
What Was Positive Metaphysics?

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Résumé

In a 1901 lecture at the Société française de philosophie, Bergson characterized "la métaphysique positive" as a philosophy that was "susceptible d'un progrès indéfini, parce que la détermination de plus en plus précise du rapport de la conscience à ses conditions matérielles, en nous montrant avec une exactitude croissante sur quels points, dans quelles directions, par quelles nécessités notre pensée est limitée, nous guiderait dans l'effort tout particulier que nous avons à faire pour nous affranchir de cette limitation." Far from having been a uniquely Bergsonian project, endeavors to connect spirit and matter were widespread and set in motion a new positivism in fin-de-siècle France. Édouard Le Roy called it, "spiritualist positivism;" for Félix Ravaisson it was, "spiritualist realism or positivism;" Baptiste Jacob described it as "neo-materialism."

I argue that this philosophical movement had a coherent ensemble of commitments that took shape across four contexts:

- 1) The longstanding spiritualist tradition in French philosophy
 - 2) Neurophysiology, particularly clinical psychology and cerebral localization
 - 3) The critique of neo-Kantianism
 - 4) Elite institutions of the French Third Republic, including the 1900 Universal Exposition, scientific societies, and the *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*
- By examining the intellectual and institutional contexts that sustained positive metaphysics, we can better appreciate the broader configurations of philosophy, science, and spirit in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

Mots-Clés: Bergson, Third Republic, Neurology, Modern France, Intellectual History, Spiritualism

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