Consciousness Unbound: Bridging Science, Metaphysics, and the Continuity of Being

Rhonda Reliford

California Institute of Integral Studies

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Abstract

This paper explores the nature of consciousness as a dynamic and trans-personal phenomenon, bridging the physical and metaphysical dimensions. Engaging Henri Bergson's philosophy—particularly his concepts of durée (duration), memory, and the brain as a filter—this study examines how subjective experiences such as near-death experiences (NDEs) and past-life memories challenge materialist paradigms and suggest that consciousness extends beyond physical embodiment. Drawing from contemporary research in neurophenomenology, trans-personal psychology, and cognitive science, this analysis highlights the limitations of reductionist models that confine consciousness to brain activity. The empirical rigor of Bruce Greyson's NDE Scale, Ian Stevenson's reincarnation studies, and Pim van Lommel's longitudinal research on post-resuscitation transformations provide compelling evidence that consciousness persists independently of neural mechanisms. These findings align with Bergson's assertion that memory and perception are not merely emergent properties of the brain but fundamental attributes of consciousness itself. This paper argues for an integrative epistemology that harmonizes subjective experience with scientific inquiry, challenging conventional distinctions between objective and phenomenological knowledge. By reconsidering consciousness as an evolving force rather than a static function of the brain, this work invites a paradigm shift—one that embraces both metaphysical and empirical frameworks in understanding human experience. This study contributes to the ongoing discourse on consciousness studies, positioning Bergson's metaphysical insights as a vital bridge between philosophy, science, and subjective inquiry.

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Introduction: Consciousness Beyond the Brain — Bergson Revisited

Twentieth-century French philosopher Henri Bergson proposed a radical view of consciousness that challenged the materialist assumptions of his time: the brain, he argued, does not generate consciousness—it filters it. In his framework, consciousness is not reducible to neural processes but is instead a continuous, creative force. Psychological phenomena such as memory, perception, emotion, and thought are expressions of this deeper metaphysical reality—one that animates rather than arises from the body. This paper argues that Bergson's philosophy of duration offers a radical metaphysical framework in which consciousness is not generated by the brain but emerges

as a vital, continuous movement of becoming—primary, irreducible, and capable of extending beyond the boundaries of the personal self. Far from being outdated, his ideas align remarkably with contemporary empirical research into near-death experiences NDEs[1] and children's past-life memories.[2] These phenomena challenge dominate physicalist paradigms by suggesting that consciousness persists beyond bodily death and that memory can function independently of brain.

Drawing from Bergson's concept of *durée* (duration), his distinction between pure and habitual memory, and his theory of the brain as a filtering mechanism, I will demonstrate how his philosophical insights resonate with and illuminate findings from NDE and past-life memory studies. These cases offer rich, experiential data that suggest psychological phenomena are not reducible to neural substrates but instead point toward consciousness as an ontologically prior force, one that shapes and animates embodied life rather than emerging from it. To build this argument, I begin by tracing the historical movement away from metaphysical traditions toward the rise of modern materialism, examining how ancient dualities and early philosophical frameworks were gradually eclipsed by empirical and mechanistic worldviews.

This historical backdrop reveals not only what was lost in this shift but also what is at state in reclaiming metaphysical inquiry. I then situate Bergson within this intellectual landscape, highlighting why his views on consciousness were both radical in their time and increasingly significant in contemporary debates. From there, I explore his theories of duration, memory, and the brain as a filter, followed by an analysis of empirical studies on NDEs and past-life memories. These phenomena point toward a model of consciousness that is continuous,

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[1] NDEs, or near-death experiences, are commonly reported as vivid, often life-altering events occurring during states of clinical death or unconsciousness. They frequently involve phenomena such as out-of-body perception, encounters with beings or light, altered time perception, and a profound sense of heightened awareness. Although their mechanisms remain debated, a growing body of research—especially from Bruce Greyson, Pim van Lommel, and Sam Parnia—suggests that these experiences may offer evidence for the continuity of consciousness beyond brain-based functioning. For foundational research in this field, see: Greyson 1983, 1998, 2003, 2014; van Lommel 2001; Parnia 2000, 2001, 2006.

[2] Past-life memories refer to instances where individuals—particularly children—recall events, identities, or relationships from lifetimes that precede their current one. These cases often involve verifiable details that the individual could not have learned through ordinary means. See: Stevenson 1997; Tucker 2005, 2013.

transpersonal, and emotionally intelligent, capable of operating beyond the limits of physical embodiment. By weaving together Bergson's metaphysical insights and empirical research, this paper calls for a reimagining of consciousness that bridges subjective experience with scientific inquiry. Rather than a by product of brain activity, consciousness emerges as a dynamic force that persists beyond the body, inviting a more integrative, evolving view of mind, memory, and identity—one that restores depth, mystery, and meaning to our understanding of being.

How Metaphysics Was Lost to Materialism: A Historical Grounding

While Bergson's work revitalized metaphysical inquiry in the early 20th century, he was writing in a world increasingly shaped by materialist frameworks that had marginalized metaphysical explanations. To fully grasp the stakes of his philosophy—and its current relevance—it's important to trace the historical movement away from ancient metaphysical traditions toward the dominance of physicalism. In doing so, we also gain perspective on the broader tension between empirical science and the metaphysical worldviews that once defined human inquiry.

Historical Dualities and Ancient Perspectives

Throughout history, the concept of duality has pervaded human understanding, offering a framework for distinguishing between physical and metaphysical. This distinction shaped ancient philosophical inquiries and persists in contemporary debates, such as the modern mind-body problem, which interrogates the relationship between consciousness and physical processes. Within empirical frameworks, physical reality is typically defined as that which is measurable, quantifiable, and in principle observable—either directly through the senses or indirectly through instruments. By contrast, metaphysics concerns itself with the foundational principles that underlie or transcend physical existence, addressing questions of causality, being, and the nature of consciousness.

Ancient civilizations expressed this duality through various traditions, including the ka and ba of Egyptian spirituality, symbolizing the interaction between physical and spiritual existence; the Atman in Hindu philosophy, representing the eternal self that underlies all reality; and Plato's theory of forms, which proposed a realm of perfect, immutable ideals beyond physical manifestation. These ideas regarded the metaphysical as inseparable from physical reality, tangible, essential, and integral to the nature of existence—even if imperceptible to the senses. Their understanding of metaphysical reality emerged through introspection, intuition, spiritual experience, and philosophical reasoning—modes of knowing that offered insight into truths not accessible through the senses alone.

The term *metaphysical* stems from the Greek words *meta*, meaning "beyond" or "after," and *physika*, which pertains to "the physical" or "natural" world. Andronicus of Rhodes, renowned for his meticulous editing and commentary on Aristotle's works, famously coined the term. He used it to describe a collection of Aristotle's writings that followed his treatises on physics—texts exploring the nature of existence, causality, and the ultimate realities that transcend sensory experience. The enduring appeal of metaphysical inquiry, as reflected in Aristotle's works, highlights humanity's persistent quest to understand realities beyond the physical. These foundational questions about existence and causality resonate through time, evolving into the philosophical debates we encounter today. This shift—from integrated metaphysical worldviews to empirical paradigms—would gain momentum in the centuries that followed, ultimately culminating in the dominance of modern materialism.

The Eclipse of Metaphysics and Rise of Materialism

To understand how consciousness came to be tethered so tightly to the physical brain, we must begin with a few of the philosophical giants who helped reshape the Western intellectual landscape. Each contributed in their own way to a gradual but decisive marginalization of metaphysics—a movement that still echoes in today's scientific frameworks. While often celebrated as visionaries of reason and progress, many of these figures also played a role in narrowing the boundaries of what could be known, and how. Francis Bacon, often regarded as the father of modern science, did more than refine a method, he redefined our relationship to the natural world.[3] Knowledge, once a contemplative pursuit of higher truths or divine order, became something else under Bacon's influence: a tool for prediction, control, and even domination. His emphasis on inductive reasoning and the systematic dissection of nature set the stage for a kind of inquiry that abandoned metaphysical wonder—a kind of wonder that once framed existence as sacred, interconnected, and alive with meaning—in favor of mechanistic certainty. This wasn't merely a methodological pivot, it was a transformation of purpose.

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[3] Francis Bacon, *Novum Organum*, ed. Lisa Jardine and Michael Silverthorne (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); see also Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980), 164–172; Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 31–38.

Then came Galileo Galilei, whose distinction between primary and secondary qualities introduced a subtle yet profound fracture in how we interpret reality. Measurable attributes—mass, motion, shape—were elevated as objectively "real," while sensory experiences like color, taste, and sound were demoted to subjective illusions. It was a brilliant move in terms of physics, but a quiet blow to the status of human perception itself. In his universe, the senses—our first bridge to the world—were no longer trustworthy guides to truth.

And yet, tucked inside his 1623 work *Il Saggiatore* (1623), Galileo reveals a fleeting acknowledgement—one that might have surprised even him: *"I think that tastes, odors, colors, and so on reside in consciousness. Hence if the living creature were removed, all these qualities would be annihilated."* While he demoted these secondary qualities to mere byproducts of perception, his concession that they reside in consciousness inadvertently acknowledged consciousness as a precondition for experience. Galileo may have brushed up against a deeper insight he could not fully articulate: that perception, emotion, and qualitative experience may not simply arise from the body but emerge from or reside in consciousness itself.

Though he lacked the metaphysical framework or empirical evidence to explore this further, his distinction left open a question that would echo across centuries: what is the nature of that consciousness in which all experience unfolds? The assumption that consciousness ends with bodily death has long shaped this divide. But as we will later see, emerging research into near-death experiences and past-life memories suggests that this assumption may no longer hold.

René Descartes preserved the metaphysical status of consciousness, but at a cost. His dualism cleaved the human experience into two distinct substances: *res cogitans* (the thinking mind) and *res extensa* (extended matter). While he affirmed the existence of a thinking self, he inadvertently handed the material world over to mechanistic science, and created a mind-body split that has haunted Western philosophy ever since, and with it, a lingering sense that mind and world no longer spoke the same language. That very division—the tension between inner life and observable matter—would become the battleground for centuries of inquiry.

John Locke advanced a more empirical and mechanistic view of mind. He imagined the mind as a *tabula rasa*; a blank slate shaped entirely by sensory experience. In this view, even our inner world became externalized—reduced to impressions and reflections produced by the senses —mechanizing even our most intimate mental landscapes. This shift placed consciousness firmly within the domain of physical observation, severing it from any framework that extended beyond the observable, material world. And yet, Locke's theory of personal identity offers a

subtle but significant insight. He argued that what makes a person the same over time is not the continuity of substance, but the continuity of consciousness—specifically, the memory of having experienced something directly. For Locke, to remember an experience is to be the same person who lived it. In fact, he even entertains the notion of reincarnation as a philosophical thought experiment, suggesting that if the same consciousness—with memory—could persist across different embodiments, then personal identity could, in principle, extend beyond a single lifetime. While he ultimately stops short of endorsing this view, his framework raises a provocative possibility: if a child recalls memories from a previous life, then by Locke's own criteria, it must be the same consciousness—suggesting that consciousness, not the body, is the thread that persists.[4] We will return to this idea later, when exploring near-death experiences and past-life memories as empirical challenges to materialist views of identity.

Locke's memory-based theory of identity—while rooted in empiricism—revealed just how deeply psychological continuity could shape our understanding of the self. And yet, despite these insights, the broader philosophical climate continued to drift away from metaphysical grounding. By this point, the scaffolding that once upheld consciousness as something enduring and primary had been weakened from multiple sides—first fractured by dualism, then hollowed out by rationalism, and increasingly displaced by empirical reduction. What remained was a world rendered intelligible only through material mechanisms. But intelligibility is not the same as understanding—and certainly not the same as meaning.

By the 19th and 20th centuries, the transformation was almost complete. The mechanistic worldview had become dominant, and consciousness was no longer framed as a mystery to be contemplated, but as a function to be explained. The tide had turned. Consciousness was now a scientific puzzle, not a philosophical mystery. This shift reached its most symbolic expression in the early 20th century, when Henri Bergson—arguably the last great metaphysician of that era—publicly debated Albert Einstein. Chronicled in *The Physicist and the Philosopher*, this debate highlighted the growing authority of physics over philosophy in defining reality. Einstein, whose theory of relativity reconceived time as a fourth dimension of spacetime, dismissed Bergson's concept of *durée*—a qualitative, lived experience of time—as scientifically irrelevant. His now-infamous retort, "the time of the philosophers is over,"

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[4] John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), II.xxvii.9–10.

was more than a personal rebuke. It signaled a cultural and intellectual shift: the metaphysical dimension of consciousness, particularly its relationship to time, was being written out of the scientific worldview.

And yet, even as the metaphysical dimension of consciousness was being written out of the scientific worldview, it did not disappear. In Henri Bergson, we find not a relic of outdated thinking, but a visionary who offered one of the most compelling alternatives to reductionist models of mind. Writing in a period increasingly dominated by materialist science, Bergson advanced a philosophy of consciousness that was continuous, creative, and irreducible to physical processes. His work provides a vital foundation for rethinking consciousness as a dynamic and enduring force—one whose resonance continues into contemporary empirical research.

Bergson's Philosophy of Consciousness

Setting the Philosophical Groundwork

To understand how modern empirical research on near-death experiences and past-life memories supports the view of consciousness as independent from the brain, we must first turn to the philosophical framework that renders such a claim coherent. Bergson's philosophy of consciousness—rooted in the notions of *duration*, memory, and the brain's function as a filter—offers a compelling metaphysical model that directly challenges materialist and reductionist assumptions. His work, particularly as articulated in his early *Lectures on Psychology* (1892-1893) and later texts such as *Matter and Memory* (1896) and *Mind-Energy (*1920*)*, provides the conceptual foundation for reimagining consciousness as an enduring, dynamic force rather than a byproduct of neural activity.

In his *Lectures on Psychology*, Bergson examined the foundational elements of inner life—consciousness, memory, and duration—laying the groundwork for a model of mind grounded in lived experience and temporal flow. Central to this view is the notion that psychological facts, including perceptions, sensations, inclinations, tendencies, thoughts, emotions, and memories, are not reducible to bodily mechanisms or spatial structures. Instead, they emerge as living expressions of consciousness, unfolding within the continuous, qualitative flow of duration (*la durée*). *Duration* lies at the heart of Bergson's metaphysics. Unlike clock time, which is abstract and divisible, duration is time as it is lived—fluid, heterogeneous, and irreducible to discrete units. It captures the inner flow of consciousness, a self-generating movement where past and present interweave in an unbroken rhythm. Within this stream, psychological facts are not static events but processes in motion, continually changing and enriching themselves. Duration allows us to understand consciousness not as a fixed entity, but as a fluid, evolving process—one that resists

reduction to static mechanisms and instead reflects the richness of lived experience. It is within this temporal unfolding that Bergson situates the dynamic interplay between memory and perception, both of which arise from—and contribute to—the vitality of inner life. Bergson sees this ongoing flow as the very ground of psychic life: the medium through which psychological facts emerge.

Through his *Lectures on Psychology*, Bergson begins to construct a dual-aspect model in which the body functions as a center of action—a tool for navigating and responding to the external world—while consciousness serves as the locus of perception and memory, encompassing the full range of psychological life. Perception, in this framework, is not a passive reception of sensory data, but an active process shaped by the organism's practical needs, filtering experience according to what is useful for action and survival, thus participating in the evolution of consciousness itself. Bergson draws a critical philosophical distinction here: psychological facts—such as sensations, inclinations, feelings, and passions—belong to consciousness, not to the body. While bodily mechanisms may trigger sensations (such as through the sense organs), sensation itself is, for Bergson, a lived, conscious phenomenon. Inclinations or tendencies are expressions of will or desire, rooted in the dynamic continuity of consciousness, yet often directed toward physical expression. While not caused by the body, they are lived psychologically and may orient or prepare the body for action. Feelings and emotions are likewise irreducible to physical causes; they are qualitative, inner experiences that unfold within duration, though they may be accompanied by physiological expressions. Passions, too, are not mechanical outputs but affective movements of the self, revealing the dynamic intensity and inner richness of psychic life.

This distinction between bodily mechanism and psychological life leads directly into *Matter and Memory*, where Bergson deepens his argument: the brain does not produce consciousness—it filters it. This conceptual shift grounds his metaphysical claim that consciousness and duration are primary realities, and that mechanism, though indispensable for coordinated actions, are subordinate to the inner unfolding of lived experience.

The Brain as Constraint

In *Matter and Memory*, Bergson advances a radical departure from materialist theories of mind: the brain does not originate consciousness but acts as a mediator between pure consciousness and bodily action. Consciousness, in its undivided flow, far exceeds the immediate needs of the organism. The brain's function, then, is not to produce representations, but to regulate and channel perception toward utility—selecting from the continuous field of experience only what serves the body's capacity to act and orienting attention toward the demands of the external

world. This foundational insight is later echoed in *Mind-Energy: Lectures and Essays*, where Bergson describes the brain as an *organ of choice*—a filtering mechanism that constrains the full spectrum of consciousness to what is necessary for survival. He likens it to a dam, holding back the flood of consciousness and allowing only a trickle to pass through. While the metaphor shifts, the principle remains the same: the brain does not generate consciousness but restricts it to function.

As experience flows through the brain's filtering mechanism—narrowed to what is useful for action—it does not simply vanish after serving its pragmatic role. Instead, it enters the field of consciousness, where it may be apprehended through different modes of knowing. Here, Bergson introduces a vital distinction: while analysis responds to the filtered fragments of experience, applying symbolic structures and conceptual boundaries for utility and comparison, intuition arises from the deeper strata of consciousness itself. It is through intuition that we return to the wholeness beneath fragmentation, accessing the felt, qualitative continuity that analysis can only represent in static terms.

This dynamic becomes clearer when we look more closely at how Bergson describes the movement from intuition to analysis in the formation of thought. According to him, thoughts or concepts arise first through intuition and then become tangible through analysis. Analysis dissects and immobilizes—it fragments experience into parts for comparison and utility. Intuition, by contrast, operates within mobility—within duration itself—grasping the whole as it flows. Bergson’s elevation of intuition as a method of direct apprehension offers a radically different model of knowing—one that engages the indivisible flow of subjective time and consciousness. It is not a shortcut to knowledge, but a deeper form of participation in the inner movement of life. In this light, intuition is not merely a cognitive tool—it is a mode of consciousness that aligns with the rhythm of lived time. It accesses the qualitative, the ineffable, the irreducible. In contrast to intellectual abstraction, intuition perceives the continuity and nuance of lived experience. It allows us to apprehend consciousness not as a neural process, but as a becoming.

Having now traced the philosophical groundwork through duration, intuition, psychological facts, and the brain’s limiting role, we begin to see consciousness not as a passive register of experience, but as a fluid, self-organizing field shaped by affective resonance and temporal depth. These elements are not auxiliary to consciousness; they are its very substance. Psychological facts—emotions, perceptions, tendencies, inclinations—emerge as primary expressions of this ongoing flow. To visualize this dynamic process and its relevance to memory, identity, and transpersonal access, we now turn to Bergson’s memory cone: a conceptual diagram that renders the fluidity of

duration into a layered structure of consciousness, revealing how the past persists and informs the present in ways both ordinary and extraordinary.

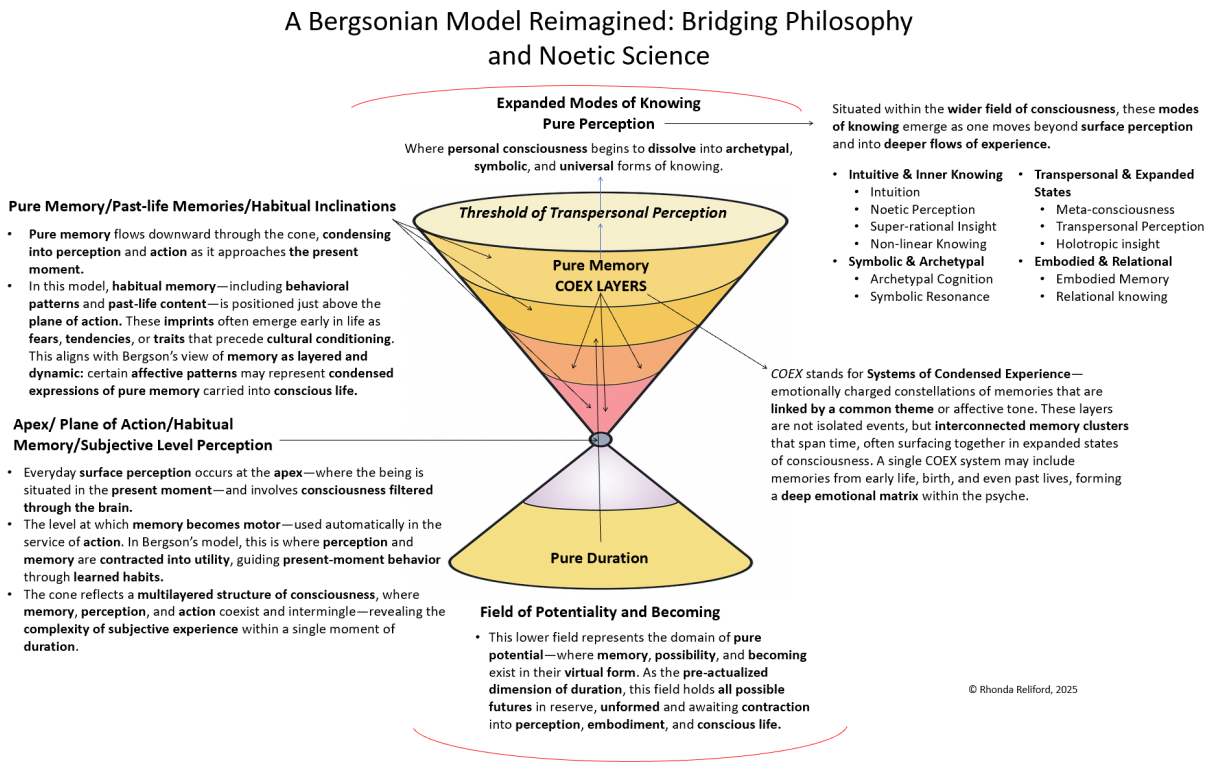
Memory, Perception, and the Cone

When considering near-death experiences, past-life memories, or other transpersonal phenomena, a compelling line of inquiry concerns how memory is held or organized within consciousness, beyond the confines of brain-based storage. Drawing from Bergson's metaphysical framework and supported by empirical insights from transpersonal psychology, this view treats memory not as a static neural imprint, but as a dynamic, non-local expression of consciousness. This understanding is vividly illustrated in *Matter and Memory*, where Bergson introduces the memory cone as both a conceptual model representing the relationship between memory, perception, and action, situated within the continuity of duration.

According to Bergson's cone theory, the apex of the cone represents the present moment, where our consciousness resides within the immediate physical reality. It is here that past experiences converge with current perceptions, shaping our comprehension of reality. Moving away from the Apex, we encounter memories of recent events. These memories are more easily accessible and influence our current thoughts and actions. The farther one moves from the apex of the cone, the more distant these memories are—less readily accessible to our conscious awareness, yet still active within the deeper strata of consciousness, where they continue to exert influence over our overarching perspective, behavior, and broader contours of identity. These distant experiences encompass a spectrum of recollections accumulated throughout one's current lifetime, reaching back through adolescence, infancy, the birth experience, in utero memory, and even into the transcendent realms, including experiences suggestive of past lives. The cone thus offers a metaphysical architecture of consciousness in which time, memory, and perception are interwoven in a dynamic field.

Figure 1. *A Bergsonian Model Reimagined.* This visualization expands Bergson's memory cone by integrating insights from transpersonal psychology and noetic science. It depicts consciousness as layered, affective, and temporally dynamic, incorporating COEX systems, transpersonal perception, and future potentiality. Informed by data from NDEs, past-life recall, and holotropic states, the model affirms the epistemic legitimacy of expanded states of consciousness as real and integral to the broader field of experience.

Image by Rhonda Reliford. Concept based on Henri Bergson's Matter and Memory (1896/1990)



This model illustrates how consciousness navigates the relationship between past and present, drawing on memory to inform perception and support meaningful action. Beyond this functional role, Bergson's model also illuminates the deeper dynamics of memory—specifically the distinction between habit memory and pure memory, offering insight into how different layers of remembering shape perception, identity, and the evolving sense of self.

Habit memory refers to the type of memory associated with routine actions, skills, and learned behaviors. It involves recollecting past experiences ingrained through repetition and practice, becoming almost automatic or habitual. Bergson suggests that habit memory is closely tied to the body and its movements, as it operates within the realm of practical, everyday activity—what he refers to as the plane of action. In contrast, *pure memory* transcends the confines of habitual action and routine behavior. It is a dynamic preservation of past experience that exists beyond immediate utility, retaining the qualitative texture of how it was subjectively lived. Pure memory encompasses deeper, more profound layers of memory, such as emotions, sensations, and impressions that may not be consciously linked to the present moment but remain embedded in the fabric of consciousness. Pure memory does not follow a linear sequence. Instead, it unfolds through a non-chronological structure, marked by the sudden and often unanticipated emergence of impressions from the past. These recollections are frequently catalyzed by sensory stimuli or moments

of deep contemplation—threshold moments charged with emotional intensity that serve as keys, unlocking memory across time.

This active, creative interplay between memory and present perception not only reveals the fluid and layered nature of consciousness but also aligns with contemporary explorations of *qualia*—the ineffable, subjective qualities that define our lived experience. For Bergson, pure memory plays a pivotal role in the formation of identity and the continuous evolution of consciousness, operating as a vast reservoir of lived experience, that informs our sense of self in ways that may be subtle yet enduring. Though often inaccessible in ordinary states of awareness, these deeper memory layers contribute to an ongoing inner narrative, shaping the emotional and intuitive dimensions of identity. When viewed through the lens of transpersonal psychology, this continuity takes on even greater significance. Pure memory begins to resemble more than a psychological function—it becomes a portal into expanded states of consciousness, where layers of personal and even transpersonal experience converge in the architecture of the self.

Emotion and Duration: The Convergence of Bergson's Memory Cone and Grof's COEX System

Contemporary research into transpersonal states, particularly the work of psychiatrist Stanislav Grof, offers compelling empirical resonance with Bergson's model of consciousness, which conceives memory as a stratified field, the brain as a filtering organ, and duration as the fundamental medium of psychological life. In exploring expanded states of consciousness, Grof discovered that emotionally charged memories are not stored as isolated, fragmented imprints, but are instead organized into what he termed COEX systems (systems of condensed experience). Both Bergson's memory cone and Grof's COEX systems illuminate the layered structure of memory within consciousness.

For Bergson, memory persists within duration as a qualitative field, where past experiences may re-emerge through sensory cues, emotional resonance, or moments of deep reflection and inner stillness. Grof similarly observed that in expanded states of consciousness, specific sounds, smells, images, or somatic sensations can activate emotionally charged memory constellations. These COEX systems, linked by symbolic themes and shared affect, surface nonlinearly and often with intense emotional clarity. When accessed in holotropic or expanded states of consciousness, the vivid recall of these emotionally charged memories can initiate profound therapeutic release—dissolving unconscious patterns, integrating repressed material, and restoring a sense of inner coherence. Though developed in different contexts, both models present memory as a dynamic, affectively charged process, that responds to the internal and external conditions of resonance.

Grof's research extends this understanding by confirming that COEX constellations span multiple layers of experience, from early childhood and biographical trauma to perinatal experiences and transpersonal domains, including past-life recall. Each system is unified by a dominate emotional theme, such as guilt, abandonment, fear, or ecstatic love, linking disparate events across time into a single affective thread. Much like Bergson's memory cone, Grof's model shows that memory is not merely accessed through logical association but is triggered through affective resonance and symbolic patterning. What surfaces in holotropic states is not a linear recollection but a vivid, embodied immersion into the emotional and somatic essence of a theme—one that can transcend time, the personal psyche, and even the boundaries of a single lifetime. This layered, emotionally organized structure of memory not only echoes Bergson's notion of pure memory but also provides a therapeutic map for the healing potential embedded in our deepest emotional imprints.

When viewed through this lens, the memory cone traces the arc of consciousness itself, from the familiar terrain of daily life to the boundaryless realms accessed in expanded states. Together, Bergson's metaphysical insights, Grof's COEX system, and contemporary transpersonal research provide a compelling foundation for understanding the continuity of consciousness beyond bodily constraints. What follows builds directly on these insights, exploring how near-death experiences and past-life memories reflect and reinforce the metaphysical continuity Bergson envisioned—a consciousness that endures, evolves, and transcends physical embodiment.

Evidence of Conscious Continuity: Near-Death and Past-Life Phenomena

Near-Death Experiences as Thresholds of Expanded Consciousness

The developments in resuscitation science and consciousness studies have brought remarkable near-death experiences (NDEs) into the spotlight[5], challenging traditional views of perception and reality. As these

[5] The earliest known medical documentation of an NDE dates to 1740, when French military physician Pierre-Jean du Monchaux described a patient's vision of a bright light during a near-death event in *Anecdotes de Médecine*. In 1892, Swiss geologist Albert Heim formally categorized NDEs as a distinct phenomenon, laying the groundwork for academic inquiry. The term "near-death experience" itself was popularized by Raymond Moody in 1975, ushering in a modern era of research. These profound experiences, frequently reported by individuals near death or resuscitated, offer unique insights into consciousness and human perception. Scholarly interest in NDEs has surged, with an analysis of articles from 1885

experiences have gained scholarly attention, a growing body of data reveals just how widespread and consistent they are across populations. Empirical studies have revealed striking statistics regarding the prevalence and reliability of NDEs. According to the Near-Death Experience Research Foundation, a 1992 Gallup Poll[6] estimated that 13 million Americans had experienced an NDE. In 1992, the population in the United States was approximately 260 million, which led to an estimated NDE prevalence of 5%. Research suggests that 12% to 18% of cardiac arrest survivors report NDEs. The AWARE (AWAreness during REsuscitation) study, which examined 2,060 cardiac arrest events, revealed that 9% of survivors reported experiences meeting NDE criteria. As of October 2024, the International Association of Near-Death Studies estimates that 5% of the world's population has had an NDE, and 10–20% of people who survive a close brush with death report such an experience.[7]

To ground this discussion in empirical research, I reference Bruce Greyson's Near-Death Experience Scale[8]—a 16-item scale used to evaluate the depth and content of NDEs across cognitive, affective, paranormal, and transcendental dimensions. Importantly, longitudinal studies, such as Greyson's, reveal no statistically

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to 2011 identifying 470 publications on the topic—a trend that accelerated after 2000. Philippe Charlier, "Oldest Medical Description of a Near-Death Experience (NDE), France, 18th Century," *Resuscitation* 85, no. 9 (September 2014): e155, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.resuscitation.2014.05.039.

[6] Near-Death Experience Research Foundation, "Estimated Number of Near-Death Experiences in the U.S.," updated 2024, https://nderf.org/NDERF/Research/number_nde_usa.htm.

[7] Janice Miner Holden and Bruce Greyson, *Fact Sheet: Near-Death Experience*, October 2024, https://iands.org/education/fact-sheet-near-death-experience-nde/.

[8] A major milestone in the systematic study of near-death experiences (NDEs) came in 1983 with Bruce Greyson's development of the 16-item Near-Death Experience Scale. Categorized into cognitive, affective, paranormal, and transcendental dimensions, the scale provides a structured framework to assess the depth and intensity of NDEs. Each item is scored from 0 to 2 (with a total maximum score of 32), and a cumulative score of 7 or higher qualifies an experience as an NDE. Research indicates that experiencers often score between 15 and 19, reflecting the presence of multiple, strongly represented dimensions. The Greyson Scale remains a cornerstone in NDE research, offering a reliable method for identifying and analyzing these transformative phenomena. See: Bruce Greyson, "The Near-Death Experience Scale: Construction, Reliability, and Validity," *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease* 171, no. 6 (1983): 369–75.

significant differences in NDE Scale scores over two decades, underscoring the reliability of these accounts over time. These experiences often include vivid perceptions of leaving the body, moving through tunnels of light, encountering deceased loved ones or benevolent beings, and experiencing a profound sense of peace or life review. In some of the most compelling cases, individuals report veridical perceptions—accurately describing events, conversations, or medical procedures occurring in the operating room or nearby locations while they were clinically deceased. These accounts have been independently verified by medical personnel, adding empirical weight to claims that consciousness can persist beyond the body. They compel us to reconsider whether consciousness is truly generated by the brain—or merely filtered through it.

Analysis of the qualitative dimensions of NDEs, reveals a complex interplay between empirical observations and phenomenological insights. These experiences challenge traditional scientific boundaries and compel us to engage questions that exceed the reach of brain-based explanations. Juxtaposing Greyson's NDE Scale with Bergson's philosophical framework, these empirical accounts bring his theory to life—revealing consciousness as a layered phenomenon that transcends physical embodiment. Greyson's categories, particularly their cognitive and affective dimensions, highlight the intricacy of human consciousness, as evidenced by accelerated thought processes, vivid panoramic life reviews, and encounters with universal or existential truths. These elements echo Bergson's understanding of memory and consciousness as a dynamic, creative force that extends beyond the constraints of linear time and bodily mechanisms.

At the heart of these phenomena lies the pivotal role of emotion, which serves as a primary lens through which consciousness is experienced and understood. In his longitudinal studies, Pim van Lommel, a cardiologist and a prominent researcher in near-death experiences, conducted interviews two and eight years apart following cardiac arrest. These studies revealed significant changes in cardiac survivors who reported experiencing an NDE. Patients frequently reported transformative effects, including reduced fear of death, greater life satisfaction, and a sense of interconnectedness, which not only facilitated their recovery process but also enabled profound healing and psychological transformation. Notably, the longer the interval between the near-death experience and interview, the more positive changes were reported. Many individuals described feeling more compassionate, more attuned to non-material values, and more present to the mystery of life. These emotional and existential shifts point to a reorientation of consciousness itself—one that seems to deepen over time.

Van Lommel found that cardiac arrest patients who did not report an NDE often demonstrated a more

limited capacity for psychological and emotional healing compared to those who did. Without the transformative insights associated with NDEs, these patients appeared to face greater challenges in achieving emotional adjustment and resilience following cardiac arrest. This contrast suggests that during an NDE, the brain's filtering mechanism, as described by Bergson, may temporarily relax, allowing access to a more expansive field of consciousness. This unfiltered experience provides insights and perceptions that catalyze profound inner change and recovery, fostering psychological growth and resilience. Van Lommel's findings underscore the unique role of such experiences in bridging the physical and metaphysical realms of consciousness, further validating the transformative potential of bypassing the brain's filtering constraints.

Far from being secondary to cognitive processes, affective states such as awe, unconditional love, and tranquility imbue these events with transformative significance. According to Bergson, psychological facts—emotions, inclinations, sensations, and tendencies—are not derivative of cognition, but fundamental expressions of consciousness itself. These affective states arise within the flow of *duration*, where thought and feeling are not separate categories but interwoven layers of experience. In this light, the emotional intensity of NDEs is not incidental, it is central to the expression of consciousness freed from bodily constraint. The profound emotions reported during NDEs disrupt empirical expectations about states of unconsciousness and clinical death, suggesting that consciousness not only persists beyond the physical body but may function at its highest level when freed from neural constraints. This is precisely why subjective experience must be recognized as a legitimate and indispensable form of knowledge. While some argue that consciousness during clinical death cannot reflect an elevated or authentic state of being, firsthand accounts often tell a different story—marked by heightened clarity, emotional depth, and meaningful insight. The dynamic interplay between cognition and emotion in these reports reveals a continuity of consciousness that defies reduction to physical mechanisms alone.

As the narrative expands into paranormal and transcendental dimensions, NDEs further challenge conventional paradigms. Out-of-body experiences (OBEs), heightened sensory awareness, and perceptions of new realms suggest that consciousness operates within a broader metaphysical ecosystem—a network that connects individual experiences to a universal continuum. Many experiencers describe entering luminous, non-ordinary landscapes; encountering non-human intelligence; receiving ineffable knowledge; or feeling merged with a source beyond time and space. These reports frequently defy the boundaries of personal identity, linear time, and spatial orientation, suggesting an ontological expansion of self that aligns with transcendental

awareness. Bergson's emphasis on creative evolution and interconnectedness is reflected in these accounts, framing NDEs as experiences that transcend physical limitations while revealing the profound unity of existence.

If near-death experiences offer a glimpse into consciousness when freed from the brain's filtering constraints, then past-life memories may represent another expression of consciousness's continuity—emerging not at the boundary of death, but in the early stages of life, before cognitive frameworks are fully formed. Both phenomena invite us to consider that consciousness may not originate in the body but temporarily localizes within it—filtering through it at birth and releasing from it at death. These accounts invite us to consider memory not merely as personal recall, but as access to a deeper, transpersonal reservoir.

Childhood Memories of Previous Lives: Continuity at the Threshold of Birth

As early as 1961, Dr. Ian Stevenson began traveling extensively throughout Asia and the Middle East, meticulously documenting cases of children who reported detailed recollections of previous lives. His case studies—most often involving children between the ages of two and six—revealed strikingly vivid memories frequently charged with intense emotion and tied to events, locations, and individuals with whom the child had no plausible prior contact. Through this body of research, striking patterns began to surface—uncanny correspondences between reported past-life memories and tangible physical markers, such as birthmarks or other bodily anomalies that aligned with injuries or wounds sustained by the previous personality. Stevenson's findings indicate that birthmarks and somatic imprints may serve as physical traces of emotional trauma experienced at the moment of death—encoded during heightened emotional intensity and carried into the next life. These imprints suggest that consciousness may not only survive death but also impress itself across lifetimes in ways we have yet to fully comprehend. In this light, the body becomes a canvas for the soul's memory, underscoring the profound interconnectedness of physical form and inner life: what happens to the body, in essence, happens to the soul.

These foundational investigations laid the groundwork for Stevenson's pioneering contributions and directly influenced the establishment of the Division of Perceptual Studies (DOPS) at the University of Virginia, where such phenomena could be examined through systematic, interdisciplinary research. As Stevenson's successor, Jim Tucker—former Director of DOPS—has extended this legacy by focusing on cases of past-life memory in children. His work exemplifies the integration of empirical rigor and metaphysical inquiry, challenging the materialist paradigm that confines memory and consciousness to the brain. By documenting detailed recollections and verifying their

accuracy, researchers at DOPS demonstrates that these memories often reflect experiences that cannot be accounted for within the child's current life.

Over the last 50 years, researchers at the DOPS have collected more than 2,500 cases of the reincarnation type, the majority of which originated outside the United States. Numerous books and articles have emerged from this work, including Dr. Stevenson's monumental two-volume *Reincarnation and Biology*, which presents 225 detailed case studies and spans over 2,000 pages. Drawing on medical records, autopsies, eyewitness accounts, and interviews with family members, Stevenson meticulously correlated children's reported memories with verifiable historical events—often accompanied by physical traits, such as birthmarks or congenital anomalies, that matched injuries from a previous life.

For most cases, detailed field notes have been coded across more than 200 variables and stored in DOPS's expansive database, enabling researchers to conduct cross-case analyses and identify recurring patterns. One of the most striking patterns, first discussed above, is that approximately 30% of cases involve birthmarks or birth defects corresponding to wounds sustained by the previous personality. Stevenson ultimately conceptualized somatic imprints as a third category of memory: one that transcends the mental and becomes embedded in the biological fabric of the new life, often linked to emotionally intense or traumatic experiences surrounding death. These findings further substantiate a view of consciousness as continuous, transpersonal, and capable of expressing itself through both psychological and somatic channels.

Similar to the affective disturbances reported in Van Lommel's longitudinal studies of cardiac arrest patients —where individuals often experienced shifts in personality, perception, or behavior after near-death episodes—research in past-life memory cases indicates that children may exhibit distinct behavioral anomalies before their memories surface consciously. These behaviors often appear unprompted and emotionally intense, such as extreme phobias tied to water, fire, or weapons; reenactments of death scenes through play; or persistent identification with names, languages, or geographic regions to which the child has never been exposed.

Over time, these behavioral anomalies are frequently followed by intense, vivid recollections tied to the life and death of the previous personality. These recollections suggest that fragments of memory, initially constrained or filtered by the brain to protect the child's current psychological development, surface when conditions become emotionally or developmentally appropriate. In some cases, the emotional and psychological intensity of the prior experience appears so great that it bypasses the brain's typical filtering mechanisms—not

immediately as conscious memory, but as embodied tendencies that shape how the child navigates the world. These fragments, too potent to remain fully repressed, manifest in phobias, compulsions, or other affective responses that precede memory itself. Significantly, once these memories are brought into conscious awareness and integrated into the child's sense of self, the associated phobias, compulsions, or emotional disturbances often subside. This pattern reinforces the view that the brain serves a dual function: both as a filter that regulates overwhelming information and as a facilitator of healing, allowing repressed or residual experiences to emerge, be processed, and ultimately resolved.

The intense memories and emotions experienced by individuals recalling a past life align with Bergson's idea of pure memory, affirming his assertion that memory operates independently of physical embodiment. Together, these findings point to a model of consciousness that transcends the physical body, retaining access to a repository of past, present, and future experiences. Furthermore, these experiences embody Grof's concept of the COEX System—dynamic networks of emotionally charged memories—highlighting their connection to emotional frequencies. This dynamic supports a model in which emotions and memory are not secondary functions of the brain, but primary expressions of consciousness—aligning with Bergson's metaphysical framework and Grof's COEX systems as layered manifestations of conscious experience.

While many of these behaviors are emotionally charged or disruptive, others appear entirely benign—yet equally puzzling. Some children, before recalling any past-life memories, exhibit habits or preferences that are striking in their specificity: mimicking the act of smoking or drinking without ever having been exposed to such behaviors, insisting on prayer rituals from unfamiliar traditions, applying makeup in a culturally specific way, or using language or gestures associated with a distinct region or time period. These actions often mirror habitual patterns later confirmed to have belonged to the previous personality. Though less distressing than phobias or reenactments, such tendencies reveal a different aspect of continuity—one that operates at the level of embodied routine and unconscious familiarity. It is within this subtler realm of behavior that Bergson's theory of habitual memory offers a compelling framework for understanding how such patterns may arise.

Bergson posited that habitual memory operates unconsciously, preserving actions and behaviors learned over time until they become automatic. These tendencies, manifesting seemingly without cause, suggest that habitual behavioral patterns are deeply embedded in consciousness, much like other psychological constructs. This interplay between habitual memory and Bergson's concept of the brain as a filter implies that such tendencies might represent

underlying patterns of consciousness that persist beneath the brain's selective mechanisms. These patterns, shaped by prior experiences or lives, may occasionally press against the constraints of the "dam" that filters consciousness, emerging as seemingly inexplicable behaviors or impulses. Until specific memories surface, their connection to a core experience remains obscured, leaving these behaviors to appear as harmless play or personality quirks—easily dismissed as ordinary aspects of childhood. In this context, what initially seems inexplicable may be better understood as echoes of past-life memories stored in habitual memory, waiting to pass through the filtering mechanism and emerge into conscious awareness as vivid recollections.

In this context, what initially seems inexplicable may be better understood as echoes of past-life memories stored in habitual memory, waiting to pass through the filtering mechanism and emerge into conscious awareness as vivid recollections. These cases challenge us to rethink identity not as a function of physical continuity, but as something rooted in the enduring resonance of memory, affect, and perception. Rather than viewing consciousness as confined to a single life or brain, these findings suggest a deeper continuity—one in which emotional and behavioral patterns persist across time and embodiment. In affirming this view, we are brought face-to-face with a more fundamental question: what if these psychological states—these memories, emotions, and tendencies—are not effects of consciousness, but its essence?

Conclusion: Psychological Facts as the Ground of Consciousness

Taken together, the philosophical and empirical dimensions explored throughout this paper point toward a radical reframing of consciousness—not as a byproduct of physical processes, but as a fundamental force in its own right. Bergson's metaphysical model, enriched by contemporary studies of near-death experiences and past-life memories, allows us to see psychological facts not as secondary outcomes of brain function but as primary attributes of consciousness itself. These affective, perceptual, and mnemonic expressions—once thought to arise from the brain—are better understood as intrinsic to the dynamic, unfolding field of consciousness that temporarily passes through the body, but is not confined by it.

When filtered through Bergson's durée, memory and perception cease to be mere functions and emerge as fluid movements of becoming. When analyzed through the empirical lens of NDEs, COEX systems, and childhood recall, we find corroboration: consciousness persists, remembers, emotes, and knows even when the physical brain is inactive or undeveloped. It is not constrained by time, nor reduced by biology, but shaped by a layered continuity—

affective, intuitive, and deeply intelligent. These findings underscore what Bergson asserted long ago: psychological facts are not artifacts of the body; they are the very architecture of experience.

Even Locke, within the limits of his empiricism, conceded that the continuity of self is grounded in memory, not substance. If a child can recall a life they did not live in this body, and do so with emotional specificity and verifiable detail, then we are forced to reconsider what constitutes identity, and where it truly resides. What emerges is a model of consciousness not limited to neural complexity, but one that endures through time, shaped by the emotional and intuitive imprints that define personal reality.

To acknowledge this is not to dismiss the role of biology—but to refuse its monopoly on meaning. Hormones, brain states, epigenetic markers—all have their place. But they do not explain the depth of love that survives death, the longing that outlives loss, or the inexplicable familiarity a child feels when they walk into a village they've never visited in this life. These are not epiphenomena. They are clues. And they suggest that consciousness is not simply reacting to the world—it is, in some essential way, remembering it.

To call emotions chemical alone is to overlook the soul in favor of its residue. But consciousness, like the soul, is not reducible to residue. It is felt, known, and lived. It weaves time into memory and memory into identity. It speaks through intuition, dreams, synchronicity, and longing. It carries the frequency of affect across lifetimes, embedding meaning not just in neurons, but in the energetic field of being itself.

In this light, the study of consciousness cannot remain tethered solely to brain scans and behavioral models. It must return to the lived, the intuitive, the metaphysical. Not as an abandonment of science, but as its necessary evolution. As thinkers like Francisco Varela, Evan Thompson, and Stanislav Grof have shown, integrating first-person experience into scientific inquiry doesn't weaken objectivity—it completes it.

The implications are both philosophical and deeply human. If psychological states—emotions, tendencies, intuitions, memories—are primary to consciousness, then our inner lives are not mere reflections of outer stimuli. They are ontological truths. They are the ground of being.

And so, this paper does not conclude with certainty, but with conviction: that to understand consciousness, we must treat subjective experience not as a side effect, but as the starting point. We must reclaim the metaphysical without abandoning the empirical. We must listen to the soul as carefully as we study the brain. Only then can we hope to answer the question that has animated this inquiry from the beginning—not merely what consciousness does, but what consciousness is.

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