

UNMASKING BERGSON'S IDEALISM

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This paper attempts to sketch an interpretation of Bergson's metaphysics. In the first part I want to discuss what I take to be the core of Bergson's analysis of the origin of concepts that disfigure experience. In the second part I want to examine how Bergson's epistemological analysis informs his metaphysical position. I will try to suggest reasons of interpreting Bergson, not as a vitalist nor as a pioneer of process metaphysics, but as one of the last of the nineteenth century idealists.

I. Bergson's Critique*

Aspects of Bergson's metaphysics suggest a hidden idealism at the depth of his endeavor to elucidate the nature of two key terms: the vital impetus and duration. As an introduction to this discussion I will first briefly address Bergson's critical method as he developed it through the metaphor of endosmosis. This strategy is adopted since his treatment of endosmosis unlocks Bergson's diagnosis of conceptual errors in speculative philosophy, and since he assumed that metaphysical problems were informed by the analysis of the origin of our ideas. It is through the morphology of endosmosis that Bergson is able to diagnose the etiology of speculative illusions. In the second part of the paper I will try to show how Bergson's metaphysics can be subjected to the same method that he used in the criticism of traditional concepts of speculative philosophy.

Bergson's program originates in the attempt to purge some concepts of the idea of space. His attack on "spatialization" involves an etiological analysis of endosmosis which sponsors the intrusion of ideas borrowed from the external world into the region of mind. One philosopher was even led to characterize this approach as a type of "epistemological psychoanalysis."¹ Some concepts generated from pragmatic interests are misap-

*For a detailed examination of Bergson's methodology see my paper "The Process of Endosmosis in the Bergsonian Critique," *The Modern Schoolman*, LXV, November 1987.

plied in the investigation of human consciousness in which change is intrinsic, and space—a diagrammatic design for the ideal limit of extension—is surreptitiously introjected through habitual forms of thinking and perceiving. Thus Bergson believed that the unreflective osmotic interfusing of ideas was engendered by considerations of utility. The identification of this habitual transfer of ideas from the plane of practical action to the region of speculative philosophy is necessary if one seeks to clarify the immediate data of experience upon which, for Bergson, philosophy must be constructed.

Endosmosis is used as a metaphor to describe a compenetration of psychical elements with elements “borrowed” by intelligence from its adaptation to the world. He locates the genesis of conceptual confusion by showing how ideas that apply to the external world impose themselves on introspective acts by producing “hybrid” concepts; i.e., concepts not modelled after immediate data of experience, but derivative concepts composed of mongrel elements and represented under one idea. The hybrid concept, then, is only a by-product of more primitive ideas.

The clarification of experience begins by unmasking interpretive elements that are unconsciously, though habitually, superimposed on the evaluation of experience. Bergson writes,

intelligence has contracted habits necessary for everyday living; these habits, transferred to the domain of speculation, bring us face to face with a reality, distorted or made over, or at any rate arranged; but the arrangement does not force itself upon us . . . ; it comes from ourselves. . . .²

Bergson used endosmosis to explain the operation by which the arrangement comes to be. From the arrangement, hybrid concepts are formed that disfigure experience. He contended that some mental functions have a practical character; they are “turned toward action.” Consequently, habits are formed that infiltrate the “sphere of speculation, where they create fictitious problems.”³

This concludes a brief sketch of Bergson’s method for analyzing concepts. In the next part I want to examine interpretations of Bergson’s metaphysics by providing a Bergsonian

critique of his treatment of the vital impetus. There may be grounds, on Bergson’s terms, for regarding the vital impetus as a hybrid concept composed of primitive elements borrowed from mind.

II. Bergson’s Idealism

The term vitalism has often been used to describe Bergson’s metaphysical view. However, I want to show that his metaphysics is ambiguous and that the ambiguity of his thought can be traced to the same type of osmotic fusion of ideas that he so vigorously analyzed in his critical evaluation of philosophical concepts. His view of the ultimate nature of reality, I will argue, can be traced to a compenetration of ideas that are cast by Bergson in mentalistic terms, although represented under the hybrid concept of the vital impetus. What has been interpreted as vitalism by some commentators or as a metaphysics of process by others, is in fact ontological idealism.

As early as *Time and Free Will* Bergson characterized existence as composed of heterogeneous strata. The stratification ranges from the deep self in which the tension of duration is pronounced, to the strata of living bodies where durational tension is less and the externality of parts is greater, to the stratum of material bodies where extension is most pronounced, durational tension is most relaxed and the habitual repetition of events is at a maximum. Even though extension is a conspicuous property of matter, Bergson held that the microscopic region of matter is composed of quanta of energy pulsating at intermediate levels.

The question that has concerned interpreters of Bergson is, “What are these strata of existence degrees of?” There are three plausible candidates: the vital impetus, process or mind.

Čapek has argued that Bergson’s metaphysics is not an “unqualified form of monism.”⁴ Certainly there is a dualistic character between the psychological (mental) stratum and the physical stratum. And although there is no strict dualism of mind and matter, the differences between them appear conspicuous owing to the varying degrees of durational tension from the psychological to the physical. As Bergson recognized in *Matter and Memory*, metaphysical theories of dualism are the speculative residue of pragmatic intelligence which habitually tends to

separate into distinct substances what is a continuity of varying degrees of duration in the stratified whole.

In our experience existence implies two conditions: "(1) presentation in consciousness; and (2) the logical or causal connection of that which is so presented with what precedes and with what follows."⁵ The reality of a conscious state and that of a material thing are constituted by these two conditions. For Bergson these conditions "admit of degrees, and it is conceivable that, though both are necessary, they may be unequally fulfilled."⁶

Existence implies these two conditions "both at the same time but in different degrees."⁷ For the existence of psychical states the condition of conscious apprehension dominates; for the existence of material things the dominating condition is regular causal connection. There is a degree of regular causal connection among psychical states, and a degree of conscious apprehension of material things. While these two conditions are implied in the existence of both mind and matter, the intellect insists on setting up a rigid dichotomy by separating them; consequently, mind and matter become just as rigidly separated. The intellect attributes "to external objects on the one hand, and to internal states on the other, two radically different modes of existence, each characterized by the exclusive presence of the condition which should be regarded as merely preponderating."⁸ The intellect falsely attributes a difference in kind to what is actually a difference of degree. Thus Bergson does not favor a rigid dualism between mind and matter.

Having argued against metaphysical dualism it is now necessary to explore what is common to the various strata ranging from matter to life to mind. One interpretation asserts that duration is the common ground of the various strata. According to this view of dynamic monism—which takes process and change to be fundamental—reality is a stratified whole with duration being intrinsic to all of the strata. Duration possesses varying degrees of tension depending on whether the stratum is matter or life or mind.

The interpretation of Bergson's metaphysics as dynamic monism argues that the vital impetus, which is essential for understanding Bergson's position, is accounted for in terms of duration. It holds that the vital impetus is a kinetic substance reducible to pure change; further, it holds that pure change is essential

to duration since duration is an organic composition of indivisible successive processes. One version of this interpretation was offered by Ian Alexander when he argued against a rigid dualism between matter and the vital impetus. According to Alexander,

the vital impetus and the forms in which it manifests itself, are thus two complementary aspects of creation; not two realities, but one single act, which now tends, now distends, and in its projection 'explicates' the virtualities implicit within itself.⁹

Thus Alexander not only reduces the vital impetus to duration, but further identifies duration with creative activity. This identification may be partially correct; however, it is not complete since it neglects the aspect of memory that is essential for grasping Bergson's conception of duration.

It is not clear in what sense duration qualifies as the common denominator for the strata of existence from mind to matter, even if the vital impetus can be identified with duration. A study by Arthur Berndtson, *Power, Form, and Mind*, comes closer to a more correct interpretation since it analyzes the traits that compose Bergson's organic conception of duration. Berndtson maintains that Bergson's metaphysics appears dualistic with regard to matter and the vital impetus, but he cautiously suggests a monism on the basis of his analysis of the vital impetus. He argues that we find "a dualism at the surface of his philosophy and evidence below it for a monism favoring the vital impetus."¹⁰

Berndtson would agree that the vital impetus is identified with becoming to the degree that it is "a kinetic substance whose nature consists of continuous becoming."¹¹ This position accepts the process interpretation insofar as it equates the vital impetus with pure becoming intrinsic to duration. However, the implication of this identification is carried further when it is argued that the impetus is developed by Bergson "under the concept of mind"¹² since the impetus bears psychical elements; it is endowed with the traits of memory and creativity. The vital impetus, writes Berndtson,

seems to combine creativity, which is the source of change, and memory, which secures the continuity in

change. Memory is a psychical aspect in the impetus; and so is creativity, which seems to contain a general appetency directed to novelty but not to any specific novelty. Here the vital seems to be subservient to the psychical.¹³

The vital impetus, as it is developed under the concept of mind, is a hybrid concept composed of two psychical aspects—memory and creativity. Thus the concept of the impetus is not derived from any one ultimate substance. If we have correctly located the source of the vital impetus, then we have a basis for maintaining that a primitive mind is operative even at the lowest stratum of reality. Moreover, in contrast to the interpretation that process is fundamental to all the strata, duration cannot qualify as the common denominator since memory and creativity are also essential traits in Bergson's development of duration. Memory secures the indivisible continuity of succession and creativity is required for engendering the future emergence of novel forms. Even at the lowest level of matter, which is pre-vital, there is a minimum of duration; yet duration in the physical stratum, just as duration in the psychical stratum, is conceived by Bergson in terms of memory by which the continuity of the past rigidly prefigures future advance.¹⁴

Duration, like the vital impetus, is also conceived under the concept of mind. Rather than advancing vitalism or pure process, Bergson's ontology reduces to idealism; mind is more basic than the vital impetus since the functional unity of organic processes it requires presupposes mind. Moreover, if the stratified reality is conceived through varying degrees of duration, then mind is still basic since duration is a hybrid of memory and creativity. Thus the vital impetus reduces to duration and duration reduces to mind. According to this account, change and becoming are basic attributes of mind rather than fundamental dynamic substances.

This interpretation not only emphasizes the psychical nature of the vital impetus, it is also compatible with the view that ascribes a mild finalism to Bergson's metaphysics.¹⁵ The role of the vital impetus is to create through a continuity of its advance into the future. Bergson's position supports a mild finalism since a living organism is constituted out of a mutual adaptation of parts and the impetus secures a continuity of irreversible

processes from past, present, to future. The impetus, by coordination of variations, maintains a continuity and unity of function in the living organism. It enables living forms to develop greater complexity and organization than previously existed. All species diverge from the original impetus, but nevertheless, they maintain an identity of their origin in their structural development.¹⁶

Although it is well known by Bergson's readers that he rejected mechanism and radical finalism, it is seldom noticed that the vital impetus is "goal-directed"; however, its "directedness" is not determined by any specific goal. Man can be looked upon as the "end" of evolution in the respect that with him consciousness has overcome the determination and necessity of matter. This recognition of a mild finalism and Bergson's attention to the problem of teleology serves to reinforce the idealistic turn in his metaphysics.

He was probably not aware of the hybrid nature of his own concepts—such as duration and the vital impetus—which disguise idealism in general and pan-psychism in particular. The "unmasking" of idealism is made possible by a technique developed by Bergson in his critical philosophy. Concepts Bergson thought essential for constructing a metaphysics can be subjected to the same type of critical analysis that served as a propaedeutic to Bergson's speculative thought. He believed that endosmosis promotes the disfiguration of experience when concepts that conform to one stratum of existence are illegitimately transferred to another stratum.

This paper has been an attempt to analyze the osmotic fusion of ideas that go into the composition of duration and the vital impetus. Bergson failed to see the identification of the vital impetus with duration, and, even more importantly, he did not recognize that duration is a hybrid term which borrows memory and creativity from the stratum of mind and is applied to a general conception of reality.

NOTES

¹M. Čapek, *Bergson and Modern Physics* (Dordrecht-Holland: Reidel Publishing Company, 1971), p. 85.

²H. Bergson, *Creative Mind*. Translated by M. Andison (New York: Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1965), pp. 28-29.

³H. Bergson, *Matter and Memory*. Translated by N. Paul and W. Palmer (New York: Humanities Press, 1911), p. xxi.

⁴Bergson and *Modern Physics*, p. 193.

⁵*Matter and Memory*, p. 189.

⁶*ibid.*

⁷*ibid.*, p. 190.

⁸*ibid.*

⁹I. Alexander, *Bergson, Philosopher of Reflection* (London: Bowes and Bowes, 1957), p. 47.

¹⁰A. Berndtson, *Power, Form and Mind* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1981), p. 190.

¹¹*ibid.*

¹²*ibid.*

¹³*ibid.*

¹⁴H. Bergson, *Duration and Simultaneity*. Translated by L. Jacobson (New York: Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1965), pp. 47-48. Here Bergson discusses duration in the physical world as analogous to duration in psychic existence.

¹⁵See D. Herman's book, *The Philosophy of Bergson* (Washington: University Press of America, 1980), which is entirely devoted to arguing for the thesis that Bergson's development from *Time and Free Will* to *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* implies a mild finalism as opposed to the radical finalism and mechanism that he argued against.

¹⁶H. Bergson, *Creative Evolution*. Translated by A. Mitchell (New York: Random House, Inc., 1944), p. 98.