

# Remarks for a Territoriology of Wine Tasting<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** This piece submits some remarks and ideas about the relationship between wine and territory. Such relationship is not only an *external* one (wine as a product of territory) but also an internal one: wine as a territory on its own account. To illuminate this fact, it is sufficient to consider the expertise and practices of sommeliers. Advancing toward a territoriological analysis of wine tasting calls for leaving behind the image of wine as a mere object upon which a certain analytical activity is performed. Wine is neither a subject nor an object, rather, a *mode* or a *matter of expression* that emerges in the context of the practice of tasting. A *mode* can also be described as the result of an *encounter*, a meeting of agents (for example: wine-glass-nose-mouth...), a complex composition of distributed variables within a continuum of heterogeneous elements that extend into each other according to series of nexuses and links that are neither casual nor causal. All the rules and protocols that guide tasting are but tentative tools to provides us with a compass for *sailing in the sea of wine*: wine is a veritable *environment*.

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'During a nice dinner in the company of friends, a glass of wine can create a moment of merry conviviality. Wine tasting, however, is a different thing.' Such an austere remark, written almost in the register of an admonishment, can be found in the opening page of a classic tasting textbook by the Italian Sommelier Association. Similar, more or less explicit, remarks are not uncommon among sommeliers. The simple reason is that they need to distinguish themselves from people who merely 'enjoy wine'. Yet some sort of enjoyment is certainly involved in tasting, too. At first, one might be tempted to oppose the company of a 'merry glass of wine' and the activity of 'wine tasting' as one would oppose convivial pleasure, on the one hand, and intellectual pleasure, on the other. While this view is not entirely wrong, for it to make sense, the phrase 'intellectual pleasure' must be understood correctly.

First, we are not dealing with the difference between a social and a solitary activity, since tasting is always a social activity. Early on in his/her training, the neophyte taster is recommended never to taste alone. This is essentially for two reasons: an aesthetic-moralistic one – 'it is not nice' – and an epistemological one – 'exchange of views is necessary.'

Second, here intellectual activity is not to be understood in a loose everyday sense, that is, as an alias for non-manual occupations at large. Rather, it is taken as pertaining to a practice specifically related to the production of *judgments*. In other words, what characterizes wine tasting is the expression of taste judgments. On the one hand, judgment is certainly tied to a whole universe of publicness, visibility, and accountability; as such, it is intimately linked to the whole universe of legal discourse, as well as the production of justifications, and the recourse to repertoires of justification. As soon as one describes a wine, s/he becomes accountable to an extended series of protocols, rules etc. One can best feel the weight of judgment

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when, as a novice, is asked to present a wine and comment upon it. On the other, judgment also place tasters in the domain of a semiotic investigation: indisputably, wine emits signs; what do they mean? How to make sense of them? Therefore, these judgments are simultaneously normative, technical, and, more amply understood, legal.

But interestingly, sommeliers tend to reject all terms related to 'judgment'. Why is it so? The fact is that they are running a campaign for 'objectivity'. Tasting, sommeliers argue, should not be a matter of personal taste, but the 'objective analysis of the sensations' produced by wine on one's sensory apparatus. In the technical vocabulary developed by sommeliers, the evaluative aspects, such as the formulation of judgments concerning the quality, harmony and evolution of a wine, must play a subordinate role and, above all, they must only be formulated *after* a complete and accurate description and analysis of the tasted wine has been carried out.

Certainly, organoleptic or 'sensory' analysis is different from chemical analysis, also known as 'instrumental' analysis, i.e. analysis conducted with technological means of detection, such as for example a gas chromatography. Sommeliers know quite well that by making use of their sense organs they can only hope to achieve measures that are necessarily quantitatively less precise than those made by a technical device. However, they do not regard this fact as a source of decreased objectivity, or as an impediment. On the contrary, they make a distinction between, on the one hand, a list of quantitative elements and, on the other, the ability to spot and express the unity or quality of a certain wine (sometimes also referred to as its 'atmosphere'). An often heard refrain in the community is that, after all, it is humans, not machines, who eventually drink the wine: consequently, producing an ensemble of quantitative measurements can only have industrial application, but is not enough to produce a true analysis, that is, to claim to have 'understood' a certain wine. In this sense, recognizing the presence of a subject and admitting its importance to organoleptic analysis are not seen by sommeliers as hampering well-balanced analysis – at least, they say, to the extent that the subject is not 'prevaricating' by producing 'idiosyncratic' statements. In short, professional sommeliers conceptualize the activity of tasting as an *encounter* between a subject and an object that should be resolved in favor of the latter: what counts, in their view, is the object, and the revelation – or the appearing, the becoming-explicit – of its features.

However, this image, pivoted around the relationship established between an investigating subject and an investigated object is not entirely adequate to account for the practice of wine tasting as a social undertaking. Indeed, by describing wine as a mere object upon which a certain analytical activity is performed, one would not be able to understand much of sommeliers' professional working practices. The image of wine as an object misleads us into a kind of determinist conception which would ground our understanding into either a causal mechanism of chemical molecules combinations, or on the contrary – but with comparable reductionist outcomes – a radical social constructivism where an equally simplistic activity of truth construction by consensus is envisaged. Even the reversed image of wine as a subject might incur into several mistakes: not only and perhaps not so much

fetishism – which, however, is never completely removed, especially when dealing with highly prestigious, almost worshipped wines – but in the first place a grave underestimation of the specific differences between the involved players, that is to say, an overlooking of the actual ways and specifications through which wine itself has ‘a saying’ in the activity of tasting.

Therefore, it would more accurate to say that wine is neither a subject nor an object, rather, a *mode* or a *matter of expression* that emerges in the context of the practice of tasting. A *mode* can also be described as the result of an *encounter*, a meeting of agents (for example: wine-glass-nose-mouth...), a complex composition of distributed variables within a continuum of heterogeneous elements that extend into each other according to series of nexuses and links that are neither casual nor causal. Such nexuses and links are created by the ‘grip’ or ‘catch’ that certain elements exercise upon others, and they endure only until these grips are effectuated. This happens until agents act upon each other and react to each other by selecting and capturing certain qualities to be appropriated. In short, a mode is a social sphere that entails a whole territorial production, articulation, and stabilization.

Such a conception we could call the *modalization* of wine. Its usefulness lies in overcoming the dichotomy we have encountered above between *analysis* and *judgment*: each moment in the description and analysis of a wine entails an exercise of judgment, although not intended as a statement of personal preferences. Here, the distinctive aspect of judgment is to be found in its *public* nature. In other words, judgment is addressed to an audience, it is meant to be visible, ostensible, social, not as a further accidental determination (judgment is produced and then made public) but as an intrinsic aspect (publicity is the element in which judgment is produced). Then, judgment represents here the largest category, into which wine analysis falls, and the preoccupation of sommeliers can be appreciated as the requirement to distinguish between two types of judgments: a structured, ‘categorized’ judgment, on the one hand, and an unstructured, idiosyncratic judgment, on the other.

Sociologically speaking – as well as from a strict lexical point of view – we can apply the notion of *taste* judgment to wine tasting because taste is not a simple set of preferences and appreciations but rather a complex social relationship, even a large-scale one. The name of Pierre Bourdieu is often associated with the thesis that differences – not only in consumption styles and patterns, but also in taste preferences – are employed as items or affordances of class distinctions. The subjective correlate of this view is that taste works as sixth sense, or a *cultural orientation* sense: by recognizing ourselves in certain schemes of perception and appreciation, we recognize ourselves as belonging to a certain class. Although not entirely wrong, this interpretation of Bourdieu’s work is, to say the least, partial. In fact, Bourdieu’s habitus-field theory envisaged to take into account not only the *structural* but also the *generative* dimension of taste. For Bourdieu<sup>2</sup> ‘classification systems would not be such crucial stakes were they not also contributing to shape classes themselves, adding to the effectiveness of the objective mechanisms the

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<sup>2</sup> Bourdieu, Pierre, *La distinction. Critique sociale du jugement*. Paris: Minuit, 1979: 474.

confirmation that derives from the images structured in ways that are consistent with classification'. Between linguistic and symbolic structure, on the one hand, and the structure of the distribution of capital, on the other, there is always an interplay, an *interstice*, a space where 'the strategies designed to take advantage of the discordance between the real and the nominal, to appropriate words in order to appropriate the things they designate, or to appropriate things waiting to obtain the words that record them, make their appearance'<sup>3</sup>. Insofar as we are concerned here, the structuralist thesis essentially identifies *positions* on the basis of *oppositions*. As in Saussure's classic notion of *langue*, from this perspective a taste option is seen as a position that makes sense only insofar as it is distinguished and opposed to other options: you can only tell good taste on the basis of its difference from both common taste and bad taste – or, more accurately, good taste is nothing but *that which* is opposed to something else known as common, trivial, etc.

Yet research inevitably puts us before the evidence that, even keeping in mind the genesis of taste dispositions, taste cannot be explained as *solely* a matter of social distinction. This insight has gained ground in sociology over the last decade. French sociologists such as Antoine Hennion and Geneviève Teil<sup>4</sup> have criticized the structuralist view on taste for its lack of recognition of the positive role that *materiality* plays in it. The 'new' sociology of taste has pointed out that the act of engaging with a material 'object' – in activities as diverse as wine tasting, listening to a piece of music, or opening a new climbing path on a rock wall – cannot be reduced to the positional differentiation of a subject from others. The differentiating function assigned to taste by the structuralist view is only one among many, and probably not even the most important one. Indeed, what matters most is not taste as opposed to lack of taste, but taste as a plurality of ways that are solicited or stimulated by a single material object, taste as the ways in which we engage in matters. 'In the difficult transition from *taste* to *tastes*, the issue is of course, more than ever, the contact with the object, but an object that opens up and becomes plural. Between a bunch of music notes and a work of art, between the physical wine and tasted wine, you pass through a sort of flaking, a series of mediations, you never swing over a dividing binary line. Tastes invite us not to turn away from the object and go looking for the real causes elsewhere, but to rethink the object that is in front of us as a possibility, as an attempt and a temptation, rather than as a sum of its parts'<sup>5</sup>. Such an argument is certainly not meant to lead us back to naive determinism: 'the object – continue Hennion and Teil – does not "contain" its effects, as well known in aesthetics: taste is revealed precisely in uncertainty, variation, and the deepening of the effects that the product creates at the time and in the circumstances of its use.'

Here, the term 'object' must be placed strictly in quotation marks. As we look closely, we begin to recognize that in practical activities such as wine tasting, music listening and rock climbing, there is no such thing as an object that stands in opposition to a subject. Rather, we are faced with a whole *Gestalt*, a configuration

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid: 475.

<sup>4</sup> Hennion, Antoine and Teil, Geneviève, 'Le goût du vin. Pour une sociologie de l'attention', in Véronique Nahoum Grappe and Odile Vincent (Eds.) *Le goût des belles choses*. Paris: Éditions de la MSH, pp. 111-126, 2004.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

we might also call a *terrain, region* or *territory*. It is upon this terrain, in this region or territory that we can define what is the actual *focus* of a practice or, one might even say, what is its problem field, its *problématique*, or even – we might venture – the *interest* of that given practice. What I am proposing here is that the importance of territory with respect to wine should be doubled: not only is wine a territorial product, the product of a given territory or *terroir*, the unique ensemble of terrain and climate (pedo-climatic conditions); it is also a territory in itself, better, it contains the affordances that might enter into a range of territorial compositions with the taster. If we look at wine as the product of a territory, we are led to describe it as an *object*; but if we look at it as a territory in itself, we might begin to appreciate it as an *environment*.

Why is wine tasting a 'problem field'? Etymologically, the word 'problem' refers to something that is thrown before or carried along. In this sense, the note of caution often recalled by sommeliers, according to which 'in tasting, you can never generalize,' refers precisely to a dynamic of knowledge that proceeds by problems, as opposed to a different type of knowing that is deductive, or more widely syllogistic. Such a problem-orientation does not prevent the existence of a series of guidelines for correct tasting, just as there are operative norms and preferential options. These guidelines determine the existence of a series of marked *versus* unmarked choices, whereby certain judgments are accepted as 'going without saying', less contestable and less surprising than others. However, sommeliers' training proceeds largely by examples and cases, to the point that one could never overstate the importance of experience and habit. Even before defining a specific professional knowledge, experience and habit create an essential horizon of *familiarity* for the encounter, a veritable *taste for taste*.

On the basis of what said so far, the wine to be tasted could be characterized as a 'sensory problem'. Indeed, all five perceptual senses are involved in tasting, so that in this context the sense of taste stands, by synecdoche, for a complete multi-sensorial practice. This can be proved easily. The sense of hearing must be attentive to capture how wine falls into the glass; sight must be able to describe the limpidness, color, thickness or effervescence of wine; smell must grasp the intensity, persistence, complexity, quality and bouquet description of wine; taste and touch must interrogate its softness, hardness, texture, balance, intensity, persistence and quality, while all the senses must work together to determine evolution and harmony. The rich sensorium that is involved in and stimulated by tasting leads s/he who is exercising and improving his/her abilities as wine taster towards a progressive sensory refinement. More and more refined abilities are proportionally called for in order to 'deal with' more and more refined and complex wines. It is not just a matter of dispositional subjective qualities, rather, of capacities to articulate the problem field in subtler ways, abilities to create new encounters and new modes, to liberate new expressive materials and introduce new visibility thresholds between phenomena.

To improve as a wine taster means, in other words, to make wine *visible*, or make visible as many of its qualities as possible. It means – following Gabriel Tarde's

methodological recommendations <sup>6</sup> – to move from ‘similarities and repetitions of complex and confused masses to similarities and repetitions of detail, more difficult to grasp, but more precise, elementary and infinitely numerous as infinitesimal.’ I would also like to remark the fact that all these similarities and repetitions, and above all these differences, are fully *social*, insofar as they are *material* rather than simply *structural* (or ‘distinctions’ in Bourdieu’s sense). The social would not be possible without all these acts that inscribe, project and extract certain intensities (or, if one wants, meanings) into and from materials.

It is likewise noticeable that the phrase ‘matters of expression’ refers to the existence of a non-hylomorphic *mode*. In the doctrine of hylomorphism, as classically conceptualized by Aristotle in his *Physics*, matter is unformed, whereas substance is conceptualized as formed matter. Matter is therefore located outside of the game of form and formalization and, as such, regarded as something that is without either expression or content. Simondon<sup>7</sup> famously criticized hylomorphism for failing to take ontogenesis into account; thus, hylomorphism would assume the individual as a fact while ignoring the dimension of individuation, or the process of becoming-individual. Beside its failure in taking into account the dynamic perspective, we could more generally state that the hylomorphic model is suitable to describe a range of crafts such as working with clay or baking, i.e., activities involving inert materials. It in fact derives from a type of society where these craftsmen were more noticeable. On the contrary, the hylomorphic model is not suitable to account for the existence of active materials, materials that have an expression in themselves, such as metals. A liquid such as wine also falls into this category. A veritable ‘material semiotic’ of wine reveals it as being closer to metals than water: wine is a matter of expression whose articulation defines territories and encounters.

It would be blind to overlook the fact that sensory abilities also grow with the ability to articulate feelings, the ability to ‘speak of wine’ – another advice that is often repeated to novices. Speaking of wine calls for not only the proper use of the conventional tasting vocabulary, but also the development of the ability to move within the problem field with a certain familiarity (*nonchalance* and *savoir-faire* are but consequences of such an ability). The good sommelier is such because the *nonchalance* and *savoir-faire* (both untranslatable French words) with which s/he speaks of wine reveals his/her familiarity with and proximity to a certain expressive material. At the outset, we have discussed tasting as an ‘intellectual pleasure’. Now we are perhaps better placed to see that, in fact, pleasure comes from accepting a judgmental challenge, which proves willingness to enter into the game. The game of tasting also outlines a style issue. We know, for instance, that wine descriptors are, more or less explicitly, evocative rather than referential. And the evocative dimension of judgment is not a neutral medium of the tasting experience. On the contrary, it always stands out in comparison with the more – but usually, less – developed skills of perception possessed by the public.

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<sup>6</sup> Tarde, Gabriel, *Les lois sociales*, 1898 : 47 (edn. 1999 Paris: Synthelabo).

<sup>7</sup> Simondon, Gilbert, *L’individuation psychique et collective: à la lumière des notions de forme, information, potentiel et métastabilité*, 1958 (edn. 2007 Paris: Aubier).

The sommelier is not simply making a personal experience with wine: s/he is also acting as a guide for others into the experience of tasting. Such an idea of the sommelier as an expert in 'wine communication' is meeting increasing success. When we look at guided tasting session we notice how the sommelier, acting as an officiant and a veritable *medium*, leads the other drinkers into a territory whose characteristics are outlined through the descriptions that are elaborated and provided. These are often blind tasting session, organized increasingly also as tourist attractions and territorial marketing purposes (for instance, you may land in Rome and easily end up at a tasting session where a sommelier, making his best to speak in English, presents you a portrait of Italy and its territory through a series of four most renown wines). In any case, here lies the specific nature of the encounter with a matter of expression, here lies its double articulation, always simultaneously material and expressive. Even without substituting the scientific nominalism that is required by the social science (that is, without resorting to medieval philosophical realism) it is impossible to fail to notice that the words chosen and used by sommeliers cannot be considered at all neutral or ineffective in their impact on the practice of tasting. For example, once a cherry flavor has been evoked, named, and publicly declared, it will be in most cases recognized even by a novice. In other words, getting used to 'speak of wine' means to test oneself, learning to move in a field that exists at the crossroads between uniqueness and repeatability of the encounter. The otherwise evanescent term 'style' corresponds precisely to the trajectory each time drawn by this movement of expression through the material.

The paradox of wine tasting probably lies in the fact that a beginner fails to effectively describe a wine, not because s/he does not pay enough attention, but because s/he pays *too much* attention. In other words, the neophyte surrenders completely to the singleness, fullness and uniqueness of his/her sensory experience. S/he is literally flooded by sensations and fails to introduce lines of discontinuity, descriptions, classifications, that would enable him/her to establish and draw significant thresholds of differential visibility. Tasting is all about creating a certain *distance* from wine, the correct distance that is necessary to make it thoroughly visible. Such a visibilization of wine can only be obtained thanks to the introduction of certain *a-priori* in the uniqueness of experience. The sommeliers' tasting sheet (but the scoring sheet is not different) is, from this point of view, a small Kantian masterpiece. 'Transcendental' in a precise technical sense, the tasting and scoring sheets indicate the sets of dimensions the encounter is necessarily bound to have, so that the only thing that remains to be done is to make them *relevant* and actual in the activity of tasting.

Tasting is made possible by attention or, more precisely, by a strategy of visibilization of perceptions and sensations. Rather than with perceptions, tasting is thus concerned with *apperception*, perceptions made relevant on a threshold of awareness. Wine tasting involves listening to your body and its reactions. It is necessary to pay specific attention to how your eye, nose and mouth react during the encounter with this or that specific wine: how, for instance, clarity and color are revealed by tilting the glass at forty-five degrees; how perfumes reach your olfactory mucosa directly through a short, sharp aspiration that creates a vortex of olfactory

molecules; how the saliva in your mouth reacts with the acidic components of wine, and so on. This is how an encounter with wine can be explored, and the technical objects sommeliers employ – such as a decanter, or a glass shaped in a specific way – work as tools for apperception, sensory amplifiers that enable to magnify the visibility of the features we are trying to grasp. The overall situation cannot be reduced to a Cartesian horizon, since what we are exploring in tasting is not simply our personal private encounter with wine: someone else's encounter is also always involved. Certainly, since tasting is a social activity, issues of authority and consent are pervasive. But, it would be unfair to regard them as merely omnipotent. It is simply not true that, just because no naïve objectivity can be attained, provided that one sounds rhetorically convincing everything and anything can be said about a certain wine. Tasting involves the capacity to articulate a territory, detailing its features and defining its constitution.

Authority and consent are certainly part of the process, but the activity of tasting concerns the specification of the areas and the limits within which authority and consent are relevant. It is thus necessary to bring sensations and judgments into a shared public territory. Tasting is a kind of territorialization, a territorial encounter in an actual ethological sense. Encounters are characterized by their contingency and uniqueness. Encountering this or that wine is not necessary (it may not be), nor is it necessarily protracted (it may interrupt soon). Sensory analysis entails the apparently unfulfillable requirement according to which a unique meeting (which may not be repeated) must be repeated (i.e., traced back and compared to former encounters). Tasting brings the encounter with this wine at hand into a series of virtual encounters with all wines, thus defining a peculiar tension between factual unrepeatability, on the one hand, and the axiological need of repetition, on the other.

The territorial aspect of the tasting experience becomes evident as soon as judgment divergences between tasters appear. Given the experiential richness of tasting, and given the number of variables entailed in an encounter, such differences are actually quite common. Unlike more hierarchical contexts in which a single sommelier guides newbies, when a group of sommeliers who are basically peers make a joint tasting session, there is a general trend towards recomposing judgment differences after they have arisen, in a joint effort towards unanimity. In other words, by attempting to converge on shared views or, at least, articulating and disaggregating the elements of disagreement, sommeliers try to 'modalize' themselves, that is, to build (or regain) a shared mode, thereby re-territorializing themselves. While only rarely do trained sommelier diverge in the evaluation of certain basic or simple aspects of wine, such as softness and hardness, more subtle assessments, such as nose-mouth correspondence, evolutionary state, and harmony, might turn out to be more difficult to recompose. There are several ways to get out of an interpretive impasse and try to reconcile judgment divergences. Naïve scientist realism, which assumes the existence of an independent external truth which judgment might or might not mirror, does not certainly apply here. At the other extreme, it is likewise not enough to define a simple truth by consensus formation. A mode must be modulated by tasters using the same materials and puzzling along similar issues.



Let us briefly consider two fundamental reasons that prevent us from accepting the naïve scientist-realist image of taste judgment as a mirroring process. In the first place, wine is not an object, but expressive material that fundamentally exists in the dimension of becoming. This fact precludes that it can be assessed in the same manner in which an object or tool (i.e., a glass) may be appraised. Especially when we face an aged wine or an otherwise important wine, wine is a material *in evolution*. Immediately after pouring it, the bouquet is often too 'closed', and needs time to 'open up'. A equally crucial effect is played by the temperature of service, which makes the apperception of qualities range widely. These two variables define the encounter with wine not as precise a point in time, but as an unfolding process. With Bergson<sup>8</sup>, it is necessary to locate ourselves, not the order of time, but in the order of *duration*.

Furthermore, not only is wine dynamic along a diachronic axis. It is dynamic also synchronically. It often happens that, during a sufficiently large tasting session, all tasters believe they are drinking exactly 'the same wine'. True, they are drinking the same type of wine, produced by the same manufacturer in the same year etc. As a consequence, by and large, hypothetical disagreements are assumed to be caused by substantively diverging judgments. But, it may turn out that, although the wine is indeed of the same type, tasters are drinking from *different bottles* – and, as well known, each bottle is 'an entirely different story' (in terms of evolution, temperature etc.). A myriad of further details, such as different glasses, uneven lighting of the room and so on, can produce additional differences outcomes.

These different assemblages of singular items that converge in the single experience of tasting determine different and unique encounters for each taster, in each micro-location, at each specific moment in time etc. Modes, in other words, proliferate beyond control. All the rules and protocols are tentative tools to provides us with a compass for *sailing in the sea of wine*. Since, as said, wine cannot be reduced to an object, perhaps one way of appreciating it at best is to regard it as a veritable *environment*. We are not facing wine, nor are we merely sailing on it; in fact, we are *immersed in it*. As for every other passion, who ingests what remains to be seen. In this sense, to turn again to Bergson, but this time to the later Bergson<sup>9</sup> of *Matière et mémoire*, it is perhaps possible to conceptualize wine as a *multiplicity*. Wine is the multiplicity that results from a heterogeneous material impossible to reduce to either a numeric set or a degree on a numeric scale from one to many. Wine is not a multiplicity of discontinuous, atomic, divisible states, but a multiplicity of continuous flow taken in the range of a unifying *memory*: "The qualitative heterogeneity of our successive perceptions of the universe – writes Bergson – is linked to the fact that each of these perceptions stretches for a certain lapse of duration, as well as to the fact that memory condenses an enormous multiplicity of stimulations which appear to us all together, albeit they are in fact successive".

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<sup>8</sup> Bergson, Henri, *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience*, 1889 (edn. 1967 Paris: Presses universitaires de France).

<sup>9</sup> Bergson, Henri, *Matière et mémoire. Essai sur la relation du corps à l'esprit*, 1896 (edn. 1968 Paris: Presses universitaires de France).