INTRODUCTION

A. Bergson’s Philosophical Itinerary

Bergson did what philosophers are not supposed to do. He questioned the primacy of human reason. He did not do this through a general sceptical programme, but by a gradual itinerary through a variety of issues. And as he trod this path, he tried to show, sometimes implicitly, sometimes explicitly, how it was that some philosophical problems were illusory and were generated by adopting the wrong view of the nature and role of reason.

Such an approach has cousins, for instance in the writings of Pascal, or of William James. But here, we shall sketch the path which Bergson himself took.

Personal itineraries form a background to the intellectual itinerary. Bergson’s father, Michel, came from Poland but lived and worked as a musician, composer and teacher of music, in Saxony, Italy, France, Switzerland and England. His mother, Catherine Levison, from Doncaster in England, was of Irish origin. Bergson himself was born in France in 1859 and was later naturalised as a French subject. He was taken to Switzerland at the age of four. When he was seven, his parents went back to Paris. At the age of nine, he obtained a scholarship to the Lycée Condorcet (then the Lycée Impérial Bonaparte) where he remained for ten years.
BERGSON: THINKING BACKWARDS

His twelfth year is to be remarked. It was the year in which his parents moved to London, leaving their son to board in the Springer Institution in Paris. But the times were moving. In June 1870 France had declared war on Prussia, and this led to the catastrophic defeat of the armies of Napoleon III at Sedan and the capture of the emperor. There followed the siege of Paris in which the life of its inhabitants became increasingly difficult over a period of months. And finally came the dramatic events of the Commune. For two months, from March to May 1871, Frenchman fought Frenchman in the capital, with the German armies standing by. In late May, the government army reconquered Paris, defeating the communards in fierce street fighting during ‘la semaine sanglante’ (the bloody week).

A further result of the fall of Napoleon III was the withdrawal of his troops from Rome, where they had been the only remaining bulwark of the temporal power of the Bishop of Rome. Italian troops marched in and completed the unification of Italy.

Of course, young children often take what goes on around them as just part of the unaccountable, and sometimes interesting, way of things. I have not attempted to investigate to what extent the young Henri was touched at the time by these dramatic events. We do know, however, that when he taught moral philosophy at high-school level, some twenty years later, he repudiated violence as a political instrument and viewed socialism as inevitably involving an attack on liberty. But his parents removed themselves from this turbulent environment when Bergson was eleven, and so long as he remained at school in Paris, Bergson went to London to join them during school vacations. His mother continued to live in England, in Folkestone, to the age of ninety-eight. In later life, Bergson spoke of his parents, if the occasion arose, with the greatest admiration.
INTRODUCTION

It is not necessary to attribute the character of Bergson’s thought to the peregrinations of his parents (or the dramatic shifts and changes, social, political and military, which surrounded him as a boy), but yet, change and movement and place were from the first central in his preoccupations. Furthermore, he reversed a traditional order of thought about change. On that traditional view, indeed a plausible and apparently commonsensical view, change should be viewed or analysed as a succession of states. Time would thus become the dimension in which these states can be mapped out. But in such a position, states remain prior to the phenomenon of change, epistemologically, ontologically, scientifically and logically. Bergson takes the opposite view. For him, it is processes of change which are primary. And though it is pragmatically important, and indeed a main function of human reason, to analyse and map them, doing so can lead to false views, and false problems, especially in the mind of the philosopher.

We may sketch Bergson’s intellectual itinerary by giving a summary account of his main published works.

In Time and Free Will (1889), Bergson mounts a sustained attack on the atomistic view of mental states. According to this view, mental states can be determinately distinguished from each other both at a given time and over time. Furthermore, a given state can vary in intensity. For instance, one desire can be stronger than another. These ideas are sufficiently familiar to commonsense and were elaborated on in a more theoretical way by ‘associationist’ philosophers and psychologists from John Locke onwards, though we may say that similar views go back to Descartes’s ‘ideas’ and beyond.

Bergson begins with an apparently outrageous claim. Our passions, he says, are not stronger or weaker, our sensations more or less intense, or our efforts greater or weaker. Of course, the experiences which these contrasts report are real experiences. However, the very division of our mental life into
BERGSON: THINKING BACKWARDS

distinct mental states cannot be taken as a given. And even if we allow such division (as we must, for good pragmatic reasons), the changes or differences in these states to which we are led to refer are in fact qualitative, not quantitative.

His second and central step is to introduce another shocking claim: the measurable time which we know in the equations of mechanics, or indeed in our everyday presence in the world, is deficient and misleading. Bergson introduces his key notion of durée¹, which we shall discuss in some detail in Chapter 3, and which enables us to see how the contentions of the first part of Time and Free Will arise from more general considerations.

Finally, he shows how traditional determinism arises from the assumptions which he has already questioned, and how the ‘problem of the freedom of the will’ is an illusion²: In this way free will is reinstated.

In Time and Free Will, Bergson pays detailed attention to contemporary work in the psychology of perception when discussing the nature of mental states, and his main philosophical targets are Kant and the Eleatic philosophers.

If we accept the arguments of Time and Free Will, we shall have to concede that the underlying assumptions which gave rise to the centuries of debate between dualists, materialists and idealists were false. The question naturally arises what alternative account can be given of matters which they debated so bitterly, especially the ‘mind/body problem’. Bergson addresses this question in Matter and Memory (1896). His main contention is that this family of factitious problems should not be approached in the traditional fashion. Instead, ‘a capital problem of metaphysics is shifted over into observation on

¹ Usually translated as ‘duration’, I propose and prefer ‘durance’; see Chapter 3, part (ii).
² Essai, p. 180: «Le problème de la liberté est né que d’un malentendu.»
the ground, where it can be progressively resolved, instead of endlessly feeding disagreements between schools in the closed field of sheer disputation. A model for genuine advancement of our understanding of the relation between the mental and the cerebral is found in the proper study of the phenomena of amnesia and aphasia.

If *Time and Free Will* succeeds in destroying or weakening an old structure of thought, the task of *Matter and Memory* is to rebuild. And the keystone of this rebuilding is Bergson’s notion of ‘images’, which will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 1. In place of the traditional dichotomy between objects or things, and ideas or representations of those things, we have *images*, but images which can exist without being perceived. We then focus on the role of the body as a centre of ‘virtual actions’ in constituting ‘pure perception’. However, recognition requires more than pure perception: memory also is required. Here Bergson distinguishes between habit-memory, which is the body rising to the occasion of action once more, and pure recollection, which is inert. *Matter and Memory* is among the most difficult and challenging of Bergson’s works. He is willing to describe its conclusion as an extreme form of dualism, yet he completely rejects traditional dualism. The central notion of memory is the key, for, in his view, when those ‘images’ which we call ‘bodies’ become conscious, and then self-conscious, we have a complex and layered set of states of consciousness, from the primarily bodily to the spiritual, a complex layering, a reaching up and down,

---

3 *Matière et Mémoire*, p. 9: «Un problème métaphysique capital se trouve transporté sur le terrain d’observation, où il pourra être résolu progressivement, au lieu d’alimenter indéfiniment les disputes entre écoles dans le champs clos de la dialectique pure.»

4 Bergson made extensive reference to contemporary work in this area, by Charcot and Freud and many others, and would have applauded Oliver Sacks’s elaboration and pursuit of Luria’s ‘romantic science’ in, for instance, *The Man who Mistook his Wife for a Hat* (1985).
which the associationist psychology and its successors cannot possibly encompass.

After *Matter and Memory*, Bergson produced a series of less extended works, on laughter, dreams and intellectual effort, in which various forms of ‘reaching up and down’ between these layers are studied.

*Laughter* (1900), focuses nicely on a specific but crucial case. We shall discuss his treatment of this topic in Chapter 4. In outline, Bergson’s view is that we typically laugh when what should be living seems or becomes mechanical, when what should be, or is, at a higher level, falls into or mimics a lower.

The case of dreams shows analogous features (‘The Dream’ [1901]). Bergson argues in some detail, and with references to a number of empirical studies, that in dreams, our perceptual and intellectual powers are still at work, even if not the higher intellectual powers. The waking self, he argues, puts the world together from clues. Reading, for instance, is a kind of divination5. The words and phrases are read from cues. The work of the mind in dreams is similar, except that the sleeping self is inactive and indifferent to the real world, and is therefore not channelled by the needs and purposes of waking life. Bergson explores these differences through an interesting dialogue between the sleeping and the waking self in a person caught at the moment of awakening.

In ‘Intellectual Effort’ (1902), we find once more differences of level at which effort can occur. In the case of attention to perceptions, we may understand what effort consists in by referring to motor phenomena which are concomitant with the perception. But there are different levels of consciousness, as already explored in *Matter and Memory*. Bergson has an extensive discussion of forms of memory and memorization

5 ‘Rêve’, pp. 98–9: «La lecture courante est un travail de divination.»
which operate through schematization at a simpler level of consciousness. He instances ‘Kim’s game’ (though he does not use this word for it), in which a variety of objects, set out to be memorized after a brief look, must be seen as a pattern or schema (not interpreted). He also discusses certain techniques of language-learning involving the rote acquisition of whole phrases or sentences. He looks at memory of verse and at the grasp of a series of chess games by those who play blindfold chess against a number of opponents. Effort, says Bergson, is required when we move from one level of consciousness to another. An example is creative thought, of which the essence is to move between schemata and specific images which can instantiate them. The reality of these processes provides the source for the notions of efficient and final causation, which are extracted from them.

These treatments of various detailed topics, briefly summarized here, raise a question. What is Bergson doing to philosophy? Like the earlier Aristotle, he seems to be saying that each subject requires its own methods and approach\(^6\), so that if we can pursue all these severally and properly, there would apparently be nothing left over for ‘philosophy’ to do. Bergson has recommended, in *Matter and Memory*, ‘observation on the ground’. But, in face of his own increasingly piecemeal studies, he comes to think twice. Is there after all room for metaphysics? Indeed, do all such particular areas of work necessitate the formulation of a general position about this kind of ‘observation’?

In the ‘Introduction to Metaphysics’ (1903), Bergson took a decisive step as it were to reinstate the subject of which he now held the Chair at the *Collège de France*, against the challenges implicit in his earlier work, and it was this step to which

\(^6\) For further discussion, see Chapter 1.
BERGSON: THINKING BACKWARDS

Russell objected with particular vehemence. Bergson gave a cardinal role to intuition, and, correlativey, introduced his notion of the ‘absolute’. In my view, it is difficult to exaggerate the importance of this step in Bergson’s itinerary. In spite of what has been said thus far, one could argue that it is a development, flowing naturally from his earlier practice, rather than a break. Yet there is no doubt that it transformed his field of endeavour: before the ‘Introduction to Metaphysics’, Bergson’s work could be described as a set of efforts to transform psychology (broadly construed); these were supposed to vary in character according to the subject matter, but typically involved recourse to the phenomenology of mental states, as well as detailed attention to empirical studies. Now, however, intuition receives a general characterization as that which takes us ‘inside’ an object, thus grasping it as an ‘absolute’, as contrasted with analysis, which compares objects and sets them in relation to other different objects, and is in that sense dealing with what is ‘relative’. Bergson introduces the distinction using the familiar example of my raising my arm. From the ‘inside’, this is a simple act. But it can be viewed by an observer as a complex sequence of events or elements. This example itself introduces nothing new or surprising. What is new is Bergson’s willingness to make the contrast between intuition and analysis entirely general (independent of subject-matter), to use it as a principle for distinguishing positive science from metaphysics, and to open the possibility that any object may be approached by this new metaphysics. This is what will make it possible for Bergson to turn his attention to theories about the natural order: in particular, to evolutionary theory and to relativity theory. His itinerary has changed direction.

7 For further discussion, see Chapter 2, part (iv).
INTRODUCTION

I suggest therefore that the ‘Introduction to Metaphysics’ establishes a significant discontinuity between Bergson’s earlier and later philosophy (such as we see in many thinkers).

The first of these later works was *Creative Evolution* (1907), in which Bergson introduced the notion for which he is perhaps most widely known, that of the *élan vital*. He accepts the evolution of life as a fact, and his aim in the book is to reject both mechanistic and finalistic views of this process. The mechanistic approach makes the usual mistake of analysis: for, having divided organisms and living processes up in order to understand their parts, we shall never succeed in putting them together again into the living reality. Nor does finalism help, since it merely inverts the causal order, explaining the segmented process by its end-point(s), instead of by its initial point(s). In neither case, according to Bergson, can the creation of new forms and new solutions receive a satisfying explanation. (He rejects the orthodox view by which chance variations together with natural selection would be sufficient to provide such an explanation.) Thus the flow of time of which we are aware at the level of individual consciousness, that flow which is misrepresented when we analyse it perforce into components, becomes the model for life itself. For my part, I think that his attempt to create a sort of super-phenomenology for life itself, analogous to a phenomenology for an individual consciousness, and to claim that we have access to it by *ourselves* being living creatures, is dubious, though, as we shall see, he had some interesting arguments for it. It was influenced, perhaps, by the fashion for ‘panpsychism’. Fechner, whose work on the psychology of perception Bergson had used in *Time and Free Will*, was also the author of work on the ‘World-Soul’, about which Bergson corresponded with William James. At the same time, Bergson envisaged Deism for the first time in this work.

Nevertheless, there is another important element in the
BERGSON: THINKING BACKWARDS

book, which can stand in relative independence, namely, his account of the evolution of instinct and intelligence. This provides a new support for his earlier claim that intelligence is a pragmatic acquisition: we have acquired analytic abilities and practices out of the need to live and act.

But Bergson shows some signs of bad conscience about his treatment of evolution. In his lecture ‘Philosophical Intuition’ (1911), he said:

Here is someone who has followed a certain scientific method over a long period and laboriously achieved his results, and who tells us: ‘Experience, helped by reasoning, leads to this point; scientific knowledge starts here and ends there; these are my conclusions’; and the philosopher is supposed to have the right to reply: ‘Fine, leave that with me! Just look what I can do with it! I shall complete the knowledge which you brought to me incomplete. What you brought in a disjointed form, I shall unify....’ Really, what a strange pretension! How can the profession of philosophy entitle a practitioner to go further than science?.... Such a conception of the role of the philosopher would be injurious for science. But how much more injurious for philosophy?8

It is hard not to read this passage as an attack on the kind of enterprise represented by Creative Evolution.

There followed a long period of minor works, during which Bergson produced Duration and Simultaneity (1922), which discusses Relativity Theory. The question was how to relate his

---

8 ‘Intuition’, pp. 135-6: «Voici un homme qui a longuement pratiqué une certaine méthode scientifique et laborieusement conquis ses résultats, qui vient nous dire: “l’expérience, aidée du raisonnement, conduit jusqu’en ce point; la connaissance scientifique commence ici, elle finit là; telles sont mes conclusions”; et le philosophe aurait le droit de lui répondre: “Fort bien, laissez-moi cela, vous allez voir ce que j’en saurai faire! La connaissance que vous m’apportez incomplète, je la compléterai. Ce que vous me présentez disjoint, je l’unifierai”.... Étrange prétention, en vérité! Comment la profession de philosophe conférerait-elle à celui qui l’exerce le pouvoir d’avancer plus loin que la science?.... Une telle conception du rôle du philosophe serait injurieuse pour la science. Mais combien plus injurieuse encore pour la philosophie!»