kook: His Life and Works* (London: Brit Ḥalutzim Datiyim, 1951).

¹² Quoted in Shtamler, “The Sources of R. Abraham I. Kook’s Thoughts,” 322.

¹³ On the comparison made by David Cohen between Kook and Bergson, see OH”K vol. 1, 21; See also Don Seeman, “Evolutionary Ethics: The Ta’amei Ha-Mitzvot of Rav Kook,” *Hakirah* 26 (2019) 13–55, at 32.

¹⁴ Ish-Shalom, *Between Rationalism*, 77.

¹⁵ As Ben Shlomo has suggested, it is possible that Kook may have read Bergson’s *Introduction to Metaphysics*; see Yosef Ben Shlomo, “הרוח והחיים במשנת הרב קוק” [Spirit and life in the thought of Rabbi Kook], in דברי האקדמיה הלאומית הישראלית למדעים [The speeches of the Israeli Academy of Science] 7 (1988) 257–74, at 258 n. 5. It is unlikely that Kook could read French, but there is much evidence that he spoke and read English and so could have read Bergson’s books in their English translation; see Abraham I. Kook, אוצרות הראייה [Otzrot Hareia] (ed. Moshe Zuriel; vol. 1; Rishon le Zion: Yeshivat Hesder Rishon Le Zion) 26, 361; Kook’s knowledge of English was also mentioned in a newspaper during his visit to the United States; see Abraham I. Kook, “פנים לרב קוק באמריקה” [The welcoming of Rabbi Kook in the United States], *HaMizrachi*, May 2, 1924, <https://www.nli.org.il/he/newspapers/hmi/1924/05/02/01/article/10/?srpos=1&e=02-05-1924-02-05-1924--he-20--1--img-txIN%7ctxTI-%d7%a7%d7%95%d7%a7-----1>.

¹⁶ Thomas Goudge, “Introduction to 1912 Translation of *Introduction to Metaphysics*,” in *An Introduction to Metaphysics* (trans. T. E. Hulme; Cambridge: Hackett, 1949) 9–10.

may suggest that Bergson had had a certain influence on him.¹⁷ Finally, Kook mentions Bergson explicitly in one of his writings.¹⁸

■ Bergson and Kabbalah

The similarities between Kook and Bergson might be partially explained by their sharing a common source—kabbalah. This hypothesis, although very appealing, is difficult to prove.

As Yotam Hotam has underlined, *Lebensphilosophie* was influenced by esoteric and gnostic views that were very popular in Europe at the time.¹⁹ Bergson, being a *Lebensphilosoph*, may well have absorbed some gnostic ideas. Moreover, Schelling—one of the forefathers of the *Lebensphilosophie* movement²⁰—was involved in kabbalah²¹ and might have influenced Bergson's philosophy.²² Scholars have pointed out the presence of kabbalistic thinking in general in twentieth-century France;²³ this would increase the likelihood that Bergson had some familiarity with these ideas. Finally, Bergson was himself a Jew and aware of the kabbalistic tradition. The philosopher Henri Sérrouya, Bergson's contemporary, argued that, while Bergson denied any knowledge of kabbalah, certain aspects of his philosophy bore an extremely close resemblance to kabbalistic ideas.²⁴ Thus, interestingly, both Bergson and Kook negated the influences attributed to them; yet their denial has not been taken seriously by scholars, and Sérrouya, for example, notes some striking similarities between Bergson's philosophy and kabbalistic ideas, such as the never-ending and constant

¹⁷ Bergson is by far the most important Western source we can identify in Kook's writings, but Kook was also strongly influenced by kabbalistic and traditional Jewish ideas in general (as he himself testifies in the letter quoted in n. 12), and it is not feasible to identify one singular source as the paramount influence.

¹⁸ See SH"K vol. 4, 68, translated in Yosef Ben Shlomo, *Poetry of Being: Lectures on the Philosophy of Rabbi Kook* (trans. Shmuel Himelstein; Tel Aviv: MOD Books, 1990) 46. David Cohen also refers to this passage when comparing Kook's and Bergson's thought; see n. 13 above.

¹⁹ Hotam, *Modern Gnosis*, 1–11.

²⁰ David Midgley, "After Materialism," 173–74.

²¹ See Christoph Schulte, "Zimzum in the Works of Schelling," *Iyyun* 41 (1992) 21–40 (Hebrew); A. S. Ozar, "Unfolding the Enfolded: Schelling and Lurianic Kabbalah," in *Tsimtsum and Modernity* (ed. Agata Bielik-Robson and Daniel H. Weiss; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2021) 119–40; Ernst Benz, "Schellings theologische Geistesahnen," *Studia Philosophica* 14 (1954) 179; Wilhelm Schulze, "Schelling und die Kabbala," *Judaica* 13.2 (1957) 65–99; Paul Franks, "Mythology, Essence, and Form: Schelling's Jewish Reception in the Nineteenth Century," *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology* 80 (2019) 71–89.

²² On the influence of Schelling on Bergson, see Caterina Zanfi, *Bergson e la Filosofia Tedesca, 1907–1932* (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2013) 62, 74, 167–68, 176.

²³ Charles Mopsik and Alan Astro, "Reverberations of the Kabbalah in Modern French Thought," *Shofar* 14 (1996) 32–46.

²⁴ Henri Sérrouya, "Bergson et la Kabbale," *Revue philosophique de la France et de l'étranger* 149 (1959) 321–24. The passage was translated in Mopsik and Astro, "Reverberations," 41.

activity of the original principle, the metaphysical descent of matter, and the similarity between Bergson's description of cosmic creation and the theory of *tzimtzum*.²⁵ Therefore, while Bergson's testimony about his ignorance of kabbalah is not to be dismissed, it is still possible that he may have been influenced by kabbalah indirectly: through being part of the *Lebensphilosophie* movement; by being a Jewish and French intellectual; or simply by being the continuation of a long Western tradition that bore the influence of kabbalah.²⁶ Both Bergson and Kook might thus have been influenced by kabbalistic thought, and, if this is the case, they seem to have given these kabbalistic ideas a surprisingly similar interpretation.²⁷

Besides the historical connection, some twentieth-century scholars have highlighted the similarity between Bergson's and Kook's philosophies.²⁸ None of these scholars have explored this resemblance systematically, however; nor have they considered Kook's philosophy in the broader context of the *Lebensphilosophie* movement at large.²⁹

In light of the above, it is difficult to deny that Kook was, at least indirectly, influenced by his zeitgeist and by the ideas of Bergson, his contemporary. In the next sections, I turn to the striking parallelism between the two thinkers' ideas of freedom and creativity, and show how a Bergsonian reading may shed new light on multiple aspects of Kook's philosophy.

■ Bergson on Duration and the *Élan Vital*

Freedom in our world is associated by both Bergson and Kook with a vitalistic and metaphysical understanding of what is at the origin of creation, life, and existence: God's will,³⁰ or the *élan vital* (vital impetus). This free force progresses, develops,

²⁵ Sérouya, "Bergson et la Kabbale," 321–24.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 324.

²⁷ While the place of kabbalah in Bergson's thought is an important question and may, to some extent, explain the connection between Bergson and Kook and the similarities between their ideas, I cannot address and explore this fully in the present essay.

²⁸ Benjamin Orbach has argued that Kook's suspicion of any thought that is detached from the vital force of life and concrete existence, and his reservations concerning the crystallization of the endless movement of life, are positions very close to Bergson's philosophy. Orbach adds that Kook's thinking is similar to the vitalistic philosophy that developed in the 19th and 20th cent., thereby hinting at the wider connection between Kook and *Lebensphilosophie*. See Benjamin Orbach, משנתו של הנרי ברגסון [The thought of Henri Bergson] (Ramat Gan: Bar Orin, 1970) 43–46, and Benjamin Gross, *Repentance and Redemption: The Lights of Return by R. Abraham Isaac Hacohen Kook* (Jerusalem: Rubin Mass, 1999) 33 n. 81 (Hebrew). Ben Shlomo also compares many vitalistic and epistemological aspects of Bergson's and Kook's philosophies; see Ben Shlomo, "ה'רוח והחיים,'" 257–74; *idem*, *Poetry of Being*, 20–50, 62–72, 134, 139; *idem*, "שלמות והשתלמות בתורתו של הרב קוק," *Iyyun* 33 (1981) 289–309.

²⁹ I am unable to focus on this largest context here because of limitations of space.

³⁰ See Ben Shlomo, *Poetry of Being*, 50–51, who claims (in opposition to Tamar Ross's view) that creation is a free, volitional act of God. On this topic, see Tamar Ross, "Rav Kook's Concept of God (Part I)," *Daat* 8 (1982) 109–28 (Hebrew); and *idem*, "Rav Kook's Concept of God (Part

and changes, endowing everything it creates with the same fluid, overwhelming, and powerful impetus of life, and with the same limitless freedom. To interpret Kook's conception of freedom, we first need to examine Bergson's.

Two of the most central ideas in Bergson's philosophy of life are those of duration³¹ and the *élan vital*, and his conception of freedom is based on these two notions. I propose that they can equally be found, even if less explicitly, in Kook's philosophy. This parallelism helps the reader reinterpret many passages in which Kook expresses his view of freedom in a fresh manner.

According to Bergson, life—beyond the lens of our spatial understanding, which perceives reality as being made up of juxtaposed states unconnected to each other—is duration. From the deeper point of view of duration, we perceive life as a continuous and dynamic flow in which there are no separate states of consciousness at all; everything is continuously changing and is interrelated. Past, present, and future are, accordingly, interconnected and are subject to constant movement and change.³² Bergson writes: “[pure duration] forms both the past and the present states into an organic whole, as happens when we recall the notes of a tune, melting, so to speak, into one another.”³³

For Bergson, everything in the universe endures, is alive, continuously moving, changing, and growing. Bergson argues that at the source of this movement—of duration, growth, and evolution—there is one single principle that gives life to everything else. This principle is the *élan vital*, the primordial power and vital impetus that lies at the origin of the universe. The *élan vital* is pure and unpredictable creation.³⁴ Later in his work, Bergson identifies this original source, the *élan vital*, with God (or God's direct emanation) and argues that special individuals—the mystics—thanks to their deeply intuitive character, can reconnect to the eternal flow of the *élan vital* and establish “a contact,” a “partial coincidence, with the creative effort [of life],” an effort that is “of God, if it is not God himself.”³⁵ It is

2),” *Daat* 9 (1982) 39–70.

³¹ Bergson's entire corpus seems to be dedicated to the concept of duration, and he confirms this in a letter to Høffding; see Henri Bergson, “Letter to Harald Høffding,” in *Key Writings* (ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson and John Mullarkey; New York: Continuum, 2001) 367.

³² William James explains this beautifully in his lectures on Bergson; see William James, *A Pluralistic Universe: Hibbert Lectures at Manchester College on the Present Situation in Philosophy* (London: Green and Co., 1920) 235.

³³ TFW, 110.

³⁴ On the unpredictability of the *élan vital*, see Keith Ansell-Pearson, *Bergson: Thinking Beyond the Human Condition* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018) 67; Sanford Schwartz, “Bergson and the Politics of Vitalism,” in *The Crisis in Modernism: Bergson and the Vitalist Controversy* (ed. Frederick Burwick and Paul Douglass; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992) 293.

³⁵ TSMR, 220. It is unclear whether the *élan vital* should be considered identical to God or rather as a *creation* of a transcendent God. The second option seems more plausible and would allow Bergson to avoid pantheism. First, in *Creative Evolution* he describes the *élan vital* as finite (see CE, 254); being finite, it cannot be identified with God. Second, in two important letters directed to the Belgian Jesuit Father de Tonqueudec, Bergson clearly states that the *élan vital* is not God but is rather a *product* of a transcendent God. See Henri Bergson, *Mélanges* (Paris: Presses Universitaires

from the notions of duration and *élan vital* that Bergson derives his conception of freedom, arguing that the endless flow of the *élan vital*—which is at the origin of all creation—is unpredictable. Owing to this unpredictability, everything in life, by virtue of being permeated by the *élan vital*, is also unpredictable and therefore completely free.³⁶

■ A Bergsonian Reading of Kook: Life as Divine Will

Having in mind Bergson's view of life and freedom, it is possible to translate and endow with meaning some of the concepts Kook utilized in his writings that are expressed enigmatically and are otherwise difficult to interpret systematically.³⁷

Kook, like Bergson, talks about life as a dynamic force pervaded by continuous movement and as an endless flow. These ideas are expressed in Kook's style: the language of his writings is "wet" and fluid and is permeated by words that seek to reflect the flowing nature of life. Kook repeatedly refers to life as an ever-changing stream and as "wet" and "thirsty."³⁸ The Bergsonian concept of duration helps us understand Kook's use of this fluid and often aphoristic language and explains the metaphors and the parallels he draws between national or personal internal processes and the flow of streams and of water. With these wet images, fluid metaphors, and poetic language Kook, I believe, is describing the eternal movement and overwhelming flow of life, which is parallel to Bergson's concept of duration.

Like Bergson, Kook argues that the origin of this movement lies in the divine will. For Kook, the divine will is completely free from any constraint, and everything in the world—both inanimate things as well as plants, animals, and human beings—is permeated by it and is therefore intrinsically free.³⁹ Using the language of Lurianic kabbalah, Kook calls this divine will *yosher* (rightness). *Yosher* is symbolized by a straight line that stretches without constraints or a specific end. This infinite line represents the progressive, dynamic, and infinite aspect of freedom. On the

de France, 1972) 766. See also Bergson, *Mélanges*, 964. Kook is also against pantheism; as Ben Shlomo explains, "Even in the fieriest passages, which describe the light of divine will, 'which permeates all hidden places,' it is always not God himself, but God's supreme will"; Ben Shlomo, *Poetry of Being*, 54.

³⁶ See CE, 16.

³⁷ The question of the freedom to sin in Kook's thought lies beyond the scope of my current study. It is enough to say in this context that, according to Kook, there is an identification between being one's true self, being free, and acting in line with the divine will. If one acts in an evil manner, it means that one is not connected to one's true self and is therefore not free. For further reading on this topic, see Avinoam Rosenak, *The Prophetic Halakhah: Rabbi A. I. H. Kook's Philosophy of Halakah* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2007) 39–115 (Hebrew); Ish-Shalom, *Between Rationalism*, 99–172; Zvi Yaron, *The Philosophy of Rabbi Kook* (Jerusalem: HaHistadrut Hazionit Haolamit, 1974) 131–67 (Hebrew).

³⁸ See *Eder*, 143–44. This passage in *Eder* is emblematic of Kook as a *Lebensphilosoph* in the sense that he describes "being" as flowing, changing, and developing like water. Besides this example, many passages in Kook's writings contain images of streams, stream of life, wetness, flow, water, thirst, and so on.

³⁹ See SH"K vol. 1, 364, 460; SH"K vol. 4, 97.

other hand, the *igulim* (circles) symbolize necessity encircled by its laws—in a circle, there is no free advancement or development, and everything is fixed and enclosed, limited to a finite set of laws. In his writings, Kook argues that *yosher* rather than *igulim* is the most important and central aspect of existence: “*yosher* is the fundamental aspect of existence; the *igulim* are subordinate to it, that is, the freedom of life, the complete freedom from the source of being, the freedom in the divine concept . . . it is everything.”⁴⁰ Kook argues, moreover, that even within the most strict laws of nature and the strongest chains of causal necessity, freedom finds its way to act: “Within the *igulim* themselves, within the necessary laws of the universe . . . *yosher* goes forth and acts.”⁴¹

In Kook’s writings, freedom and necessity come together and are present in every aspect of existence. Every aspect of being encompasses necessity and limitations on the side of freedom. In a constantly changing dynamic world, one aspect always prevails over the other, and the relationship established between necessity and freedom in each moment determines the rhythm of the progress of the world. The more necessity prevails in our world, the more the world is static, while the more room is given to freedom, the more the world changes, advances, and is dynamic.

■ A Teleology of Tendencies

The relationship between freedom and necessity in Kook’s thought resembles in many respects Bergson’s view. Moreover, I argue, Kook’s aphoristic and enigmatic ideas on teleology can be explained through Bergson’s model. I have shown above that, according to the French philosopher, there is an original principle—the *élan vital*—which is at the origin of life, and it is essentially free. Therefore, everything that exists and is permeated by the *élan vital* is also free. Nothing is predetermined. Consequently, Bergson is against both a deterministic (mechanistic) understanding of reality and the teleological approach of traditional finalism envisioned by Leibniz, modern Newtonian science, and ancient Aristotelian science.

According to Bergson, mechanism trusts that every change in reality is determined by the events that immediately preceded it. Teleology—to which he often refers as finalism—is a lighter form of mechanism, and interprets the unfolding of events in the world as the realization of a program known in advance. He writes: “The doctrine of teleology, in its extreme form, as we find it in Leibniz for example, implies that things and beings merely realize a program previously arranged.”⁴²

⁴⁰ SH”K vol. 1, 147.

⁴¹ Ibid. For an extended discussion on the concepts of *igulim* and *yosher* in kabbalah and in Kook’s thought, see Pachter, “Circles and Straightness,” 59–90. This overcoming of the *igulim* by freedom (from within) resembles the *élan vital*’s overcoming of the material aspect (necessity) found within itself. I explore this self-overcoming movement in the next paragraphs.

⁴² CE, 39–40. For further reading on Bergson’s teleology, see Vladimir Jankélévitch, *Henri Bergson* (ed. Alexandre Lefebvre and Nils F. Schott; trans. Nils F. Schott; Durham: Duke University Press, 2015) 109–19, where Jankélévitch notes that Bergson’s perspective is extremely close to that of Schopenhauer. See also G. Watts Cunningham, “Bergson’s Conception of Finality,” *Philosophical*

This implies that living beings do nothing but follow a path already traced and decided ahead; it is a “type of teleology which conceives of the world-process as the realization of an exact and predetermined plan.”⁴³

Teleology for Bergson is a reverse mechanism, and, in both doctrines, nothing is unforeseen; real creation and novelty are impossible. Bergson writes about the consequences of such a teleological and determinist view: “If there is nothing unforeseen, no invention or creation in the universe, time is useless again. As in the mechanistic hypothesis, here again it is supposed that all is given. Finalism thus understood is only inverted mechanism.”⁴⁴

Bergson cannot accept an explanation that negates freedom. To justify his rejection of mechanism and teleology, he depicts an image of a hand that “has to pass through iron filings which are compressed and offer resistance to it in proportion as it goes forward.”⁴⁵ At some point, the hand will stop pushing and matter will remain in the position that resulted from the effort made by the hand. If that hand then became invisible, says Bergson,

Lookers-on will seek the reason of the arrangement in the filings themselves and in forces within the mass. Some will account for the position of each filing by the action exerted upon it by the neighboring filings: these are the mechanists. Others will prefer to think that a plan of the whole has presided over the detail of these elementary actions: they are the finalists.⁴⁶

But the truth is, says Bergson, that the act was merely the act of one invisible hand, and “the inexhaustible detail of the movement of the grains . . . expresses *negatively*, in a way, the undivided movement, being the unitary form of a resistance, and not a synthesis of positive elementary actions.”⁴⁷

Bergson replaces mechanisms and classic teleological finalism with a different kind of teleological finalism—that of the *élan vital*. To Bergson, all things in the universe are united by the fact that they share an original tendency rather than the same aspirations.⁴⁸ While we cannot speak of a pre-existing teleological end, we can speak of a common original tendency, found at the beginning—the *élan vital*: “Harmony, or rather ‘complementarity,’ is revealed only in the mass, in tendencies rather than in states. Especially (and this is the point on which finalism has been most seriously mistaken) harmony is rather behind us than before. It is due to an identity of impulsion and not to a common aspiration.”⁴⁹

Review 23 (1914) 648–63.

⁴³ Cunningham, “Bergson’s Conception of Finality,” 649.

⁴⁴ CE, 39.

⁴⁵ CE, 94.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* (my italics).

⁴⁸ Idella J. Gallagher, “Morality in Evolution: The Moral Philosophy of Henri Bergson,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 12 (1974) 40.

⁴⁹ CE, 51.

The *élan vital*—the original source of life and existence—sets in motion the initial drive of life, that is, progress, enhancement, and self-transcendence. But there is no predetermined final goal: this initial self-affirming and self-enhancing drive is free from then on to develop in whatever way it wants. Thus, even though every aspect of the world shares an original enhancing tendency at the start, the way the world will develop, improve, and enhance itself is completely unknown.⁵⁰ This is because the original impulse shared by all existence is pure creation, and—as in the case of human consciousness and human actions—there is no way to know what it will create until the creation comes into existence. Only in retrospect can we look at the *élan vital* as if it had a predetermined goal.⁵¹

This understanding of Bergson may help us interpret the following obscure passage, and many others, in Kook's essay *Kirvat Elohim*:

When we are asked: what is the essence of life and the source of existence, and whence is life revealed as the quality of complex forces carving their mark together in an inner and original spirit? And the answer: the hand striving to closeness with God, which is revealed in all of being as a *necessary element* of general aspiration, holding within it *full freedom* in all its course—this hand does it all.⁵²

Elsewhere he writes:

When we discuss the essential aspiration of the closeness of God in the human soul and the tendency for perfection [השתלמות] that it is in it [i.e., in our soul], we find here a revelation of two aspects which seem to contradict each other, and they are reunited to discover together the nature of the whole of life. They seem to contradict each other, for the essence of the tendency to the closeness of God itself and its aspiration are an aspect of *complete necessity*, which cannot be replaced in life. . . . On the other hand, we find the course of its advancement, progress, and refinement, hidden in its depth and foundation, precisely alongside the *complete freedom* to further the rule of the human spirit over itself and the world.⁵³

Kook writes that there is a “necessary element of general aspiration,” and that “the essence of the tendency to the closeness of God” is “an aspect of complete necessity,” that is, the tendency and aspiration of the world toward God are necessary and inevitable. This appears unclear and seems to contradict the continuation of the sentence in the first passage, where Kook writes that “the hand striving to closeness with God, which is revealed in all of being as a *necessary element of general aspiration, holding within it full freedom in all its course*—this hand does it all,” as well as with his statement in the second passage that “we find the course

⁵⁰ See Ansell-Pearson, *Beyond the Human*, 56.

⁵¹ See CE, 51.

⁵² Kook, *Ma'amarei*, 36, translated in Ish-Shalom, *Between Rationalism*, 83 (my italics).

⁵³ Kook, *Ma'amarei*, 34, translated in Ish-Shalom, *Between Rationalism*, 82 (my italics).

of its advanced progress and refinement . . . *alongside the complete freedom to further the rule of the human spirit over itself and the world.*"⁵⁴

A possible way to interpret these passages is through the lens of Bergson's philosophical approach explored above. It appears that the original principle of divine will instills into existence a free and boundless creative tendency toward enhancement and perfection, and this tendency is a necessary one. The world necessarily strives toward its enhancement, development, betterment, self-transcendence, and reunification with the divine original principle. Yet the way the world develops this tendency for enhancement, the way it betters and perfects itself, is completely free and beyond necessity. It thus seems that, as with Bergson, necessity is found for Kook only at the beginning rather than at the end. It is an original (divine) impulse toward improvement shared by every aspect of existence, but it does not determine in any way the manifestation of this betterment. Therefore, both Bergson and Kook seem to share a similar conception of teleology, different from the classical teleological view—a teleology of *original tendencies*.

■ *Élan Vital*, Divine Will, and Organicism

Reading Kook through the lens of Bergson may explain the connection between Kook's understanding of creation as deriving from an original divine and free source, on the one hand, and, on the other, his organicist and vitalistic understanding of the world. Therefore, Bergson also functions in this case as an essential interpretative tool for Kook's works.

We have seen that Bergson argues that creation originates with a free and dynamic divine source called *élan vital*. When we act freely, we reexperience the godly act of creation, and God's freedom, dynamism, and creativity are revealed in our world. In Bergson's words: "God thus defined has nothing of the already made; He is unceasing life, action, freedom. *Creation, so conceived, is not a mystery; we experience it in ourselves when we act freely.*"⁵⁵

Analogous to the *élan vital*, the divine will is for Kook the source of everything that exists and is continual and eternal creation. He writes: "It is possible to understand the wonder of man's will, in all the glory of his freedom, only as one spark from the great flame of the great will in all being, the manifestation of the will of the Lord of all worlds, Blessed be He."⁵⁶

The parallel between Kook's and Bergson's views is evident. Both thinkers share a similar starting point, according to which at the origin of life there is an eternal and endless flow, full of life force. This original source, which is identified by Kook as divine or cosmic will and by Bergson as *élan vital*, permeates all that exists. In an interesting passage, Kook expresses this organicist idea in a strikingly similar way to Bergson and talks about an abstract "flux of life" (שטף החיים), which

⁵⁴ Ibid. (my italics)

⁵⁵ CE, 248–49 (my italics).

⁵⁶ SH"K vol. 3, 47.

I suggest—in line with the translator of the passage—should be interpreted in terms of the *élan vital*: “As all that exists is one, with all its wars and tremendous opposites, there is nothing which contradicts it or prevents it from perpetual elevation. And as the *élan vital* [שׂף הַחַיִּים] in it wishes constantly to strengthen and ascend, who can halt its tremendous stream? That is why it always rises and goes up more and more.”⁵⁷

Bergson argues elsewhere that everything is continuously and imperceptibly growing old: oneself and one’s body, including every individual cell that composes it.⁵⁸ The dynamism, freedom, progress, and tendency toward betterment are characteristic of the original principle itself—the divine will or *élan vital*. Consequently, they are also characteristic of the entire cosmos, which is permeated by this divine cosmic principle.

Since this world was created, in Kook’s terminology, by the divine will, and in Bergson’s by the *élan vital*, everything in this world is an expression and revelation of this divine will. It is revealed in every aspect of the world: in plants and animals but also in inanimate objects and feelings, thoughts, and works of art. There are numerous passages in which Kook develops this idea. In one place he writes: “We are aware of the will of the world, the level that is *revealed* as the spirit of life in existence, as active and aspiring will, whose aspects *are revealed* in all orders—inanimate, vegetative, animate, human, in each and every particular, and in all of everything.”⁵⁹

It is now possible to explain Kook’s organicist and vitalistic conceptions of the world and of existence through Bergson’s concept of the *élan vital*.⁶⁰ In this view, there is no substantial difference between inanimate objects, plants, animals, and human beings—they all appertain to the same organic whole (organicism). Furthermore, according to both thinkers, everything is alive (vitalism), dynamic, and continuously progressing.⁶¹

⁵⁷ Kook, *Ma’amarei*, 16, translated by Ben Shlomo, *Poetry of Being*, 92; see also SH”K vol. 1, 404. Kook often uses the expression שׂף הַחַיִּים as in the following passages: SH”K vol. 2, 16, 59; SH”K vol. 6, 1, 72, 188; SH”K vol. 8, 46. IG”R vol. 1, 283; IG”R vol. 2, 377, 456.

⁵⁸ CE, 15–16.

⁵⁹ SH”K vol. 1, 460 (my italics), translated in Ish-Shalom, *Between Rationalism*, 80. See also SH”K vol. 4, 97.

⁶⁰ It is undeniable that the concepts of divine, cosmic will, and Ein Sof are kabbalistic concepts, and Kook’s philosophy clearly takes inspiration from them. I nevertheless argue that the specific interpretation we might give to these concepts in Kook’s philosophy can be enriched through the lens of Bergson’s *élan vital*.

⁶¹ CE, 9–10; SH”K vol. 3, 95, translated by Ben Shlomo, *Poetry of Being*, 133.

■ Voluntarism

Kook's philosophy is also voluntaristic, and it is possible to understand the source of this voluntaristic conception in the context of Bergson's voluntaristic approach.⁶² Here, as before, interpreting Kook's concept of divine will in terms of Bergson's *élan vital* will help us clarify his meaning.

We have seen above that, in a Bergsonian reading of Kook's philosophy, the will of God permeates everything that exists and is completely free. Therefore, everything in the world—which is a revelation of the will of God and is permeated by this will—has a spark of this freedom. There are numerous passages in which Kook develops this idea of an original free life force from which everything else evolves. For instance, he describes the process of development of different species as a *free* process of ramification from the single alive original principle, as “something cut off from the greatness of totality”: “The slumbering of life of the inanimate is the beginning of the lightning which shines within the vegetative world, splits up into tens of thousands of specialized and different lines, and these come unto the temple of life and there they already sparkle joyfully, go on, and ascend until the heights of the crown of the world's creatures, man.”⁶³

Bergson's *élan vital*, which likewise permeates every aspect of existence, is also a free and dynamic force that diverges and particularizes itself into different species as it encounters matter. This *élan vital* is the foundation of the free and living force in every being. There is no predetermined direction to this evolution into species for Bergson: “Once more, there is no universal biological law which applies precisely and automatically to every living thing. There are only *directions* in which life throws out species in general. Each particular species, in the very act by which it is constituted, affirms its independence, follows its caprice.”⁶⁴

In the view of both Kook and Bergson, not only are all aspects of existence alive, dynamic, and progressing, but they also have freedom of choice. As a result of this interpretation, it is possible to understand what Kook means when he argues that “each creature has, in accordance with its ability, *a part in the choice*, and that is the basis for its betterment in the future.”⁶⁵ Permeated by a spark of the Bergsonian *élan vital*, each creature is free to some extent to choose. This choice is of course not a conscious one; Bergson explains that it is expressed in the inanimate and animate realms in the gradual crystallization of the world into different material forms and species in their free process of evolution. This is what Kook means when he writes about the “hidden choice”: “The hidden choice is what acts on all those

⁶² According to this conception, a free “will” permeates all that exists. I reflect below on whether we can consider Bergson's and Kook's views of freedom as truly voluntaristic. In both thinkers, there appears to be an internal contradiction between those of their writings that assert the complete freedom of existence and their “necessitarian” argument that freedom is equal to a return to the self.

⁶³ SH”K vol. 3, 23, translated by Ben Shlomo, *Poetry of Being*, 137.

⁶⁴ CE, 16 (my italics).

⁶⁵ IG”R vol. 1, 90, translated in Ben Shlomo, *Poetry of Being*, 64 (my italics).

creatures in whom open choice does not reveal its power. It prevails most at the differentiation of stages, whether physical or spiritual, and even at the specification of kinds and species that are far from the circle of life, where, too, the Divine justice must run its course.”⁶⁶

For both Bergson and Kook, it is the original source of creation—the *élan vital* or divine will—that endows everything that exists with dynamism, self-power, movement, change, and freedom.⁶⁷ As a result of these assumptions, both authors make an unexpected connection between creativity, freedom, and a return to the self, putting into question the voluntaristic characterization of their conception of freedom.

■ Freedom and the Self

An important characteristic of *Lebensphilosophie* is the idea of self-affirmation and self-enhancement: the return to our deep, authentic self and transcending it.⁶⁸ Interestingly, the same idea can also be found in Kook’s thought; to him, freedom is associated with a return to the true self and with self-empowerment.

Bergson similarly associates the freedom of the individual with a return to the self.⁶⁹ Moreover, freedom is, for Bergson, equal to self-transcendence. We are free when the *élan vital* pushes us beyond our internal limitations. Freedom is the result of an effort.⁷⁰ This is the effort of the *élan vital* to overcome the opposing movement of matter.⁷¹ Matter is created by life (the *élan vital*) so that life can overcome itself. Bergson writes: “This effort [of the *élan vital*] was impossible without matter. By

⁶⁶ IG”R vol. 1, 283, translated in Ben Shlomo, *Poetry of Being*, 64.

⁶⁷ See SH”K vol. 8, 160; SH”K vol. 3, 47.

⁶⁸ For a review of the place of self-affirmation in *Lebensphilosophie*, see Schnädelbach, *Philosophy in Germany*, 145; Hotam, *Modern Gnosis*, 1–11.

⁶⁹ TFW, 172.

⁷⁰ For a discussion on freedom and *élan vital* as effort, see Messay Kebede, *Bergson’s Philosophy of Self-Overcoming Thinking without Negativity or Time as Striving* (Gewerbstrasse: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019) 87–124.

⁷¹ The fact that matter encounters life would seem to suggest that Bergson holds a dualistic view of reality. This may appear to contradict my previous explanation of the *élan vital* as a single monistic and original principle. Many scholars have analyzed this apparent contradiction in Bergson’s philosophy, among them Gilles Deleuze, *Bergsonism* (trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam; New York: Zone Books, 1991) 73–115; Arnaud François, “Ce que Bergson entend par ‘monisme.’ Bergson et Haeckel,” in *Lire Bergson* (ed. Frédéric Worms and Camille Riquier; Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2013) 121–38; Messay Kebede, “Beyond Dualism and Monism: Bergson’s Slanted Being,” *Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy* 24 (2016) 106–30. Jankélévitch offers a satisfying interpretation of this question for the sake of this article and argues that Bergson’s is “a *monism* of substance, a *dualism* of tendency”; see Jankélévitch, *Henri Bergson*, 109–50, at 144 (italics in original). I endorse Jankélévitch’s understanding and argue that the *élan vital* and matter are two tendencies of the same original monistic principle. Freedom is therefore equal to self-surpassing, and the *élan vital*, in order to be free, needs to overcome the material aspects contained in itself.

the resistance matter offers and by the docility with which we endow it, [it] is at one and the same time obstacle, instrument, and stimulus.”⁷²

Therefore, to the French philosopher, even though the *élan vital* permeates everything in the world, still moments of freedom in human life are rare. The encounter of the original unbounded principle—the *élan vital*—with matter results in necessity: the *élan vital* solidifies into a frozen and non-fluid form. Matter thus slows the progress of the *élan vital* and represents the necessary aspect of our world. In the same manner, habit, mechanical routine, spiritual inhibition, and every passivity of the spirit are those aspects of human behavior that are similar to matter and which prevent the free and unbounded flow of the *élan vital*. As Keith Ansell-Pearson puts it: “freedom involves breaking with the habits and conventions that govern the life of the social ego or what Bergson calls our superficial self.”⁷³

Human beings, says Bergson, are thus not free by definition, and a free act is a rare act, just as a free self is a rare self. This is because most of our lives we live as automats; we act as a result of habits and social conventions and out of inertia. We live “outside ourselves, hardly perceiving anything of ourselves but our own ghost, a colorless shadow.”⁷⁴ On the other hand, to be free, Bergson claims, we need to come into contact with our deep self and to descend below the spatial and superficial perception of the self; to go beyond our automatic performance of habits; to overcome matter and reconnect to our original divine source, the *élan vital*; to act out of our true and deep inner self and to let life surpass the material aspect within itself.⁷⁵

Moreover, according to Bergson, freedom admits degrees. The more we are connected to our own self, the more our decisions merge with our whole personality, and the more we are free. Not every individual experiences freedom in life: “many live this kind of life and die without having known true freedom.”⁷⁶ A conception of freedom that admits degrees is possible only if we consider freedom in terms of effort. Freedom is not something binary, as in classical liberal conceptions, where we either are or are not free; rather, it is a result of the effort undertaken by the life force to overcome its opposite material tendency. Freedom is the original and creative act that emerges from the *élan vital* overcoming its own material essence.

As Messay Kebede has pointed out: “This identification of freedom with self-creation does not exactly square with the view of the defenders of free will. The prevailing approach among them associates freedom with the ability to choose between alternative courses of action.” But, for Bergson, this classical conception is merely another form of determinism, since “choice posits preexisting possibilities and turns freedom into an oscillation, usually called deliberation, between given

⁷² Henri Bergson, “Life and Consciousness,” in *Mind-Energy: Lectures and Essays* (trans. H. Wildon Carr; New York: Holt, 1920) 29.

⁷³ Ansell-Pearson, *Beyond the Human*, 55.

⁷⁴ TFW, 231.

⁷⁵ TFW, 231–32.

⁷⁶ TFW, 166.

possibilities.”⁷⁷ This means that “choice never really happens, because the alternatives are never really given as such in advance. They are fictions, invented after the fact, in order to tell a story that has a beginning, a middle, and an end.”⁷⁸

It has been argued, however, that a conception of freedom like Bergson’s is in fact close to determinism.⁷⁹ That is, if freedom is an act that comes out of our true self, and the true self is not of our making, then this gives the same act “the feature of necessity, specifically of an act that could not have been otherwise.”⁸⁰ According to Kebede, though, Bergson’s conception cannot be considered deterministic since the return to the self is a result of “a sustained effort of the will; it is not an automatic occurrence pursuant to some overriding causal power.”⁸¹ Moreover, Kebede concludes, there cannot be compulsion in an act that comes from our deep self. Rather, he explains, “constraint appears when our mental life is divided into distinct states and one state is supposed to prevail over all the others.”⁸²

The reading of Kook through Bergson’s lens sheds light on the connection between Kook’s understanding of freedom as originating in the divine and his desire to enhance the self—a connection that might be unclear or be missed without taking Bergson’s ideas into account. Moreover, through this reading, it is possible to propose a solution to the contradiction that emerges in Kook’s writings between freedom, which he argues permeates the world, and necessity—a contradiction that transpires from his description of freedom as having different degrees and as being the result of a return to the self. This is possible if we understand Kook’s conception of freedom, as in the case of Bergson, in terms of effort and creation.

Kook, like Bergson, underlines the importance and recognizes the difficulty of acting out of our true and inner self, beyond the influence of society:⁸³ “what one soul receives from the influence of another, . . . harms the soul as well by *mixing an alien element in its essence*, and the world can become complete only through the negation of foreign influence.”⁸⁴

Kook further agrees with Bergson that not everybody and everything in the world is free in the same manner and that freedom admits degrees—both among different creatures and among different human beings. He writes: “from the beginning of creation, from its lowest to highest stage, natures increasingly differentiate from one another in the quality of their own freedom, which is their freedom of will. . . . In the human realm, that same quality of freedom is much wider, yet still incomplete.”⁸⁵

⁷⁷ Kebede, *Bergson’s Philosophy*, 76.

⁷⁸ Suzanne Guerlac, *Thinking in Time: An Introduction to Henri Bergson* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006) 83.

⁷⁹ See Frédéric Worms, *Bergson ou les deux sens de la vie* (Paris: Quadrige/PUF, 2004) 75–78.

⁸⁰ Kebede, *Bergson’s Philosophy*, 78.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ Kook relates to this topic more abstractly in the passage on *igulim* and *yosher* quoted above.

⁸⁴ SH”K vol. 2, 174, translated in Ish-Shalom, *Between Rationalism*, 107 (italics in translation).

⁸⁵ SH”K vol. 5, 100, translated in Ish-Shalom, *Between Rationalism*, 106.

In line with Bergson's approach, freedom for Kook is not a choice between alternatives, as in classical liberal views of freedom, but rather the result of an effort of the divine will. This divine will is continuously moving and progressing toward the overcoming of the necessitarian aspect within itself. "Every existing thing, since it has a certain aspect of limitation, also has a degree of necessity, and that is its evil aspect. [The thing's] progress depends on its freedom, on its cutting loose from the chains of necessity to liberty."⁸⁶ As a result, the world has not yet arrived at a level of complete freedom: "true freedom has not yet come into the world; the world is not yet delivered from its chains of servitude."⁸⁷

Regarding human beings, Kook distinguishes between freedom and slavery, which again recalls Bergson's ideas. He argues that not all human beings achieve the same level of freedom, and some individuals are still enslaved:

The difference between the slave and the free man is not only one of status, that is, that the first is enslaved to another, whereas the second is not enslaved. . . . The freedom to be unique is that same elevated spirit which uplifts man, and the entire people, to be *true to his inner self*, to the spiritual quality of God's image within him, and in such a quality he can consider his life worthy and purposeful.⁸⁸

To Kook, freedom is thus an inner quality of a connection to our inner self. Self-enhancement is, as Ish-Shalom puts it, a "condition of freedom or, more precisely, is tantamount to freedom and existence themselves."⁸⁹ Only if we act out of our true and deep inner self and only through self-affirmation are we free. In contrast, the "spirit of slavery" is represented by the lack of correspondence between the content of our own life and the internal self and by the following of social habits and social norms.

If this is the case, though, isn't the identification of freedom with a return to the self equal to a necessitarian conception of freedom, as it has been argued in the case of Bergson? I believe the same answer we have given for Bergson is valid for Kook: there cannot be necessity when we act out of our deep inner self. This is because there cannot be compulsion when we act in conformity with our true nature. Moreover, freedom is the result of effort; it is something that we achieve voluntarily and does not come out of necessity. Yet, as I show in the next section, some challenges to Kook's and Bergson's conception of freedom remain.

■ A Return to the Self is a Return to God

As I have shown, the connection to the deep self—the "I"—is an essential component of Kook's thought and is applied at all levels. The individual, the nation, but also the natural entities, such as the earth, should be connected to their deep inner self:

⁸⁶ SH"K vol. 5, 170, translated in Ben Shlomo, *Poetry of Being*, 54.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ Kook, *Ma'amarei*, 159 (my italics).

⁸⁹ Ish-Shlomo, *Between Rationalism*, 108.

We have sinned as our fathers have, the sin of Adam, the first Man, who was *estranged from his essence*, who heeded the snake and *lost himself*, could offer no clear answer to the question, “Where art thou?” because he did not know his own mind, because he had lost his true *I-ness* by his sin of bowing down to an alien god. Israel sinned—it went whoring after strange gods, deserted its own essence; . . . The Land sinned, denied her *selfhood*. . . . And thus the world *sinks ever deeper in loss of self*, of each and every individual and of the whole.⁹⁰

. . . That valor and might *is not external to us; it is our own breath, the Lord our God and David our King whom we shall seek*, we stand in awe before the Lord and before His goodness. *We shall seek our “I,” ourselves, and we shall find us*. Cast off all alien gods, remove every stranger and *mamzer*.⁹¹

Ish-Shalom has suggested that, with the expression “we shall seek the Lord our God and David our King . . . we shall seek our ‘I,’ ourselves,” Kook asserts that the return to ourselves and the reconnection to our deep self is identical to the return to God, to the original source, the divine will that created life.⁹² The desire for closeness to God and the desire to return to the self go hand in hand.⁹³

It thus appears that human beings, to attain true freedom, need to reconnect to their deep self. Both Bergson and Kook agree that, through a connection to our true self and therefore through a free act, we reconnect to what is for Kook the “spiritual quality of God’s image” and to Bergson the real essence of the *élan vital*, the original divine principle. Therefore, they both make a connection between a return to the self, freedom, and a return to God.

We have seen that Kook argues that the divine will permeates every aspect of existence. In this sense, God’s will endows with life everything that exists. But the awareness that everything that exists is alive can be attained only through a deep understanding of the self and through acting freely. This is because the self is part of this eternal flow of God’s will, and, therefore, by reconnecting with ourselves we reconnect with God himself:

Contemplate in amazement Creation in its divine animation, not as some dark form, brought to you from afar, but rather know the reality in which you live. *Know yourself, your world, know the meditations of your heart, and of every thinker*. Find the source of life within you, beyond you, around you, find the glory and splendor of the life in which you live.⁹⁴

For both Bergson and Kook freedom is thus associated with the connection to our true self, and connection with our inner self means connecting with God. We are free only when, through a connection to our deep self, we reconnect and rebound to the original source of life—the divine will or *élan vital*.

⁹⁰ SH”K vol. 3, 24, translated in Ish-Shalom, *Between Rationalism*, 108 (italics in translation).

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 108–9 (italics in translation).

⁹² Ish-Shalom, *Between Rationalism*, 109.

⁹³ See Kook, *Ma’amarei*, 33, translated in Ish-Shalom, *Between Rationalism*, 109.

⁹⁴ SH”K vol. 1, 181, translated in Ish-Shalom, *Between Rationalism*, 116 (my italics).

This connection made by Kook between God and the return to the self, however, challenges his conception of freedom because, in contrast to Bergson, he does not see God as an abstract concept devoid of any quality besides the one of overriding progress.⁹⁵ Rather, God is the Jewish God and the connection to him has many ethical and practical implications. In this sense, it is unclear how much freedom remains to the individual once they have reconnected to their own self and therefore to God. Clearly, this connection in a Jewish context must imply that one necessarily becomes righteous and fully obedient to God's laws.⁹⁶

■ Freedom and Creativity

Both Bergson and Kook associate the idea of creativity with the idea of freedom. The central role of creativity is, in fact, characteristic not only of their philosophy but of *Lebensphilosophie* in general.⁹⁷ Other classical and liberal thinkers also made the connection between freedom and creativity,⁹⁸ but Bergson was the only one who linked the four elements of freedom, creativity, the self, and a spiritual source. Consequently, his model fits Kook's and sheds light on its challenging and unclear aspects.

As I have shown above, Bergson's discussion of freedom goes beyond the classical liberal understanding of choice between preexisting alternatives and is a discussion in the realm of time, duration, and self-creation. I have argued that the same can be said about Kook. His reflection on freedom cannot be understood in terms of liberal classical debates on the topic. Those who try to do so fail to understand Kook's view and underestimate the centrality of the creative act in his works. Moreover, the failure to understand Kook's conception in terms of a Bergsonian durational view of freedom radicalizes the contradiction between freedom and necessity in Kook's thought—a contradiction that is significantly eased if we approach his teaching from the perspective of Bergson's view of freedom.

For both Bergson and Kook, freedom *is* a creative act. Bergson argues that freedom is the "creation of self by self,"⁹⁹ while Kook states that the "free soul is actually the creative one."¹⁰⁰ Ish Shalom has been the first to make the connection

⁹⁵ It is unclear whether this is the case in Bergson, considering his description of the unbounded love felt in the mystical experience in TSMR, 209–66.

⁹⁶ I believe this contradiction is not solved in Kook's thought, but, owing to space limits, I cannot explore this topic at length. For further reading regarding the place of contradictions in Kook's thought, consider Ish-Shalom, *Between Rationalism*, 31–77; Ross, "The Cognitive Value of Religious Truth Statements," 41–85; Benjamin Ish-Shalom, "Tolerance and Its Theoretical Basis in the Teaching of Rabbi Kook," *Daat* 20 (1988) 151–68 (Hebrew); David Shatz, *Jewish Thought in Dialogue: Essays on Thinkers, Theologies and Moral Theories* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2010) 101; Avinoam Rosenak, *The Prophetic Halakhah: Rabbi A. I. H. Kook's Philosophy of the Halakhah* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2007) 39–115 (Hebrew).

⁹⁷ Midgley, "After Materialism," 161–85.

⁹⁸ John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003) 121–31.

⁹⁹ CE, 7.

¹⁰⁰ SH"K vol. 4, 85.

between freedom and creativity in Kook's thought, but he does not explain the reason for this connection. He summarizes Kook's approach as follows: "man, by definition, is free. His freedom lies in his humanity. This freedom must be expressed in original thought, for original thought alone reflects the personality."¹⁰¹ In order to discover their inherent freedom, then, human beings need to reconnect to their inner self; in addition, to express their freedom, individuals need to be creative. But why does that make them free?

We can explain the connection between freedom and creativity drawn by Kook through an analysis of what is a creative act for Bergson. Freedom does not mean for Bergson simply to become who you are and to return to your true self, as I have presented above. Bergson is a philosopher who believes in dynamism, and to him there is no such thing as a static self to which we reconnect. Rather, we use the given aspects of our life to recreate ourselves incessantly. He writes: "artisans of our life, even artists when we so desire, we work continually, with the material furnished us by the past and present, by heredity and opportunity, to mold a figure unique, new, original, as unforeseeable as the form given by the sculptor to the clay."¹⁰² Therefore, the return to the self is a return which is simultaneously self-creation.

Thus, there is no freedom without self-creation. Invention, creation, and creativity are the deepest expression of our true self and, in this sense, creative acts are free acts. When we act out of our true self, we are *always* creative, as we are acting in a way that could not be predicted and is completely original. To sum up, for Bergson, being creative means being one's true self. Our inner self is the place where we reconnect to the original principle, to the divine will of life. Therefore, when we act creatively, we are acting out of the stream of God's will, merging with him. In the creative act, we do not only connect to our deep self but also completely merge with the original source, the *élan vital*, whose main essence is creation.

Kook likewise argues that the expression of our inner soul and absolute freedom can be found in what he calls "original thought," that is, in creativity and originality. Nevertheless, the connection between freedom and creativity is expressed vaguely. Kook writes: "the intrinsic inwardness of the soul, thinking, living a true spiritual life, must have absolute inner freedom. Her freedom is *her life*, gained through *her original thought* that is her inward glimmer, enkindled and burning by study and reflection, but this essential spark is the basic element of idea and thought."¹⁰³

By applying our reading of Bergson, it is possible to propose an interpretation of the above paragraph and of many others in Kook's writings. It seems that, for

¹⁰¹ Ish-Shalom, *Between Rationalism*, 102.

¹⁰² Henri Bergson, "The Possible and the Real," in *The Creative Mind: An Introduction to Metaphysics* (trans. Mabelle L. Andison; Mineola, NY: Dover, 1968) 73–87, at 75. Bergson's conception of freedom as self-overpassing is close to Nietzsche's. For a study on the similarities between these two views, see Arnaud François, *Bergson, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2008) 127. This study strengthens my thesis that Kook should be considered in the larger context of *Lebensphilosophie*.

¹⁰³ SH"K vol. 3, 34, translated in Ish-Shalom, *Between Rationalism*, 102.

Kook, only by acting out of “original thought,” that is, out of creativity, can we truly connect to our deep self and personality and to the inner spark of God and therefore of freedom that is found deep inside ourselves. In other words, the act of creativity and originality *is* an act of connection to the true self and therefore of complete freedom. “The free soul is a creative soul,”¹⁰⁴ Kook writes, and its creativity cannot be limited.¹⁰⁵ Creativity and the creative act should be free and unaffected by external influence, because only then will they originate from the deep essence of our true self.¹⁰⁶ When we have a new idea or a creative thought, according to Kook, this idea is an expression of a deep connection to our inner self and thereby to the original source of life—God. The encounter with the original source, and therefore the act of creation, is only possible if our spirit is free. Hence, original thought is a kind of thought that is connected to the deep essence of life, to the *origins* of life, and in this sense is new and creative.

Creativity, then, is not an *expression of freedom*, but rather, *creativity is freedom*, since only when we are truly free, truly connected to our deep self, only then can we act creatively, reconnect to the free and unlimited divine will of life, and really be free. Likewise, only by acting creatively do we reconnect to our true selves and enact our freedom. Freedom is a continuous act of creation. The creative act, therefore, assumes in Kook’s thought a central role and becomes a fundamental aspect of religious life.

While, according to Ish-Shalom, will and thought—or free will and creativity—are two expressions of freedom,¹⁰⁷ through my reading of Bergson I add another layer to his interpretation. Moments of creativity are not only expressions of freedom but are, rather, moments of reconnection with the original principle of the “divine will” and are identified with freedom itself. Acting creatively means reconnecting with the will of God and revealing it in the world.¹⁰⁸ Human souls must, therefore, “wander far and wide,”¹⁰⁹ says Kook.

Consequently, throughout his works, Kook champions the creative act. He argues that, since the creative act is embedded in God’s flow, we must not stop its blossoming and we should ever enhance it. He frequently highlights the importance of not being confined to the strict and often limiting study of Jewish texts, which

¹⁰⁴ SH”K vol. 4, 85, translated in Ish-Shalom, *Between Rationalism*, 107.

¹⁰⁵ SH”K vol. 4, 72.

¹⁰⁶ SH”K vol. 3, 338, translated in Ish-Shalom, *Between Rationalism*, 122.

¹⁰⁷ Ish-Shalom argues that in Kook the tension between will (mysticism, freedom) and thought (rationalism) is preserved, even in his discussion of freedom. Ish-Shalom identifies “original thought” with rational thought and freedom with will and argues that freedom can be expressed—according to Kook—in terms of these two opposing principles. I believe Ish-Shalom is wrong in this interpretation because, for Kook, original thought is not equivalent to rational thought. Original thought is a thought from which all that exists *originates*. In this sense, it is new and creative—it is a thought mediated and enhanced by its connection to the original will of existence and it cannot, in my opinion, be identified with rational thought (see Ish-Shalom, *Between Rationalism*, 102).

¹⁰⁸ See IG”R vol. 2, 41–42, translated in Ish-Shalom, *Between Rationalism*, 103.

¹⁰⁹ SH”K vol. 1, 184.

constricts the creative soul.¹¹⁰ Just like freedom, creativity needs to be beyond influences: “the free spiritual creative work does not consider any outside influence. It creates according to its internal strain.”¹¹¹

■ Conclusion

I hope to have shown that it is possible to understand Kook’s views on freedom, creativity, the self, and God in terms of the conceptual framework of the *Lebensphilosophie* of Bergson. Both thinkers agree that at the essence and origin of life there is freedom (*élan vital* or divine will). Consequently, freedom permeates all aspects of reality, including inanimate objects, animate beings, and life expressions such as philosophy and works of art. There are, at the same time, varying degrees of freedom, and complete freedom is rare. To be free, human beings must act out of their true self and avoid the influence of society and habits that represent the necessity in our world.¹¹² It is through this connection to the self that we also reconnect with the divine will, which is the source of life. Finally, creativity and creative acts are human beings’ freest acts, as they emerge out of a deep connection with our self and thereby with God. Through the creative act, God and God’s freedom are revealed, and freedom, which is the essence of life, is finally attained.

¹¹⁰ SH”K vol. 7, 190.

¹¹¹ SH”K vol. 1, 608.

¹¹² SH”K vol. 3, 339.