Overcoming the Divide between Freedom and Nature: Clarisse Coignet on the Metaphysics of Independent Morality

Jeremy Dunham (University of Durham)

ABSTRACT: Clarisse Coignet (1823-1918) played an important role in a number of the most important intellectual movements in nineteenth-century France. She grew up around and documented the leaders of the Fourierist movement, provided the philosophical support for the *La Morale indépendante* (an influential movement that promoted the rebuilding of French society on the basis of free morality, rather than religion), and spent twenty years defending the secularization of education and improving French primary schools. She developed her own theoretical and practical philosophy and applied it in the social world to play her part in the transformation of her country "from more or less an absolute monarchy, into a free republic" (Coignet, 1903: 7). Despite all of this, her work has received very little philosophical attention. This article focuses on the theoretical underpinnings of her practical philosophy, and the importance of her engagement with the French spiritualist tradition for its development.

From 1865-1870, Clarisse Coignet was an integral member of a collective of French intellectuals who defended a version of Kantian ethics founded on the dignity of the free individual. This movement's mouthpiece was *La Morale indépendante*, a weekly magazine. Coignet wrote the largest share of articles and produced the most sophisticated philosophical defence of the movement's core ideas. She developed this defence into a monograph, sharing the same name as the magazine, published in 1869.

In the 1860s, Coignet defended the view that a true independent morality requires that the human subject stand outside of the realm of mechanistic nature. However, in her later 1911 work *De Kant à Bergson,* published when she was in her late eighties, she argues that this dualism can be overcome by means of the new understanding of nature introduced by evolutionary science and the metaphysics of the *new spiritualists*, such as Émile Boutroux and Henri Bergson. In this article, I examine (i) the reasons why Coignet

attempted to bring together her form of Kantian ethics with spiritualist metaphysics, and (ii) the philosophical gains of this reconciliation.[1]

I argue, first, that to understand the motivation for Coignet's about-face regarding the relationship between humans and nature, we should look to her life story. Coignet grew up in close contact with many of the most important utopian socialist followers of Charles Fourier. She attributes her first religious conversion to Fourier's ideas on the harmony of all beings. Nonetheless, as a young adult she converted to non-conformist Protestantism and found its emphasis on human freedom incompatible with such a harmony. Coignet was critical of the early forms of spiritualism that emerged from Victor Cousin's school, and of metaphysics more generally. She claimed that her philosophy came from the perspective of *criticism*, a *phenomenist* method inspired by Kant and Charles Renouvier, the latter being one of the harshest critics of Cousin's school. Nonetheless, I shall show in this paper, even at this period Coignet stood midway between the spiritualists and the critical school. Like the former, but not the latter, she believed that we have a direct intuition of our free activity. But she objected to the further metaphysics of the spiritualists because she believed that it, like Fourierism, led to a determinist pantheism that swallowed up human freedom.

The new spiritualists, however, inspired by developments in the life sciences, developed a theory of nature as open, creative, and evolving. In this theory, I argue, Coignet found the framework necessary to bring together nature and the free human subject, and, consequently, unite the utopian socialist ideals of Fourierism with the focus on individuality in the Protestant religion. But what are the philosophical gains of such a reconciliation? First, it undercuts the dualism of nature and the noumenal self in Kantian ethics, and allows a one-world foundation for her practical philosophy that is compatible with a non-compatibilist theory of freedom. Second, it drew out some of the potential ethical implications of Bergson's work at a time when Bergson himself claimed not to have anything to say about such matters.[2]

The article proceeds as follows. In §1, I present a short biography of Coignet to contextualise her work and intellectual development. In §2, I focus on her critique of Cousin's *old* spiritualism. In §3, I present an exposition of her positive philosophy of

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1 The only philosophical presentation of Coignet's philosophical works in English is a summary of her ethical work *La Morale indépendante*. This is part of a collection of overviews on women in the history of philosophy. See Allen, 1991.

2 In a 1914 *New York Times* article, Louis Levine reports Bergson claiming that a book authored by him on ethics would be "news from nowhere".

independent morality. In §4, I argue that Bergson's new spiritualism provided Coignet with the solution to reconcile the sharp division between nature and mind that she had posited in her works on independent morality. In §5, I argue that Bergsonian metaphysics further presented her with a way to reconcile her protestant religious beliefs with her earlier Fourierist romanticism. Crucially, this new reconciliation allowed her to reap the rewards of a non-dualist metaphysics without having to accept the determinism of traditional pantheisms.

I

Coignet was born in 1823 in La forge de Montagney, France. From a young age, Charles Fourier's utopian socialism played a significant role in Coignet's life and intellectual development.[3] Her aunt Clarisse Vigoureux (1789-1865), under the influence of Coignet family friend Juste Muiron (1787-1881), was the first female disciple of Fourier (CCM I.221). Her living room was a centre for the study of his work and it was there that the Fourierist movement proper was born. Victor Considérant (1808-1893), then aged just sixteen, joined them, and later became the movement's most significant leader.

Fourier's utopian socialism was founded on an extremely broad intellectual system. In addition to interconnected theories of education, ideal society, and the progress of history, he defended a speculative cosmogony (see part one of his *Theory of Four Movements*.). Of all the ideas that undoubtedly had a lasting effect on Coignet's thought (including his socialism, optimism for humanity, respect for work, and his views equality) his cosmogony had the most transformative effect (see OC I.94, and Beecher, 1986: 118). The Catholicism she had been brought up on left her cold, but Fourier's romantic theory of the "joyful unity of all living creatures" (CCM I.240-241) provided her first live connection to religious feeling: "How much more dignified such a conception of an infinitely powerful, just, and good creator seems to me," she writes, "than did the sad sin and incomprehensible damnation, which, after making an entire race responsible for the fault of one person alone, makes us bow down, since the beginning of the world, in humiliation, pain and penance!" (CCM I.241)

Fourier claimed that there is a law of the harmony of all beings and that his task was to be the Newton of the social world. By discovering this law, he could discover the

[3] On Fourier's utopian socialism, see Beecher (1986). On the Fourierist movement, see Alexandrian (1979), Beecher (2001) Coignet (1895), and Louvancour, (1913).

social mechanisms that would allow perfect goodness and harmony to be realized. One of the key problems of contemporary 'civilization', as he saw it, is that restrictive social conventions have led humans to repress their instincts and this obstructs the divine course of nature, causing immense suffering. In sharp contrast to views that regard the moral life as necessarily involving self-sacrifice, Fourier believes that in true social harmony we would be one with nature. This would involve a return to the natural passions and such a universal fulfilment would lead to the growth of goodness in each individual, and to a greater attraction and love between all human beings.

From age sixteen onwards, Coignet would dedicate much time to reading works of romantic literature and keeping up with politics and Fourierist writings. She believed that, "socialism in the economy of societies corresponds to romanticism in literature. Both proclaim the perfect goodness of nature coming out of God's hands, its right to free development, to complete satisfaction" (CCM II.42). At twenty-one, Coignet moved to Paris and arrived in the centre of the Fourierist world at its most vibrant time. However, it was in the thick of this activity that she started to have doubts about the clarity of Fourier's vision. These doubts would be exacerbated a few years later when she moved to Liverpool, England. There she encountered non-conformist Protestantism, which provided her with a very different framework for her religious feelings.

Her encounter with Protestantism laid the ground for her eventual defence of a form of Kantian ethics. As Coignet saw it, although the sixteenth-century Reformation "innovated nothing new in theology", its true novelty was to substitute "the inner and personal experience of belief" for the authority of the church (1911: 67). It was "a protest of individual conscience against the authoritarian government of the Church… a return to the spirit of the Gospel, to freedom, to inner piety" (CCM II 98). She felt that this focus on the conscience of the individual was a radically different way of thinking to those that she had experienced with either Catholicism or Fourierism:

> How far away I feel here from the two doctrines in which my adolescence was cradled! In Catholicism, man remains dependant on the Church, in Fourierism, on society; here [in Protestantism], on the contrary, he is their foundation. Consciousness becomes the source of authority, the cornerstone of the individual and, by means of the individual, the group. Duty, henceforth inseparably linked to right, returns freedom to self-government and self-sacrifice. At the same time, it creates the spirit of initiative and the feeling of solidarity that covers the country

> with philanthropic institutions, and it establishes the government of opinion, which becomes a control for the State. (CCM II 110)

Coignet accepts that the first reformers held on to absolute and immutable dogmas and failed to recognise the true consequences of their doctrine. Nonetheless, the crucial fact is that the reformation was a major historical moment that initiated the release of the "individual and living consciousness" from the dogmatic chains of Catholicism, and was thus the originating moment of moral freedom (1911: 70).

Coignet's Fourierist intellectual background meant that she had been deeply engaged with a variety of philosophical ideas and theories from a young age. However, she began a systematic study of the history of philosophy thanks to her encounter in the autumn of 1858 with Alexandre Massol (1805-1875). Starting from 1860, soon after the birth of Coignet's fourth child, Massol dedicated a great deal of time to teaching her the history of philosophy. Massol was an inspiring teacher. In 1904, she reflected on these years of study as "among the best in my life" (CCM III.251). Massol went through philosophy's history with her chronologically. She found much of interest in Aristotle and Spinoza who both left a lasting impact on her work. However, the new *critical* method for philosophy outlined in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* caused a "complete revolution" in her mind:

> Critique… by wrenching the illusions of transcendence from man, far from weakening him, strengthens and enlightens him. No longer dependent on mysterious and incomprehensible principles, he can freely study his surrounding environment and himself, and two distinct worlds appear to him.
>
> Outside, physical phenomena appear connected in a regular and constant order of causes and effects…
>
> Inside, another perspective appears to him. He feels and conceives himself as free, responsible, and obligated. Although he holds on, by instinct, to the natural order, he overcomes it through the perception of a good and evil foreign to instinct and that carry their sanction in themselves in the joy or pain that follows from their accomplishment. It is the moral life invincibly enclosed in natural life, right enshrined in force, freedom in necessity, voluntary duty in servile submission, so indeed the irresponsible elements form the matter for responsibility. Thus, the

> morality that liberates human personality from universal mechanism endows it with a grandeur and dignity that becomes the principle of right. (CCM III.238-239)

In 1865, Massol invited Coignet to join a school of like-minded thinkers who could be united under the name *La Morale indépendante*. The centre of this movement would be a weekly journal directed at the public dedicated to ethics, religion, politics, and philosophy. Coignet was central to *La Morale indépendante.* As Behrent has noted, she produced the most sophisticated defence of its central philosophy and the greatest share of substantive articles (2006: 425-426). The aim of this journal, as Massol put it, was to highlight the fact of the freedom of the individual, and that the rights and duties of humanity are founded on this freedom (IM I.1-3). While many philosophers have emphasised this fact, the job of the journal was to remove the theory from its purely speculative state and to turn it into "a careful and precise idea" (IM I.2). The 1789 revolution had overthrown the old order but failed to build something satisfactory in its place. The independent moralists aimed to show that the new order must be built on the foundation of the free individual who derives their morality from the fact of their freedom and *not* from the church or state.

II

The journal caused controversy from its inception.[4] Cousin was prominent among the choir of those who denounced it; and he could still lay claim to being the dominant voice in French spiritualist philosophy (despite his popularity being in clear decline). Alfred Fouillée reports Cousin telling him that the theory of independent morality was a "philosophical no less than a religious heresy" and that "it must be crushed" (1887: 57 and 57n1). The first time Coignet would directly attack Cousin's brand of spiritualism, however, would not be until a few months after his death, in a series of articles in *La Morale indépendante* dating from 26th May 1867 to 21st July (IM II.339-340, 354-356, 372-374, 402-404).

Coignet starts by claiming that Cousin was less a philosopher than an actor performing as a philosopher (IM II.339). Although he played this role with outstanding eloquence and flair, such artistic tricks impress only for so long. Consequently, she claims, Cousin "experienced the particular pain" of seeing "the youth he had managed to gather at the feet of the pulpit, docile and thrilled by his every his word, suddenly move away

[4] Mothers were warned "to guard their children against *morale indépendante*" (Stock-Morton, 1988: 71; cf. 72n51).

from it indifferent and deaf, mocking, and aware that they had been previously deceived" (IM II.339).

Coignet's philosophical criticism of Cousin is based on his defence of "Impersonal Reason" (IM II 354-356) and its incompatibility with freedom. Cousin maintained that spontaneous intuition could put us into immediate contact with universal and necessary truths. These truths are just as obvious to the woefully ignorant as they are to a Leibniz (1862: 52-53). He claims that in such an experience of a universal truth, our consciousness is merely witness to the truth and does not in any way play an active role in its formation. Since these truths are universal, necessary, and presented to us without our own personal intervention, Cousin concludes that these "absolute and necessary" truths must have a foundation that is absolute and necessary; "this being", he argues, "which is at the foundation of truth as its very essence, in a word, is called *God*". (1862: 72).

As Coignet and many others have noted[5], Cousin's theory of God as the absolute foundation of Reason, also takes on pantheistic tones. This *impersonal* reason is not just the foundation for truth but also the foundation of the world and all it contains. The troubling consequences of this for the individual and morality in the development of history, Coignet argues, are identified in his *Introduction à l'histoire de la philosophie*. He tells us there that history is "the ultimate expression of divine action" and that it is "because Providence is in humanity and in history, that humanity and history have their necessary laws" (1861: 158). Since these laws are the expression of God's will, we must see the results of wars as God's judgments on humanity (1861: 190–4). In war,

> we must maintain our greatest sympathy for the winner, for every victory brings about progress following it… [T]he winner's party… is always the party of civilization, the loser's party, the party of the past. The great defeated man is a great man displaced in his time. We must therefore applaud his defeat; it was just and useful. (1861: 222)

From this view of God's will, Coignet argues, it follows for Cousin's moral theory that individuals are not ends in themselves, but mere means its satisfaction. Consequently,

[5] See Moreau (2014) and Vermeren (1995). Interestingly, the very young Cousin may have been much closer to Coignet than his published writings suggest. In 1817, Jouffroy wrote that Cousin would not publish his latest course because it "shows too clearly a truth that one cannot yet say, namely that morality is independent of religion" (cited in Ragghianti and Vermeren, 2019).

human beings can have neither real rights nor autonomy. As we shall see in more detail below, to have autonomy, in Coignet's view, is to act on ends that are our own and not the dictates of another, and our rights depend on being recognised as an individual that can act upon such ends.[6]

Coignet is not entirely critical of Cousin. She writes that he "sometimes has strange flashes of insights concerning moral life" (IM II 403). In particular, she praises his insight that we do not recognize our freedom through logical reflection, but through inner experience. In fact, this alignment with Cousin shows that Coignet's philosophical position was not entirely in line with Kant's critical view. Coignet's critical philosophy, even in the 1860s, rests somewhere between the French neo-critical Kantians, on the one side, like Charles Renouvier, who was a semi-regular contributor to *La morale indépendante* and who Coignet herself cites as a major influence (CCM III.320), and the spiritualist philosophers, such as Cousin and Maine de Biran, on the other.[7] Renouvier rejected the claim that we have any such experience of freedom of ourselves as an active cause of our actions. When we think we are experiencing ourselves initiating an action, we are really experiencing simply the muscular sensation corresponding to the action having been effected. Crucially, Renouvier thought that critical philosophy must not go beyond the phenomena of experience, which any postulation of active forces would do (1912: 261). Similarly, for Kant, we cannot know the inner self except through a priori forms of intuition. Coignet, contrary to both, sees a much stricter distinction between the reflection on inner sense and the experience of the external senses. When it comes to the phenomena of external senses, Coignet stresses her allegiance to Kantian criticism, but at the same time she insists that we have a direct intuition of our human freedom. It is a "primitive fact of human nature" (1869: 123). It is revealed to us insofar as we recognise that we have a direct experience of ourselves as the active cause of our actions. Such an experience is particularly clear when we feel the "clash of inner feelings". This clash occurs when passion directs us to act one way, but our understanding of our obligations directs us to act another, yet we choose to act according to duty and thus overcome our passions by means of the activity of our will (1869: 108).

Although Cousin believes that we have a direct intuition of our freedom, Coignet argues that his simultaneous affirmation of an all-powerful God responsible for all of human history stands in a straightforwardly contradictory relationship with it. This is

[6] Coignet's Kantianism is in line with the kind of interpretation of Kant we find in Korsgaard's work. See Korsgaard (1996: 128-131). For a critique of this reading of Kant, see Allison (2011: 209-218).

[7] On Maine de Biran and the experience of activity, see Dunham (2016).

where, she argues, Cousin's "lack of rigour" as a philosopher is most evident. Cousin's freedom is freedom to act in accordance with the pre-ordained external laws of morality defined by God without obstruction. However, for Coignet, this form of freedom is no freedom at all. If freedom is to mean anything for human beings, then it cannot be derived from obligations that God has given us, but rather must be the foundation of these very obligations themselves. She writes that "obligation without primitive freedom would only be the servile obedience of a being without rights. Only freedom makes it noble" (1869: 15). By this she means that mere obedience to God's moral laws would make us mere means to exterior ends and not an end in itself. The problem with Cousin's theory is that although he emphasizes the importance of the *experience* of freedom, he immediately turns his back on that experience to make room for the determinism that follows from his rationalist arguments in defence of an all-powerful pantheistic God. His philosophy presents the affirmation of freedom right alongside its complete denial.

III

Cousin's moral theory represents, for Coignet, the worst combination of traditional religious with metaphysical morality. She rejects both for the same reasons. They suggest that there is an idea of justice existing in a distinct sphere (whether this is God's mind or a Platonic third realm) that is the foundation for ethics and that we can somehow encounter by means of thought or intuition. However, she argues that the critical method (defended by Kant and the independent moralists) shows that we cannot adequately explain our epistemic connection to such truths. The revelations of revealed theology turn out to be the results of our individual feelings and the absolute ideas of natural theology and metaphysics are subjective forms of our understanding (1869: 26). This shows the main point of divergence between Coignet's *critical* morality from most forms of nineteenth-century French *old* spiritualism. Even if the spiritualists rejected revealed theology, most (whether loyal to Cousin or not) tended to emphasise close links between their morality and natural theology.[8] However, even if it were the case that we could acquire knowledge of morality in the ways defined by the religious or metaphysical moralist, such a morality would still be in conflict with true freedom.

[8] Jules Simon publicly abandoned in his earlier views on the connection between theology and ethics and argued for an independent morality of sorts in 1869. See *Le Devoir*, 1869: 20-21

The critical method, Coignet insists, is the "method of doubt and research" that "must destroy everything to renew everything" (1869: 189). Once this method has shown the problems with moral systems that attempt to draw their laws from outside of the human, only the human is left. Consequently, it is on the freedom of the individual that morality must be built. When Coignet unpacks her understanding of freedom, the Kantian tones sound clearly. The freedom she defends is not the freedom to simply follow one's own instincts and pleasures (à la Fourier and the naturalists), nor merely the freedom to follow God's will. In both these cases the agent would be merely a *means* to an *end* that is distinct from them. Coignet, on the contrary, defends the freedom of self-legislation: "it is the freedom that rules itself by virtue of a law that it alone administers and that it alone fulfils" (1869: 6). In Coignet's view, the free agent is free because they are cause and effect of themselves:

> Human morality is not free because it enters into the divine framework of eternal wisdom, because it can unite to God by submitting to the church. One is not free because they can eat when they are hungry and drink when they are thirsty… They are free because, while enclosed in a system of forces and laws that we call nature, they see an end not given to them by nature, they posit this end themselves and realise it. (1869: 57-58)

For an individual to count as free they must be able to produce a determinate representation of how to act in accordance with a law of which they themselves are the legislator—this is the end not given by nature—and this representation must be able to have a causal effect on how they will act. The act of self-willing is a causal power (see Engstrom, 2009: 134). This view is obviously influenced by Kant, but while Kant limits himself to saying this freedom is a necessary presupposition for this form of willing, Coignet insists that we feel the causal power enact itself, and this feeling is itself the proof of freedom.

It is this causal power that elevates the human above nature. Natural beings such as plants and animals progress according to a plan of which they are not the authors. The human being "begins a new order: the order of individual freedom and responsibilities" (1869: 58). Insofar as they recognise themselves as the author of the end of which they strive, which is itself the cause of their actions, rather than being merely caused to act by other external entities of beings, they recognise that they are not merely a *means* to an end,

but an end in themselves. This recognition is the source of the order of responsibilities as well as freedom, because to recognise oneself as a free being is to recognise oneself as possessing "a unique dignity and grandeur" (1869: 58). Since we possess such qualities, we are worthy of respect, and, therefore, have the right to be respected. Freedom, Coignet claims, "by constituting the dignity of the individual implies the respect for this dignity" (1869: 86). However, the recognition of right is simultaneous with the recognition of duty. If one is worthy of respect then one is *obliged* to respect oneself and to respect others who are similarly worthy of the same respect. Respect and obligation go together as a package deal.

Coignet's socialist tendencies are apparent right from the very start of what looks to be her version of Kant's second formulation of the categorical imperative. Since duties and rights are the product of, and not prior to, human freedom, it means that there is a strict equality of rights amongst all beings, irrespective of race, class, gender, or even metaphysical status. There is not a hierarchy where we have duties to a God without obligations towards us. If we had duties without rights, we would be in the position of the slave towards a master. Once we recognise the inseparability of right and duty, we see that all human beings–as free rational beings capable of acting in accordance with their own ends–possess dignity and the right to be respected. This, therefore, is a universal formula, but one that we realise from inner reflection, and whose validity we derive from this reflection alone. Furthermore, it is a formula that extends morality from the individual to society. The job of society, Coignet suggests, is to recognise this law as its foundation, and to attempt to guarantee the possibility that it be followed.

If this socialist interpretation of Kantian morality evidences the continued influence of Fourier, this influence only extends so far. Central to Fourier's romantic vision was the importance of following the instincts and passions of nature. Coignet, on the contrary, argues that such a blind following of the passions would lead the individual away from equality towards excessive dedication to individuals at the expense of others. "Maternal love" can become a "blind and excessive passion" that "will lead the mother to sacrifice to the interest of one the interest of all". The love of a man can lead "a woman to forget her own dignity… to the point of making herself the toy of his whims" (1869: 95). Devotion remains a moral virtue only insofar as the ideal of justice seen by the free individual tempers it. Nonetheless, morality is not antagonistic to nature, but rather should be considered as its regulator:

> It [morality] consecrates the feeling of conservation and all the natural freedoms related to it as the necessary condition for the development of the individual, but, at the same time, it determines its place, it limits its absorbing expansion and selfish invasions. It elevates all feelings by assigning them a nobler end. Married love, maternal love, friendship, kindness, sociability, ambition, patriotism, when enlightened and transformed by morality, become to varying degrees the agents of justice. (IM III 125)

The aim of society is to produce the conditions necessary for *ideal justice*. There are both inequalities of nature (physical strength, beauty, skills, etc...) and circumstance (family, social position, wealth) which allow individuals very different opportunities. These are harms for individuals that a just human should feel obliged to improve. Coignet often emphasises that she regards "the practice of the good" as a "voluntary activity" (1869: 65). This is why. Mere respect is a passive morality, but active morality depends on not just recognising the right, but "in constituting it" and "making it prevail" (1869: 99). The obligation that we should feel once we recognise our right and those of others should motivate us to "level the scales" when faced with the opportunity:

> The more inferior in strength and resources the one that we have been called to help is, the more imperative the command is; and the more we are able to penetrate the extent of their misery, the more obligated we feel ourselves to be. (1869: 101-102)

Insofar as we recognise the rights of others and actively attempt to balance the unequal forces of nature, the more we recognise ourselves as constituting a moral series that is distinct from it. Yet, although this series is distinct, it is necessarily connected. Morality is active, and this activity is the struggle *against* nature's impulses and inequalities. The moral series, thus, interacts with the natural one. It is the attempt to reform our nature so that our dispositions and habits are shaped to follow the good. Although, the struggle to even the scales is a source of virtue, it does not follow that such virtuous activity must always seem like a struggle. The influence of Aristotle on Coignet means that she sees a much more positive role for habit in her moral theory than Kant did. At least on the surface, Kant appears as one of philosophy's harshest critics of ethical habits. For him "all habits are objectionable". (AK 7: 149). Ethical actions are supposed to be those that follow from

the self-produced representation of the law (AK 4: 42), but if habitual actions are those that occur without conscious reflection, then they occur without such a representation. Coignet disagrees. We must form our habits through well considered choices following our duty established via the moral law, but rather than prohibit the passions, she claims that by this procedure they are elevated towards wisdom (1869: 132). Our freedom can transform our nature such that second nature *is* rational nature. Nature itself can become an "agent of justice".

IV

La Morale indépendante came to an abrupt end in 1870 due to the Franco-Prussian war. According to Coignet, this state of national emergency left no room in people's minds for the kinds of speculative studies that formed the core of the journal's considerations. It is perhaps for this reason that the majority of Coignet's writings from this period until her 1911 *De Kant à Bergson* appear to deal with more practical or applied topics, education in particular. But even though these writings deal with topics outside of theoretical philosophy as contemporarily understood, the influence and application of her Kantian inspired independent morality is consistent. Kant's critical turn is key to her series of books on education (see 1874 and 1881) and plays a central role in her 1903 work on the future of the French republic, *Où allons-nous?*, as well as in her 1908 work on the evolution of French Protestantism.

The main shift in *De Kant à Bergson* is that Coignet highlights the incompleteness of the work begun by the independent moralists. The problem as she sees it in 1911 is that it left too much of a stark contrast between the free moral individual, on the one hand, and the necessity of mechanical nature, on the other. The problem is evident in Coignet's stress on morality's role as a "regulator" of nature. If the divide between nature and mind is too wide, it is hard to see how we can account for the interactive role to which she attests. "A Transcendental wind", after all, "cannot drive a real sailing boat" (Dunham, Grant, and Watson, 2011: 133).

Coignet's concern with the early French spiritualists of Cousin's school was that while they professed to make room for freedom, they eliminated its true ground by making the progression of all thing (human actions included) flow from the necessity of the Absolute, or God. She objected to the swallowing up of human freedom, whether it be by mechanical or divine nature. However, in the wake of Cousin's death and as the

implications of the theory of evolution started to make themselves felt, the new generation of spiritualists offered a new dynamic metaphysics that was much more congenial to Coignet's tastes.

Boutroux's 1874 doctoral thesis, published as *De la contingence des lois de la nature*, took the theory of evolution (albeit a decidedly Lamarckian version) and argued that it could be extended beyond the biological domain. Not only do species evolve, so too the more fundamental structures of nature–even nature's laws. At the most fundamental level in nature, there are basic inner powers spontaneously striving (insofar as they are able) toward self-improvement. All beings can gradually improve through their interactions with each other, and higher beings improve generationally through heredity. It is by means of the strivings of such agents that eventually, but contingently, the stable structures in nature that we come to believe to be necessary laws are formed. Laws of nature are not ontologically separate from agents or anything over and above them at all, but rather habitual patterns realised by the individual agents themselves.

The structures of nature that the faculty of understanding had taken to be necessary, immutable, and essential turn out to be a mere symbolic framework that the mind uses to make sense of these regularities formed from an original spontaneity. The key to apprehending this original spontaneity, according to Boutroux, is to recognise that the understanding is not the only faculty by means of which we can grasp the world. Coignet writes in agreement that:

> we must appeal not only to the faculty of reason but also to the faculty of feeling and intuitive knowing, and thus by grasping the immediate reality of inner knowledge, of consciousness in the psychological sense of the word, we attain a knowledge that is very different from logic but rather modelled on the real. (1911: 37)

As we have seen already, Coignet, in contrast with other neo-Kantians, was sympathetic to the claim that it is through our inner experience that we obtain direct apprehension of our volition. However, what is crucial about *De Kant à Bergson*, is that she adopts the further spiritualist doctrine that such experience brings us into contact with the metaphysical nature or reality more broadly. For Coignet, Bergson's work is an important extension of Boutroux's because he establishes the distinction between the two methods of understanding nature, i.e., the method of external observation and the relation of facts

through reason, on the one hand, and intuition, i.e., the direct apprehension of inner knowledge, on the other, with the utmost rigour. Crucially, while setting out this distinction he is also careful not to undermine the essential role of either. Science uses the method of external observation and this method is necessary:

> The old enmity of science and metaphysics was due to mutual encroachments. Metaphysics claimed to impose its decrees on science, while science, on behalf of its own, claimed to eliminate those of metaphysics. Bergson reconciles them by showing that, while representing two distinct and special forms of knowledge, they contribute by their union to its development. (Coignet, 1911: 151-152)

The object of science is to measure and predict; however, such measurement and prediction is only possible in the determinate conditions of space, and by considering things in terms of quantity. As is well known, Bergson believes that science's error has been to consider the inner phenomenon of the mind as examinable in the same manner. The psychologist has attempted to consider the mind in terms of distinct abstract parts that can be separated or combined, analysed and classified. According to such a conception it may seem as if the mind is fully determined by its precedents, certain combinations of ideas lead to others necessarily, and all of this is correlated with neural mechanisms. However, such a deterministic conclusion is the product of a faulty method of analysis. The correct method for analysing human experience is in fact *intuition* (see Bergson, 1903: 40). But what is intuition?

Intuition can sound rather mystical and thus off-putting to contemporary ears. The basic idea, however, can be explained without recourse to anything esoteric. Bergson asks us to reconsider how we think about experience and to question the classical empiricist conception of analysing experience.) Empiricists like Hume and Locke understand experience as a noun (See Phemister, 2004: 207). We have *an* experience. Furthermore, *an* experience is the thing that provides us with ideas, but it is the ideas themselves that are important. *An* experience is a composite or bundle of ideas. Such a way of thinking of ideas is a perfect example of thinking of the mind in terms of "space", since it is conceived using "quantitative" examples. Ideas are put together like building blocks. Bergson's argument for intuition is that this is the wrong way to understand experience. Instead of analysing experience as a *noun*, we should analyse it as a *verb* in the active voice. We should understand it not as *presented to* as if it were a static entity, but rather as *lived through*. In

Bergson's own language we should move our attention away from the "*already-made*", and instead focus on the "*being-made*" (1911: 238; 259). The 'being made' is not a series of entitative units, one replacing the other, but rather a continual flux, which we play an active role in bringing about. In this continual flux, we do not experience one discrete moment replaced by another (although this is how we must understand it when we reflect upon it), but rather a pure continuity where every moment extends into every other.

Consider watching an arm rise through geometrical space. Although when I watch *your* arm rise up, *I* represent it as moving through defined spatial positions, and *I* could cut up each of these positions into distinct moments (that could easily be replaced by another), the same is not true of *my* experience of moving my own arm up in the air. As *I* lift my arm, *I* do not experience distinct replaceable moments, but a continuous process where the past (the intention) continues to live on throughout the process until my arm reaches the desired position. As *lived through,* we understand it as one single continuous process with concrete duration, even though as *presented to* (from the outside) the lifting of an arm looks as if it is merely a succession of replaceable moments.

Just like Boutroux, Bergson sees the teachings of inner sense, or intuition, as the basis for understanding not just human experience but also the ultimate nature of being. The creative impulsive movement of experience that we discover in intuition, he argues, is of the same nature as life itself. Coignet writes:

> In its concrete representation, life appears to us as a vast sheaf from which emerges an impulsive power whose progress is comparable to a shell bursting into shattered fragments, the fragments of which also shatter, and so on without stopping. (1911: 118)

All the forms of life are the product of the unstable equilibrium expressed in this metaphor of the shell. On the one hand, the continuing force of life, on the other, the resistances of the matter. This "unstable equilibrium" gives rise not just to the evolution of species, but also to the evolution of the world and all of its ultimate forms. The "fundamental point", according to Coignet, of Bergson's philosophy is that this "force of life" is itself a "mental" force. Matter is passive and resistant, mind is creative and active, and therefore the ultimate force of nature belongs to this second category. This is why intuition is required to understand evolution, to understand nature as creative. "We do not think evolution",

Coignet writes, altering Bergson's own prose slightly,[9] "we live it" (1911: 144). Nonetheless, Coignet insists that Bergson's philosophy is not anti-intellectualist (if this term is supposed to refer to someone who rejects all knowledge gained from science or the intellect). We need the intellect to separate ourselves from the pure immediacy of duration, but reality exceeds the intellectual. Therefore, attempts to understand the world and its future in full by means of either apparatus alone will fail. The creative future contains new elements that cannot be grasped by a static intellectual structure formed entirely from past actions, but immediacy without concepts and the intellect's tools is not communicable at all.

The dual relationship between intuition and intellect allows Coignet a framework to think the relationship between the free activity of the moral agent, on the one hand, and nature, on the other, without having to understand the two as standing apart from each other as if in two separate realms without an epistemically intelligible connection. Both the free agent and evolving nature have the same source. Nonetheless, at the same time, we do not lose the predictive power of science and its undeniable ability to make sense of the world and form new technologies. The distinction, which Coignet credits to critical philosophy, between the way that we experience the outside and the inside world remains in place, but with the proviso that all is united at the metaphysical level. The metaphysical nature supposedly revealed by intuition is the foundation for rectifying the division between nature and mind that had been formed by Kant's critical philosophy. The mind's moral life is no longer a series that stands over and above passive mechanical nature, but one that is what it is through its interactions with and formation through spiritual nature. "Bergsonian spiritualism is new", Coignet wrote because

> while affirming the reality of mind, far from excluding nature, it assimilates it. By returning life to the psychic order, and by attributing to it, through its adaptation to matter, the universal and inexhaustible creation of thing, it envelops nature in its spirituality. (1911: 152)

Even during the *La Morale indépendante* period, Coignet's moral philosophy already entailed a greater role for the interaction between mind and body than is necessary in Kant's. This is because she argued that our self-willed moral actions should ultimately tame, regulate, and rewire our passions and bodily instincts. This struggle over nature is one of the aims

[9] Bergson writes that we do not think "real time" (1911: 53).

of moral philosophy, according to her, and it is her main divergence from Fourier's romanticism. Bergson's emphasis on the primacy of "spirit" in the generation of mind and matter provides a clearly metaphysical picture to allow for the necessary interaction, since it no longer posits a straightforward difference in kind between the two. Kant's antinomy between the efficient causation of space and freedom of human nature is overcome in favour of an original spontaneity that gives rise to a twofold evolution into habits of nature and mind.

V

In this final section, I show that Bergson's philosophy was important for Coignet, not just because of its reconciliation of mind and nature, but also because she argues that it offers to key for the reconciliation of mind and nature with the divine. Bergson's philosophy, I argue, makes good on the promise she had originally seen in Fourier's cosmogony of the universal harmony of all beings.

Coignet was not alone in seeing Bergson's philosophy as key in the reconciliation of science, faith, and morality. Many of Bergson's most important disciples were Catholics who found in his work the same promise (e.g. Jacques Chevalier, Édouard Le Roy, and Charles Péguy).[10] However, what makes Coignet's particular blend unique and important is the fact that her earlier critiques of the appeal to instinct, in Fourier, and pantheism, in Cousin, meant that she was particularly sensitive to these risks emerging in any reconciliation involving Bergson's philosophy. The source of our normative ethics must still be based on the autonomy of the individual and not on mysticism.

As I showed in the previous section, Bergson's triumph was to understand both intuition and the understanding in their dual relationship. For Coignet, this dual relationship is in turn the way we need to understand the evolution of religion. She writes that "[a]lthough the source of religion is completely inner, the human being has a need to express their adoration externally as they do internally. This expression takes the name *symbol*" (1911: 49). Just as in science, we come to the 'truth' of religion through intuition, but we require the symbolism of the understanding to express this truth. However, both religion and science have been liable to make the same error, i.e. to reify the symbol to the

[10] On Bergson's reception amongst Catholics, see Azouvi (2007: 141-147), Cohen (1986), Hellman, (1981), Viellard-Baron (2008)

status of the absolute truth. Catholicism, according to Coignet, is the main offender. It has asserted the infallibility and immutability of its symbolic dogmas. Such an assertion is an attempt to halt the progress of life, to fail to see that "ideas evolve, and our minds with them" (1911: 64).

As we saw in §1, Coignet believes that the reformation was the first important revolution in overturning Catholic dogmatism. Although Protestantism held strongly onto dogmas of its own, it did at least substitute the authority of the Church for "the inner and personal experience of belief" (1911: 68). This inner experience, the *intuition* of religious belief, is, for Coignet, the key to the reconciliation of religious believers regardless of their system of belief. Although it is futile to try to solve the sectarian struggles and reconcile the different systems of belief with their contradictory symbolic structures, the inner source of religious faith may unite all believers. The different structures that have been formed are merely various ultimately fallible and instable attempts to try to give form to and communicate this feeling. The inner feeling is the universal that takes us beyond these varying representations. Our symbols may have a certain practical use, but nevertheless this should not prevent us, Coignet writes, from uniting "in this universal and invisible Church to which Bergson so eloquently called us" (1911: 81). It is the ultimate truth that all religious believers are truly trying to communicate.

Coignet credits her first religious conversion to Fourier's romantic image of the "joyful unity of all living creatures" (CCM I.240-241). In §III we saw that her commitment to Kant's "criticism" led her to abandon this view for much of her philosophical career, since she regarded the moral series as one existing outside of the natural world. The crucial point of Bergson's philosophy was that it provided her with the intellectual support to return to Fourier's image. Coignet claims that on the principles of Bergson's philosophy we "no longer need to feel ourselves isolated in humanity", i.e. we no longer need to feel ourselves as an atomic individual separated from our fellow human beings, whether they be believers in religion or not, we also no longer need to believe that humanity is isolated "in the nature that dominates it" (1911: 153). The passage that Coignet takes from Bergson to conclude her work (1911: 153) echoes this clearly:

> As the smallest grain of dust is entirely bound up with our solar system, drawn along with it in this undivided movement of descent that is materiality itself, so all organized beings, from the humblest to the highest, from the first origins of life up until our time, and in all places as in all times, only make sensible to our eyes, a

> unique impulsion, opposite to the movement of matter and, in itself, indivisible [spirituality]. (1911: 295. The text in brackets is Coignet's own insertion)

Coignet is quick to point to the potential religious implications of such a view. What is this spirituality from which comes all individual beings with their thirst for life? That "God is spirit and life" is a belief shared by all religions. What Bergson has done, Coignet argues, is explain what this belief means. He has changed it from an empty abstraction (as perhaps it was even in Fourier), and shown its "living reality" through intuition.

It is unsurprising that Fourier's image would remain a living influence on the development of Coignet's philosophy. Even when she had turned to Kant, she shared family members still devoted to the Fourierian cause, and her husband François Coignet was a Fourierian who had written his own Fourierian tract (1848). But a question still hangs over how even the Bergsonian vision of the harmony of all beings can at the same time be reconciled with a morality that is supposed to be *independent*? When the Catholic Le Roy converts Bergson's intuition into religious language, he talks of turning to inner reflection as "giving oneself to God" so as to become a vessel for God's goodness. But despite postulating a single source as the ultimate nature of mind and matter, Coignet must resist pantheism. We have already seen her reject Cousin's spiritualism on that basis, and only three years before *De Kant à Bergson* she rejects Schleiermacher's theology for the same reason (see 1908: 131). How does Coignet avoid her freedom-based morality getting sucked up into what is starting to sound like a pantheistic—no matter how "creative" and "vitalistic"—vision?

Here is how I think Coignet would answer this question. Independent morality is independent because it starts from the autonomy of the individual; the individual is its own source for its moral code. Independent morality is independent exactly because it starts from the individual's own attempts to come to its morality without depending on the word of the Church or State. For Coignet, in contrast to Kant, as we have seen, we have a direct intuition of our consciousness as free and active. This direct intuition, however, she argues, through her studies of Boutroux and Bergson, does not merely reveal to us our own freedom, but has a more cosmic significance. It reveals to us the *type* of activity through which we can understand nature: not as cold and mechanical, but as living and evolving. Furthermore, we recognise that our attempts to capture this living and evolving nature are limited by the structure of our intellect, which is much more easily applicable to the seemingly immutable and necessary structures of mechanical science. Progress in science

requires us to recognise that this structure is not immutable and that it hides the initial contingency and spontaneity of the world. Coignet's further move is to insist that a similar problem haunts religious belief. We have attempted to capture the living spontaneous spiritual nature of God under solid structures and unquestionable texts, but failed to recognise that such an attempt halts the progress of religion just as it does science. Ultimately, Coignet claims that science, religion, and morality are united in the same spontaneous active nature–God–symbolically expressed in different ways. So far, so problematic. However, crucially, the starting point that leads us to this belief in an ultimate unity is the free active individual, and, she insists, this is an individual that does not get swallowed up in the process.

It is important to note that Coignet's analysis of freedom remains very different from Bergson's. Bergson emphasises that it is the "whole soul… which gives rise to the free decision: and the act will be so much the freer the more the dynamic series with which it is connected tends to be the fundamental self" (1910: 167). For the Catholic Bergsonians, this meant that free acts are those that turn away from the rational representations of our actions to the intuition of our duration (see Cohen, 489). Contrary to Coignet, this becomes a mystical intuition that connects us to God. Bergson's God, who is "unceasing life, action, freedom" (1911: 262). At times, it sounds as if free action is really giving oneself up to the creativity of God or, at least, the "vital impulse".[11]

Coignet's God is the source of all but, she argues, does not determine the outcome and we should not "give ourselves to him" so that he could. Evolution is unpredictable, contingent, and it lacks the predetermined finality of either Leibnizian teleology of mechanical determinism. There is no divine plan and no restriction of the causation of the world to efficient causation. The individual may be harmonious with all beings, but they freely play their part in this harmony. Human beings do, of course, express a much higher degree of freedom than any other living beings on the planet. But some degree of spontaneity is shared by all. Nevertheless, spontaneity may be a necessary condition for free action, but it is in no way a sufficient one. On the essential conditions for freedom, Coignet is much closer to the classical German tradition than Bergson. For her, free action is self-conscious rational action.[12]It is the following of rules that we choose rationally. This

[11] See Bergson (1935: 130). I think Dewey gets it right, in his discussion of Bergson, when he writes, "A spiritual life which is nothing but a blind urge separated from thought…is likely to have the attributes of the Devil in spite of its being ennobled with the name of God." (1922: 53). For a recent defence of Bergson's ethics, see Ansell-Pearson (2018).

[12] As Rödl has rightly claimed, the heart of German idealism is the claim that "self-consciousness, freedom and reason are one" (2007: 105).

form of autonomy brings with it distinctive value, and thus obligations, and rights. In this way Coignet's final metaphysic balances the intellect and intuition in a way that gives more weight to the rational intellect. Coignet's turn to Bergson, therefore, allows her to revive a version of the Fourierian romantic image, but still from the starting point of independent morality, or what she regarded as the true starting point of the Protestant faith. Perhaps it is no wonder then that despite the enthusiasm of many Catholic youth, and of the Catholic leanings of Bergson himself (see Sinclair, *forthcoming*), Pope Pius X placed Bergson's works on the Index because of their promotion of excessive individualism (Cohen, 1986: 497).

VI

Coignet's attempts to grapple philosophical problems stemmed from a real personal desire to reconcile in her mind the varied strands of thought that were emerging in nineteenth-century France. These included non-conformist Protestantism, sophisticated understandings of classical German philosophy, socialist and republican political thought, as well the general flourishing of homegrown French philosophy that followed the downfall and death of Cousin. I have argued that in Bergson's philosophy she found the key to reconcile the Fourierst romanticism of her youth with an independent morality founded on individual autonomy. However, she was no mere disciple of Bergson. The fusion she developed provided a practical philosophy much more focused on the freedom of the rational human than anything that could be found in the works of either Bergson or his followers. Here she tips the balance between the intellectual and the intuitive in favour of the former and avoids the ethical mysticism of Bergsonism. For the Bergsonian faithful, this may rather seem like a negative than a positive, but for those who look for a clearer normative ethics than mysticism could ever provide, it should seem like a very good reason to pay Coignet's work serious attention.

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Abbreviations

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CCM: Coignet, Clarisse. *Mémoires*. 4 volumes. Lausanne: Pache-varidel. Cited by volume and then page number, 1899-1904.

IM: Multiple Authors. *La Morale Indépendante*. 5 years. Cited by author, year number, and then page number, 1865-1899.

OC: Fourier, Charles. *Oeuvres completes*. 12 volumes. Paris: Editions Anthropos, 1966-1968.

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