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BERGSON

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Introduction

Henri Bergson (1859–1941) is widely recognized to be France's greatest philosopher of the modern period. He was the author of four classic texts of philosophy, three of them characterized by a combination of exceptional philosophical gifts and impressive mastery of extensive scientific literature. Each text offers readers a number of theoretical innovations. *Time and Free Will* (1889) provides a novel account of free will by showing that time is not space and that psychic states do not lend themselves to treatment as extensive magnitudes. *Matter and Memory* (1896) provides a non-orthodox (non-Cartesian) dualism of matter and mind, seeking to show that whilst the difference between matter and perception is one of degree (unless we construe it in these terms the emergence of perception out of matter becomes something mysterious and inexplicable), that between perception and memory is one of kind (unless we construe it in these terms memory is deprived of any autonomous character and is reduced to being a merely diluted form of perception, a secondary perception as we find in Locke). *Matter and Memory* offers an extremely rich and novel account of different types of memory that philosophical psychology is still catching up with today. In *Creative Evolution* (1907) Bergson endeavours to demonstrate the need for a philosophy of life in which the theory of knowledge and a theory of life are viewed as inseparably bound up with one another. In the text Bergson seeks to establish what philosophy must learn from the new biology (the neo-Darwinism established by August Weismann) and what philosophy can offer the new theory of the evolution of life. It is a *tour de force*, a work of truly extraordinary philosophical ambition. In *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* (1932), his final text, and where the engagement with scientific literature is not as extensive, Bergson outlines a novel approach to the study of society (sociology) with his categories of the "closed" and the "open" and the "static" and the "dynamic." He advances a criticism of the rationalist approach to ethics that merits being taken as seriously as Nietzsche's critique of attempts to establish ethics on a rational foundation (Nietzsche 1998: §186). Finally, there are two important collections of essays: *Mind Energy* and *Creative Mind*.

Bergson's philosophy has a number of unique features to it. He has an impressive grasp of the history of science and of new scientific development such as thermodynamics

and neo-Darwinism. His ambition was to restore the absolute as the legitimate object of philosophy and to accomplish by showing how it is possible to think beyond the human condition. Although he contests Kant's stress on the relativity of knowledge to the human standpoint in a manner similar to Hegel, his conception of the absolute is not the same. This is the surprise of Bergson, and perhaps explains why he appears as such an unfamiliar figure to us today: he seeks to demonstrate the absolute – conceived as the totality of differences in the world, differences of degree and differences of kind – through placing man back into nature and the evolution of life. That is, he uses the resources of naturalism and empiricism to support an apparently Idealist philosophical program. Indeed, Bergson argues that "true empiricism" is "the real metaphysics" and held that the more the sciences of life develop the more they will feel the need to reintegrate thought into the very heart of nature (Bergson 2007a: 22). In his own day he was read primarily as an empiricist whose thinking amounted, in the words of his former pupil and later harsh critic, Jacques Maritain, to a "wild experimentalism." Maritain accused Bergson of realizing in metaphysics "the very soul of empiricism," of producing an ontology of becoming not "after the fashion of Hegel's panlogism" but rather "after the fashion of an integral empiricism" (Maritain 1943: 65). Julien Benda vigorously protested against Bergson's demand for new ways of thinking and new methods in philosophy and called for a return to the hyper-rationalism of Spinoza (see Benda 1954). Bergson does not readily fit into the two main camps that define the contemporary academic institution of philosophy: neither the continental one which insists on keeping apart philosophy and science and regards any interest in science as philosophically suspect, nor the analytic one which cheerfully subsumes philosophy within the ambit of the natural sciences and renders metaphysics otiose.

In histories of modern philosophy it is standard to place Bergson alongside Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) and Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911) as a philosopher of life and to portray him, along with Nietzsche, as an irrationalist (see Grogin 1988: 73–6, Lehan 1992: 324–5; on Bergson and irrationalism see Höffding 1915: 232; Maritain 1943: 57–61; Schwartz 1992: 289–91). This standard criticism of Bergson amounts to a caricature. As in Nietzsche, reason is promoted by Bergson; what is subjected to critique is a self-sufficient reason and intellectualism. Bergson is not anti-rationalist but anti-intellectualist (see Gutting 2001: 73). Like Nietzsche, Bergson wants a philosophy that can do justice to contingency, to particularity, to individuality, to spontaneous forces and energies, to the creation of the new, and so on. A philosophy of history is found in neither and Hegel's panlogism is anathema to both. Nietzsche famously advocates translating the human back into nature (Nietzsche 1998: §230); we find this echoed in Bergson when he argues in favor of a genetic approach to questions of morality and religion that places "man back in nature as a whole" (Bergson 1979: 208). Those phenomena that have been denied a history and a nature must be given them back.

What stands in the way of our intellectual development and growth? Bergson's answer is the same as Nietzsche's: the prejudices of philosophers with their trust in immediate certainties and penchant for philosophical dogmatizing (Nietzsche 1998: Preface and 43; Bergson 2007a: 40). Both accuse Schopenhauer's will to life

of being an empty generalization that proves disastrous for science. For Nietzsche, Schopenhauer's doctrine can only result in a "false reification" since it leads to the view that that all that exists empirically is the manifestation of one will (Nietzsche 1986: Vol. 2, pt 1, §5). For Bergson, the "will to life" is an empty concept supported by a barren theory of metaphysics (Bergson 1979: 115). It is impossible, he argues, to cite a biological discovery due to pure reasoning, whilst all the molds in which we seek to force the living crack, being too narrow and too rigid for what we try to put into them. Both thinkers practice historical philosophizing and identify this with the intellectual virtue of modesty. Both insist on the need to provide a genesis of the intellect as a way of ascertaining the evolutionary reasons as to why we have the intellectual habits we do. At certain points in his development Nietzsche is willing to sacrifice metaphysics to history and hands over to science the task of coming up with a history of the genesis of thought and concepts (Nietzsche 1986: Vol. 1, §§10 and 16; Vol. 2, pt 1, §10). For Bergson this is a task that can only be adequately be performed by a reformed metaphysics that proceeds via a new method of intuition. This is, in essence, Bergson's response to Kant's Copernican Revolution. In 1878 Nietzsche insists that there is only representation (*Vorstellung*) and that no hunch can take us any further. By 1886, however, Nietzsche commits himself to the view that there is, in fact, a dimension of the world outside of representation – the will to power as a pre-form (*Vorform*) of life – but insists that this is to be approached through the "conscience of method" (Nietzsche 1998: §36), a critical project which, like all others in Nietzsche, denotes the method of the "intellectual conscience" that seeks to replace the theological motivations of Kant's critical project with properly scientific ones (Nietzsche 2005b: §12). Bergson's response to Kant is equally critical and focuses attention on the soundness of the decisions Kant has made about the nature and extent of theoretical knowledge.

There are two main criticisms that have traditionally been advanced against the kind of project undertaken by Bergson. One is that naturalism cannot account for differences in kind insofar as it reduces modes of existence to differences of degree, especially between the human and the rest of nature. The other is that Bergson's thinking is guilty of the error of biologism (a criticism also leveled at Nietzsche's work), that is, of making an illegitimate extension of the biological to all spheres of existence such as the moral and the social (on biologism see Heidegger 1987: 39–48; Troeltsch 1991: 55). This criticism is, in effect, implied in the first concern. In the course of this essay I shall suggest that neither point has purchase when applied to Bergson.

Bergson's reception of Kant

Bergson does not accept two key theses of Kant's Copernican Revolution: (a) the claim that knowledge is relative to our faculties of knowing, and (b) the claim that metaphysics is impossible on the grounds that there can be no knowledge outside of science (Newtonian mechanism) or that science has correctly determined the bounds of metaphysics. For Bergson a new relation between philosophy and science is called for and knowledge of the absolute is to be restored:

> If we now inquire why Kant did not believe that the matter of our knowledge extends beyond its form, this is what we find. The criticism of our knowledge of nature that was instituted by Kant consisted in ascertaining what our mind must be and what Nature must be *if* the claims of our science are justified; but of these claims themselves Kant has not made the criticism. I mean that he took for granted the idea of a science that is one, capable of binding with the same force all the parts of what is given, and of co-ordinating them into a system presenting on all sides an equal solidity. He did not consider … that science became less and less objective, more and more symbolical, to the extent that it went from the physical to the vital, from the vital to the psychical. (2007b: 229)

Bergson contends that the physical laws of scientific knowledge are, in their mathematical form, artificial constructions foreign to the real movement of nature since its standards of measurement are conventional ones created by the concerns of the human intellect and its attachment to utilitarian groupings. This does not prevent Bergson from appreciating the success of modern science; on the contrary, it is his insights into the specific character of science that enables him to appreciate the reasons for its success, namely, the fact that it is contingent and relative to the variables it has selected and to the order in which it stages problems. For Bergson, philosophy needs to involve itself in special problems as we encounter in the positive sciences. The true difficulty is to create the unique solution of the problem which the philosopher has posed anew in the very effort of trying to solve it, and this involves abstracting oneself from language (from order-words) which has been made for conversation and which satisfies the requirements of common sense and social action, but not those of thinking. The genuine philosopher, as opposed to the amateur, is one who does not accept the terms of a problem as a common problem that has been definitively posed and which then requires that s/he select from the available solutions to the problem (the example Bergson gives to illustrate his point is that of Samuel Butler rejecting Darwin's solution in favour of Lamarck's) (Bergson 2002: 370).

Bergson makes two major claims contra Kant: the first is that the mind cannot be restricted to the intellect since it overflows it; and second, that duration has to be granted an absolute existence, which requires thinking time on a different plane to space. According to Bergson, Kant considered only three possibilities for a theory of knowledge: (i) the mind is determined by external things; (ii) things are determined by the mind itself; (iii) between the mind and things we have to suppose a mysterious agreement or pre-established harmony. In contrast to these three options, Bergson seeks to demonstrate the need for a double genesis of matter and the intellect. It is not that matter has determined the form of the intellect or that the intellect simply imposes its own form upon matter, or even that there is some curious harmony between the two we can never explain, but rather that the two have, in the course of evolution, progressively adapted themselves one to the other and so attained a common form. He regards this adaptation as coming about naturally, "*because it is the same inversion of the same movement which creates at once the intellectuality of mind and the materiality of things*"

(Bergson 2007b: 133). Both science and the intellect for Bergson concern themselves with the aspect of repetition. The intellect selects in a given situation whatever is like something already known so as to fit it into a pre-existing schema; in this way it applies "its principle that 'like produces like'" (2007b: 19). It rebels against the idea of an original and unforeseeable production of forms. Similarly, science focuses its attention on isolable or closed systems, simply because anything "that is irreducible and irreversible in the successive moments of a history eludes" it (*ibid.*). In cases of organic evolution, Bergson insists, foreseeing the form in advance is not possible. This is not because there are no conditions or specific causes of evolution but rather owing to the fact that they are built into, are part and parcel of, the particular form of organic life and so "are peculiar to that phase of its history in which life finds itself at the moment of producing the form" (*ibid.*: 18). There is a need to display a readiness to be taken by surprise in the study of nature and to appreciate that there might be a difference between human logic and the logic of nature. The scientist has to cultivate a feeling for the complexity of natural phenomena. In this respect we cannot approach nature with any *a priori* conceptions of parts and wholes or any *a priori* conception of what constitutes life, including how we delimit the boundaries of an organism and hence define it. We must resist the temptation to place or hold nature within our own ideas or shrink reality to the measure of them. Contra Kant, therefore, we should not allow our need for a unity of knowledge to impose itself upon the multiplicity of nature. Moreover, to follow the sinuosities of reality means that we cannot slot the real into a concept of all concepts, be it Spirit, Substance, Ego or Will (Bergson 1965: 35 and 49).

Bergson argues that it "is not enough to determine, by careful analysis, the categories of thought; we must engender them" (2007b: 133). A theory of knowledge and a theory of life are to be viewed as inseparable since if the critique of knowledge is not accompanied by a philosophy of life – which will study the emergence of the human intellect and the habits of the mind in its evolutionary context of adaptation – we will blindly accept the concepts that the intellect has placed at our disposal and enclose our facts within a set of pre-existing frames. We need to show how the frames of knowledge have been constructed and how they can be enlarged and gone beyond. Instead of ending up with a split between appearance and reality, or between phenomenon and noumenon, we now approach epistemological issues in terms of the relation between our partial perspective on the real, which has evolved in accordance with the vital needs of adaptation, and a mobile whole. The sensible intuition of a homogenous time and space that Kant establishes as transcendental forms, for example, on presupposes a "real duration" and a "real extensity": the former are stretched out beneath the latter in order that the moving continuity can be divided and a becoming can be fixed (Bergson 1991: 211).

Thinking beyond the human condition

Bergson conceives philosophy as the discipline that "raises us above the human condition" ("*la philosophie nous aura élevés au-dessus de la condition humaine*") and makes the effort to "surpass" (*dépasser*) it (Bergson 1965: 50; 2007a: 45).[1] Philosophy

provides us with the methods for reversing the normal directions of the mind (instrumental, utilitarian), so upsetting its habits. Because it finds itself having to work against the most inveterate habits of the mind, Bergson compares philosophy to an act of violence (2007a: 33, 40; 2007b: 19). The aim of the enterprise is to expand the humanity within us and allow humanity to surpass itself by reinserting itself in the whole (it recognizes it is part of nature and the evolution of life) (*ibid.*: 124). Intelligence is reabsorbed into its principle and comes to know its own genesis. In spite of what one might think, this makes the task of philosophy a modest one (*ibid.*: 123). If we suppose that philosophy is an affair of perception, then it cannot simply be a matter of correcting perception but only of extending it. Like Nietzsche before him, Bergson is seeking to draw attention to fact that humanity has constituted itself on the basis of a set of errors without being aware of this (Nietzsche 1974: §§110–12, 115). We find ourselves born or thrown into a world that is "ready-made" and that we have not made our own, and it when we recognize this that we are motivated to think beyond the human condition.

Bergson was motivated by what he saw as the need to correct the wandering and aimless nature of much of our research into the workings of the mind, in which there is an absence of a guiding thread (Bergson 1965: 53). The supposition he sees at work in psychology is that the mind has fallen from heaven in which its subdivision into functions and faculties (memory, imagination, conception, and perception) needs only to be recognized. Only an inquiry into the fundamental exigencies of life will enable us to raise the most important questions, such as, for example, whether the ordinary subdivision into various faculties is natural or artificial. Should our divisions be maintained or modified? Moreover, if one of the results of the research conducted is that the exigencies of life are found to be working in an analogous fashion in humans, animals and plants, what will be the consequences for all kinds of disciplines and modes of inquiry? Our reliance on an unconscious metaphysics has led us to cut up and distribute psychological life in an inadequate manner, one that cannot do justice to the complexity of our evolution and how the mind has been formed. There is, therefore, a need to dig down to sources and roots. Both Nietzsche and Bergson share this commitment to archaeology as a way of opening up the human condition and subjecting the mind and its habits of thinking to a genetic history.

Bergson insists that the "whole" cannot be approached in terms of ready-made criteria of an organic totality. Neither is the whole of nature or the evolution of the fundamental directions of life, such as the divergent tendencies of instinct and intelligence, to be thought in dialectical terms of contradiction, negation, and sublation. It is not necessary to ascribe to evolution, whether natural or historical, a logical or dialectical development. On this point Bergson has clearly been inspired by the Darwinian revolution. Bergson considered Darwin to be the greatest of all modern naturalists and held that the doctrine of evolution would impose itself on our thinking. The conception of the "whole" he has in mind is that of a universal mobility. True evolutionism, he says, must focus on the study of becoming but this requires that we do not follow the path of perception which would reduce an "infinite multiplicity of becomings" to the single representation of a "becoming *in general*" (Bergson 2007b:

194). For Bergson the whole enjoys neither interiority nor totality; individuated forms of life have a tendency towards closure but this is never accomplished. As Bergson puts in *Creative Evolution*, "finality is external or it is nothing at all" (*ibid.*: 27). That the whole is never given but is a pure virtual should meet with our delight since it is only our habitual confusion of time with space, and the assimilation of time into space, that makes us think the whole is given, if only in the eyes of God (see Deleuze 1991: 104). We could say: on the level of life there is only actualization and differentiation but to make adequate sense of this we need to appeal to a conception of the whole, and what matters is the conception we evince of it. For Bergson it is the *élan vital* conceived as a "virtual" power of self-differentiation; for Nietzsche it is the will to power conceived as a pre-form (*Vorform*) of life (a potential of energy), which is also a power of self-differentiation. Without a conception of the whole we can only posit what comes into existence in mysterious and inexplicable terms of so many brute eruptions of being.

The "human condition" refers, then, not to an existential predicament but to accrued evolutionary habits of thought that prevent us from recognizing our own creative conditions of existence and restricts the domain of praxis to social utility. Bergson believes that there is a basis for a novel alliance between metaphysics and the new post-Newtonian sciences, insofar as both, working in concert, are able to discover the natural articulations of the universe that have been carved artificially by the intellect. The categories of stable being are not simple illusions but have their anchorage in the conditions of our evolutionary existence; space, for example, is a schema of matter that represents the limit of a movement of expansion that would come to an end as an external envelope of all possible extensions. On account of its ever more complete demonstration of the reciprocal action of all material points upon each other science produces an insight into the universal continuity between things. We might suppose that all we need to do is to replace the notion of matter with that of force, but this is still insufficient for what is decisive are "movements and lines of force whose reciprocal solidarity brings back to us universal continuity" (Bergson 1991: 200). It should, therefore, be the task of a theory of matter to find the reality hidden beneath our customary images of it and that are relative to our adaptive needs. This attempt to think beyond our customary images of matter explains why Bergson claims that "every philosophy of nature ends by finding the discontinuity that our senses perceive incompatible with the general properties of matter" (*ibid.*: 201).

In a letter of 1903 to William James Bergson speaks of the need to transcend "a simple logic" and "the methods of over-systematic philosophy which postulates the unity of the whole." If a "truly *positive* philosophy is possible," he adds, it "can only be found there" (Bergson 2002: 358–9). This would be the opposite of a closed system of metaphysics which one could decide to take or leave. Indeed, Bergson commits himself to the possibility of a metaphysics that could "progress indefinitely" (Bergson 1972: 652). The reformed metaphysics will advance by the gradual accumulation of obtained results. In other words, metaphysics does not have to be "a take-it-or-leave-it system" that is forever in dispute and doomed to start afresh, thinking abstractly and vainly without the support of empirical science. Not only is it the case for Bergson that metaphysics can be a true empiricism, but it can also work with science in an

effort to advance our knowledge of the various sources, tendencies, and directions of life. Bergson outlines what is in effect his "superior positivism" in his Huxley lecture of 1911 on "Life and Consciousness": "… we possess now a certain number of *lines of facts*, which do not go as far as we want, but which we can prolong hypothetically" (Bergson 2007c: 4). This is taken up again in the *The Two Sources* where he states that the different lines of fact indicate for us the direction of truth but none go far enough; the attainment of truth can only take place when the lines are prolonged to the point where they intersect (1979: 248). He makes it clear that the conception of a vital impetus and of a creative evolution were only arrived by following the evidence of biology. Furthermore, he stresses that his conception is not simply a hypothesis of the kind that can be found at the basis of all metaphysical systems; rather, it aims to be "a condensation of fact, a summing up of summings up" (*ibid.*: 249). The knowledge we wish to develop and advance concerning evolution must "keep to ascertained facts and the probabilities suggested by them" (*ibid.*: 273).

Duration

To think duration is to think "beyond the human condition" (Bergson 2007a: 45). My existence, including my duration, is disclosed by objects "inferior" and "superior," though in a certain sense interior, to me (*ibid.*: 33). Take the example Bergson gives of mixing a glass of water with sugar and waiting until the sugar dissolves, which he says is a "little fact big with meaning" (2007b: 6 and 216–17). The time I have to wait is not a mathematical time which we could apply to the entire history of the material world as if it was spread out instantaneously in space; rather, it coincides with an impatience that constitutes a portion of my duration and which I cannot protract or contract at will. This is an experience that is lived and denotes not a relative but an absolute. Furthermore, my duration has the power to disclose other durations and to encompass them *ad infinitum*. Bergson gives the example of a simultaneity of fluxes in which while sitting on the bank of a river, the flowing of the water, the flight of a bird, and the uninterrupted murmur in the depths of our life, can be treated as either three things or a single one (Bergson 2000: 36). Bergson admits that "to conceive of durations of different tensions and rhythms is both difficult and strange to our mind simply because we have acquired the useful habit of substituting for duration an homogeneous and independent time" (1991: 207).

Bergson argues that time involves a coexistence of past and present and not simply a continuity of succession as in Kant. Pure duration "is the form which the succession of our conscious states assumes when our ego lets itself *live*, when it refrains from separating its present state from its former states" (Bergson 2001: 100). Duration can be defined as "the continuous progress of the past which gnaws into the future and which swells as it advances" (Bergson 2007b: 2). It is irreversible since, "consciousness cannot go through the same state twice. The circumstances may still be the same, but they will act no longer on the same person, since they find him at a new moment of his history" (*ibid*: 4). Even if states can be repeated and assume the character of being identical, this is merely an appearance, so we cannot live over and over again a single

moment. We may think we can efface memory but such effacement would work on the level of our intellect, not our will. If we take time to be something positive then we have to treat it as both irreversible and unforeseeable. This conception of duration, which is that of a "becoming" which flows out of previous forms while always adding something new to them, is very different from Spinoza's conception of the "one complete Being" which manifests forms. For Bergson this conception denies "effective action" to duration (*ibid.*: 225). Both Cartesian and Spinozist physics seek to establish a relation of logical necessity between cause and effect and in so doing "do away with active duration" (Bergson 2001: 208–9).

Duration cannot be made the subject of a logical or mathematical treatment. This is owing to its character as a continuous multiplicity, as opposed to one made up of discrete parts or elements. In *Creative Evolution* Bergson addresses the status of his construal of life in terms of an impetus. He conceives it in terms of a "virtual multiplicity" (*virtuellement multiple*). He acknowledges that describing life in terms of an impetus is to offer little more than an image. The image, however, is intended to disclose something about the essential character of life, namely, that it is not of a mathematical or logical order but a psychological one: "In reality, life is of the psychological order, and it is of the essence of the psychical to enfold a confused plurality of interpenetrating terms" (Bergson 2007b: 165). The contrast he is making is with space in which the multiplicity posited or found therein will be made up of discrete elements or components that are related to one another in specific terms, namely, relations of juxtaposition and exteriority.

In Time and Free Will Bergson argues that the different degrees of a mental state correspond to qualitative changes that do not admit of simple measure or number. When we ordinarily speak of time we think of a homogeneous medium in which our conscious states are placed alongside one another as in space, and so form a discrete multiplicity. The question is whether the evolution of our psychic states resembles the multiplicity of the units of a number and whether duration has anything to do with space. If time is simply a medium in which our conscious states are strung out as a discrete series that can be counted, then time would indeed be space. The question Bergson poses is whether time can legitimately be treated as such a medium.

One way of opening the issue is to reflect on the nature of a psychic state and question the validity of treating it as a magnitude. Does it make sense, for example, to say that today I am twice as happy or joyous as I was yesterday? While we can distinguish between experiencing a twinge of jealousy and being obsessed by a jealous passion, would it make sense to say that the jealousy of Othello should be understood as being made up of innumerable twinges of jealousy? (see Moore 1996: 45; Bergson 2001: 73). Bergson asks: "why do we say of a higher intensity that it is greater? Why do we think of a greater quantity or a greater space?" (2001: 7). His contention is that states of consciousness cannot be isolated from one another but should be approached in terms of a multiplicity in which there is fusion and interpenetration, in short, a qualitative heterogeneity. The reason for this fusion and interpenetration is that the states of consciousness unfold themselves in duration and not, like the units of arithmetic, in space. An increasing intensity of a mental state is inseparable from

a qualitative progression and from a becoming of time. The notion of an intensive magnitude "involves an impure mixture between determinations that differ in kind" with the result that our question "by how much does a sensation grow or intensify?" takes us back to a badly stated problem (see Deleuze 1991: 19). It is not that we do not count in duration; rather, we count the moments of duration by means of points in space. We perfectly comprehend the sense of there being a number that is greater than another, but can the same be said of an intensive sensation? How can a more intense sensation contain one of less intensity? Unlike the law of number the relations among intensities cannot be adequately approached in terms of those of container and contained with different intensities being superposed upon one another. Adequately understood intensity cannot be assimilated to magnitude.

Looked out from the perspective of pure duration our states can be seen to permeate and melt into another without precise outlines and without any affiliation with number, in which past and present states form a whole, "as happens when we recall the notes of a tune, melting, so to speak, into another" (Bergson 2001: 100). These are involved in qualitative changes that disclose a "pure heterogeneity" (continuous variation). When we interrupt the rhythm of a tune by perhaps dwelling longer than is customary on one note, it is not the exaggerated length that signals the mistake to us but rather the qualitative change caused in the whole of the piece of music.

> We can thus conceive of succession without distinction, and think of it as a mutual penetration, an interconnexion and organization of elements, each one of which represent the whole, and cannot be distinguished or isolated from it except by abstract thought. (*Ibid.*: 101)

When we reduce time to a simple movement of position we confuse time with space. It is this confusion between motion and the space traversed which explains the paradoxes of Zeno. The interval between two points is infinitely divisible, and if motion is said to consist of parts like those of the interval itself, then the interval can never be crossed. But the truth of the matter is different:

> … each of Achilles's steps is a simple indivisible act … after a given number of these acts, Achilles will have passed the tortoise. The mistake of the Eleatics arises from their identification of this series of acts, each of which is *of a definite kind and indivisible*, with the homogeneous space which underlies them. (*Ibid.*: 113)

Because this space can be divided and put together again according to an abstract law, the illusion arises that it is possible to reconstruct the movement of Achilles not with his step but with that of the tortoise. In truth, we have only two tortoises that agree to make the same kind of steps or simultaneous acts so never to catch one another! Within any posited motionless trajectory it is possible to count as much immobility as we like. What we fail to see is that "the trajectory is created in one stroke, although a certain time is required for it; and that although we can divide at will the trajectory

once created, we cannot divide its creation, which is an act in progress and not a thing" (Bergson 2007b: 197). Whilst the space traversed is a matter of extension and quantity (it is divisible), but the movement is an intensive act and a quality. Bergson is insistent that it is "through the quality of quantity that we form the idea of quantity without quality," not the other way round. Qualitative operations are even at work in the formation of numbers. The addition of a third unit to two others alters the nature (the rhythm) of the whole, even though our spatial habits lead us to disregard the significance of these varying aspects (Bergson 2001: 123). We can appreciate why Bergson holds that metaphysics, in the negative sense of the term, begins not with Plato but with Zeno: "Metaphysics … was born of the arguments of Zeno of Elea on the subject of change and movement. It was Zeno who, by drawing attention to the absurdity of what he called movement and change, led the philosophers – Plato first and foremost – to seek the true and coherent reality in what does not change" (Bergson 1965: 141; see also 17).

Mechanism is not wholly illegitimate or simply false in Bergson's view (he does not embrace finalism since this is merely an inverted mechanism that also reduces time to a process of realization). It is a reflection of our evolved habits of representation and these are habits that conform in large measure to certain tendencies of matter. The intellect is the product of a natural evolution and has evolved as an instrument of action that exerts itself on fixed points. Intelligence, for example, does not consider transition, but prefers instead to conceive movement as a movement through space, as a series of positions in which one point is reached, followed by another, and so on. Even if something happens between the points the understanding intercalates new positions, an act that can go on *ad infinitum*. As a result of this reduction of movement to points in space, duration gets broken up into distinct moments that correspond to each of the positions (this is what we can call a discrete or actual multiplicity). Bergson writes:

> In short, the time that is envisaged is little more than an ideal space where it is supposed that all past, present, and future events can be set out along a line, and in addition, as something which prevents them from appearing in a single perception: the unrolling in duration [*le déroulement en durée*] would be this very incompletion [*inachèvement*], the addition of a negative quantity. Such, consciously or unconsciously, is the thought of most philosophers, in conformity with the exigencies of the understanding, the necessities of language and the symbolism of science. *Not one of them has sought positive attributes in time*. (1965: 95)

If we say that time merely glides over these (material) systems then we are speaking of simple systems that have been constituted artificially through the operations of our own intellect. Such systems can be calculated ahead of time since they are being posited as existing prior to their realization in the form of "possibles" (when a possible is realized it simply gets existence added to it, its fundamental nature has not changed). The successive states of this kind of system can be conceived as moving at

any speed, rather like the unrolling of a film: it does not matter at what speed the shots run an evolution is not being depicted. The reality here is more complex, however, but the complexity is concealed. An unrolling film, for example, remains attached to consciousness that has its own duration and which regulates its movement. The more duration marks the living being with its imprint, the more the organism must differ from a mere mechanism (Bergson 2007b: 24).

One of the difficulties we have in accepting this conception of duration as the invention of the new is due to the way in which we think of evolution as the domain of the realization of the possible. We have difficulty in thinking that an event – whether a work of art or a work of nature – could have taken place unless it were not already capable of happening. For something to become it must have been possible all along (this is a conception of logical and spatial possibility). As Bergson points out, the word possibility can signify at least two different things and we often waver between the two senses. From the negative sense of the word, such as pointing out that there was no known insurmountable obstacle to something coming into being, we pass quickly onto the positive sense of it, in which we hold that any event could have been foreseen in advance of its happening by a mind with adequate information. In the form of an idea this is to suppose that an event was pre-existent to its eventual realization. Even if it is argued that an event, such as the composition of a symphony or a painting, was not conceived in advance, the prejudice still holds sway that such an event *could have been*, and this is to suppose that there exists a transcendent realm of pre-existing possibles. In *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* Bergson applies this critique of the pre-existence of the possible in the real, which he now calls "retrospective anticipation," to the domain of history. The supposition at work in our thinking of history is that things are approximating some ideal or norm – one that must stand outside history to make the judgment possible – as in the view that: "… the conceptions of justice which followed one another in ancient societies were no more than partial, incomplete versions of an integral justice as we know it today" (Bergson 1979: 72). But this is to deny that something new comes into existence in history, often by taking possession of something old and absorbing it into a new whole. It is always possible to interpret a forward movement as a progressive shortening of the distance between the starting-point and the end, and then to claim that when the end has been reached the thing in question was either possible or that it had been working towards this end all along. But there is nothing that warrants this inference; it is the result of the error of "thinking backwards." For Bergson, this is a "metaphysical doctrine" (in the negative sense) that sets the theory of knowledge insoluble problems. Bergson is attacking, in part, the philosophy of history that would identify in a thing's development a linear or logical progress towards a goal, and the proximity of his criticism to that evinced by Nietzsche in the *Genealogy of Morality* is striking (Nietzsche 2006: II, 12).

The reduction of the real, and of real complexity, to mathematical calculability or computation is one that Bergson locates in both nineteenth-century physics and biology. He quotes the following passage from Du Bois-Reymond's *Über die Grenzen des Naturerkennens* ("On the Limits of Our Knowledge of Nature") of 1892: "We can imagine the knowledge of nature arrived at a point where the universal process of

the world might be represented by a single mathematical formula, by one immense system of differential equations, from which could be deduced, for each moment, the position, direction, and velocity of every atom of the world" (*ibid*: 25). Time is positive for Bergson in the sense that it introduces indetermination into the very essence of life. However, our natural bent is always to construe this indetermination in terms of a completion of pre-existent possibles. The intellect, which has evolved as an organ of utility, has a need for stability and reliability. It thus seeks connections and establishes stable and regular relations between transitory facts. It also develops laws to map these connections and regularities. This operation is held to be more perfect the more the law in question becomes more mathematical. From this disposition of the intellect there have emerged the specific conceptions of matter that have characterized a great deal of Western metaphysics and science. Our mind conceives the origin and evolution of the universe as an arrangement and rearrangement of parts that simply shift from one place to another. This is what Bergson calls the Laplacean dogma that has informed a great deal of modern enquiry, leading to a determinism and a mechanism in which by positing a definite number of stable elements all possible combinations can be deduced without regard for the reality of duration (*ibid*.: 24–5).

In *Time and Free Will* Bergson also aims to show the limitations of physical determinism by arguing that the science of energy rests on a confusion of concrete duration and abstract time. Modern mechanism holds that it is possible to calculate with absolute certainty the past, present, and future actions of a living system from knowledge of the exact position and motion of the atomic elements in the universe capable of influencing it. It is this quest for certainty that informed the science built up around the principle of the conservation of energy. To admit the universal character of this theorem is to make the assumption that the material points which are held to make up the universe are subject solely to forces of attraction and repulsion that arise from the points themselves and have intensities that depend only on their distances. Thus, whatever the nature of these material points at any given moment, their relative position would be determined by relation to the preceding moment (Bergson 2001: 151).

Bergson's main concern is to demonstrate why it is illegitimate to simply extend this conception of matter to a deterministic and mechanistic understanding of psychic states (perhaps by making them reducible to cerebral states). Bergson does not deny that the principle of the conservation of energy appears to be applicable to a whole array of physico-chemical phenomena, especially the case, he notes, since the development of the mechanical theory of heat. The question he wants to pose for science, however, is whether there are new kinds of energy, different from kinetic and potential energy, which may rebel against calculation (he is thinking in particular of physiological phenomena). His principal point is to argue that conservative systems cannot be taken to be the only systems possible. For these conservative systems time does not bite into them. Without duration can these systems be said to be *living* systems? On the model of modern mechanism the isolable material point can only remain suspended in an eternal present (*ibid*.: 153). Whilst a conservative system may have no need of a past time (duration), for a living one that exists in a metastable state it

is a prerequisite. For Bergson the setting up of an abstract principle of mechanics as a universal law does not, in truth, rest on desire to meet the requirements of a positive science, but rather on a "psychological mistake" derived from treating the duration of a living system to the "duration which glides over the inert atoms without penetrating and altering them" (*ibid.*: 154).

The antinomies of modern thinking, for example of determinism and freedom, stem in large measure from our imposition of symbolic diagrams upon the movement of the real, which serve to make it something uniform, regular, and calculable for us. To break free of these mental habits would make it possible to transcend space without stepping outside extensity. There is no fixed logic or established law that compels us to equate a continuous and diversified extensity with the amorphous and inert space that subtends it, and within which movement can only be constructed in terms of a multiplicity of instantaneous positions. In arguing that movement is something absolute and place is relative Bergson is claiming it to be something real and not merely an effect of measurement (the mathematical symbols of the geometrician are unable to demonstrate that it is a moving body that is in motion and not the axes and points to which it is referred). But if motion is merely relative then change must be an illusion (Bergson 1991: 194–5).

Intuition

What is involved in restoring the absolute? For Bergson it centres on recognizing that reality is made up of both differences of degree (the tendencies of matter) and differences of kind (the tendencies of life). We can divide a composite or mixture according to qualitative and qualified tendencies, such as the way in which it combines duration and extensity defined as directions of movements, giving us "duration-contraction" and "matter-expansion." Such a method of division might be compared to a form of transcendental analysis in that it takes us beyond experience as given toward its conditions. However, we are now dealing not with the conditions of all possible experience, but rather with conditions that are neither general and abstract nor broader than the conditioned (see Deleuze 1991: 26–7). Once we make the turn in experience beyond the bias directed towards utility we reach the point at which we discover differences in kind and no longer subsume reality within utilitarian groupings. We frequently locate only differences in degree (more or less of the same thing), when in actuality the most profound differences are the differences in kind. Experience itself offers us nothing more than composites, such as time imbued with space and mixtures of extensity and duration. To think beyond our mental habits, which give us only badly analysed composites, we require a special method, and for Bergson this is the method of intuition. Without this method duration would remain a simple psychological experience. Intuition is not itself duration but rather "the movement by which we emerge from our own duration" and "make use of our own duration to affirm … and recognize the existence of other durations" (Deleuze 1991: 33).

Given our finitude Kant claims that our mode of intuition can only be of a derivative kind and not an original one. By this he means that we have no access to an

intellectual intuition. Kant allows for the fact that the way the human being intuits time and space may not be peculiar to it alone but may be something to be found among all finite beings that have a capacity of self-representation. But what he will not allow for is the possibility that we could overstep the bounds of our finitude and attain a higher intuition such as an intellectual one. This can only belong to the primordial being (Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B72). We can only know matter in terms of its outer relations; the inward nature of matter, that is matter as it would be conceived by the pure understanding independently of sensuous intuition, is a phantom. The most we can do is to posit a "transcendental object" (*Objekt*) which may be the ground of the appearance we call matter, but this is an object without quantity or substance, it is "a mere something of which we should not understand what it is, even if someone were in a position to tell us" (A277/B333). To be able to intuit things without the aid of our senses would mean that we could have knowledge "altogether different from the human, and this not only in degree but as regards intuition likewise in kind" (A278/B334). But of such non-human beings we do not know them to be possible or how they would be constituted. Kant does not deny that through observation and analysis it is possible that we can penetrate into "nature's recesses," but he insists that this is nature conceived only in the aspect or dimension of its *appearance*: "with all this knowledge, and even if the whole of nature were revealed to us, we should still never be able to answer those transcendental questions which go beyond nature," that is, beyond nature qua appearance. Ultimately, Kant is led to positing a problematic noumenon, which is not the concept of any determinate object but rather bound up with the limitation of human sensibility. This provides a place for speculation with regard to there being objects outside of our specific field of intuition, objects other and different to what we are able to intuit through our particular *a priori* intuitions of time and space, but of their existence nothing can either be denied or asserted (A288/B344).

Bergson argues that in order to reach a higher mode of intuition it is not necessary, as Kant supposed, to transport ourselves outside the domain of the senses: "After having proved by decisive arguments that no dialectical effort will ever introduce us into the beyond and that an effective metaphysics would necessarily be an intuitive metaphysics, he added that we lack this intuition and that this metaphysics is impossible. It would in fact be so if there were no other time or change than those which Kant perceived …" (Bergson 1965: 128). By recovering intuition Bergson hopes to save science from the charge of producing a relativity of knowledge (it is rather to be regarded as approximate) and metaphysics from the charge of indulging in empty and idle speculation. Although Kant himself did not pursue thought in the direction he had opened for it – the direction of a "revivified Cartesianism" Bergson calls it – it is the prospect of an "extra-intellectual matter of knowledge by a higher effort of intuition" that Bergson seeks to cultivate (2007b: 229). Kant has reawakened, if only half-heartedly, a view that was the essential element of Descartes' thinking but which was abandoned by the Cartesians: knowledge is not completely resolvable into the terms of intelligence. Bergson does not, let it be noted, establish an opposition between sensuous (infra-intellectual) intuition and intellectual (what he calls an

"ultra-intellectual") intuition but instead seeks to show that there is a continuity and reciprocity between the two. Moreover, sensuous intuition can be promoted to a different set of operations, no longer simply being the phantom of an inscrutable thing-in-itself:

> The barriers between the matter of sensible knowledge and its form are lowered, as also between the "pure forms" of sensibility and the categories of the understanding. The matter and form of intellectual knowledge (restricted to its own object) are seen to be engendering each other by a reciprocal adaptation, intellect modelling itself on corporeity, and corporeity on intellect. But this duality of intuition Kant neither would nor could admit. (*Ibid.*: 230)

For Kant to admit this duality of intuition would entail granting to duration an absolute reality and treating the geometry immanent in space as an ideal limit (the direction in which material things develop but never actually attain).

In Bergson intuition denotes neither a vague feeling nor a disordered sympathy but a method that aims at precision in philosophy (see Bergson 1965: 11, 79, 88; 2007a: 43n53; 2007b: 153, 172; 2007c: 26). As Deleuze points out, duration would remain purely intuitive, in the ordinary sense of the word, if intuition in Bergson's sense did not exist as a method (Deleuze 1991: 14). It is a complex method that cannot be contained in single act. Rather, it involves an "indefinite series of acts," the diversity of which "corresponds to all the degrees of being" (2007a: 33). The first task is to stage and create problems; the second is to locate differences in kind; and the third is to comprehend real time, that is, duration as a heterogeneous and continuous multiplicity. Bergson acknowledges that other philosophers before him, such as Schelling, tried to escape relativism by appealing to intuition (1965: 30). He argues, however, that this was a non-temporal intuition that was being appealed to, and, as such, was largely a return to Spinozism, that is, a deduction of existence from "one complete Being."

Regarding the first task, we go wrong when we hold that notions of true and false can only be brought to bear on problems in terms of ready-made solutions. This denotes a negative freedom that reflects manufactured social prejudices where, through social institutions such as education and language, we become enslaved to "order-words" that identify for us ready-made problems that we are forced to solve. True freedom lies in the power to decide through hesitation and indeterminacy and to constitute problems themselves. This might involve the freedom to uncover certain truths for oneself, but true freedom is more to do with invention than it is with discovery that is too much tied to uncovering what already exists, an act of discovery that was bound to happen sooner or later. In mathematics and in metaphysics the effort of invention consists in raising the problem and in creating the terms through which it might be solved but never as something ready-made. As Maurice Merleau-Ponty notes in a reading of Bergson, when it is said that well-posed problems are close to being solved, "this does not mean that we have already *found* what we are looking for, but that we have already invented it" (Merleau-Ponty 1988: 14).

False problem are of two kinds: first, those which are caught up in terms that contain a confusion of the "more" and the "less"; and, secondly, questions which are stated badly in the sense that their terms represent only badly analyzed composites. In the first case the error consists in positing an origin of being and of order from which nonbeing and disorder are then made to appear as primordial. On this schema order can only appear as the negation of disorder and being as the negation of nonbeing (see Bergson 2007b: 143). Such a way of thinking introduces lack into the heart of Being. The more or less errs in not seeing that there are kinds of order and forgetting the fact that Being is not homogeneous but fundamentally heterogeneous. Badly analyzed composites result from an arbitrary grouping of things that are constituted as differences in kind. For example, in *Creative Evolution* Bergson contends that the cardinal error that has vitiated the philosophy of nature from Aristotle onwards is identifying in forms of life, such as the vegetative, instinctive, and rational, "*three successive degrees of the development of one and the same tendency, whereas they are divergent directions of an activity that has split up as it grew*." He insists that the difference between them is neither one of intensity nor of degree but of kind (*ibid.*: 87–8). Life proceeds neither via lack nor the power of the negative but through internal self-differentiation along divergent lines.

It is through a focus on badly analyzed composites that we are led, in fact, to positing things in terms of the more and the less, so that the idea of disorder only arises from a general idea of order as a badly analyzed composite. We are the victims of illusions that have their source in aspects of our intelligence. However, although these illusions refer to Kant's analysis in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, where reason is shown to generate for itself in exceeding the boundaries of the understanding inevitable illusions and not simple mistakes, they are not of the same order. There is a natural tendency of the intellect to see only differences in degree and to neglect differences in kind. This is because the fundamental motivation of the intellect is to implement and orientate action in the world. For the purposes of social praxis and communication the intellect needs to order reality in a certain way, making it something calculable, regular and necessary. As Nietzsche notes, in order for a certain species to maintain itself and increase its feeling of power over the world it is necessary that it develop a conception of calculable and constant reality in order to establish a schema of behavior on it (Nietzsche 1968: §480).

If intuition is to be conceived as a method that proceeds via division – the division of a composite into differences of kind – is this not to deny that reality is, in fact, made up of composites and mixtures of all kinds? For Bergson, the crucial factor is to recognize that it is not things that differ in kind but rather tendencies. It is not things (their states or traits) that differ in nature, but the tendency things possess for change and development. A simple difference of degree would denote the correct status of things if they could be separated from their tendencies. The tendency is primary not simply in relation to its product but rather in relation to the causes in time that are retroactively obtained from the product itself. For example, if considered as a product, then the human brain will show only a difference of degree in relation to the animal brain. If it is viewed in terms of its tendency, however,

it will reveal a difference of nature. Any composite, therefore, needs to be divided according to qualitative tendencies. Again, this brings Bergsonism close to Kant's transcendental analysis, going beyond experience as given and constituting its conditions of possibility. However, these are not conditions of all possible experience but of real experience (for example the inferior and superior durations we discussed above). Living systems in the universe are open systems in which liberty and contingency are real empirical features. As Deleuze notes: "Indetermination, unpredictability, contingency, liberty always signify an independence in relation to causes …" (Deleuze 1999: 25).

Bergson's metaphysics of change aims to operate via "differentiations and qualitative intergrations," and in an effort to reverse the normal directions of the workings of thought enjoys a rapport with modern mathematics, notably the infinitesimal calculus:

> Modern mathematics is precisely an effort to substitute for the *ready-made* what is in process of *becoming*, to follow the growth of magnitudes, to seize movement no longer from outside and in its manifest result, but from within and in its tendency towards change, in short, to adopt of the mobile continuity of the pattern of things. (2007a: 41; see also 1991: 185)

Metaphysics differs from modern mathematics (the science of magnitudes), however, in that it has no need to make the move from intuition to symbol. Its understanding of the real is potentially boundless because of this: "Liberated from the obligation of working practically for useful results, it will indefinitely enlarge the domain of its investigations" (2007a: 41). Metaphysics can adopt the generative idea of mathematics and seek to extend it to all qualities, "to reality in general" (*ibid.*: 42). The aim is not to bring about another Platonism of the real, as in Kant's system he contends, but rather to enable thought to re-establish contact with continuity and mobility (*ibid.*: 49–50). A form of knowledge can be said to be relative when, through an act of forgetting, it ignores the basis of symbolic knowledge in intuition, and is forced to rely on pre-existing concepts and to proceed from the fixed to the mobile. Absolute knowledge by contrast refuses to accept what is pre-formed and instead cultivates "fluid concepts," seeking to place itself in a mobile reality from the start and so adopting "the life itself of things" (*ibid.*: 13, 43), able to follow "the real in all its sinuosities" (2007b: 232). To achieve this requires relinquishing the method of construction that leads only to higher and higher generalities and thinking in terms of a concrete duration "in which a radical recasting of the whole is always going on" (*ibid.*). Bergson calls for experience to be "purified" of intellectualism and released from "from the moulds that our intellect has formed" (*ibid.*: 231).

Bergson insists that his method of intuition contains no devaluation of intelligence but only a determination of its specific facility. If intuition transcends intelligence this is only account of the fact that it is intelligence that gives it the push to rise beyond. Without it intuition would remain wedded to instinct and riveted to the particular objects of its practical interests. The specific task of philosophy is to introduce us "into

life's own domain, which is reciprocal interpenetration, endlessly continued creation" (*ibid.*: 115). This is different, though not opposed, to what science does when it takes up the utilitarian vantage point of external perception and prolongs individual facts into general laws. The reformed metaphysics Bergson wishes to awaken commits itself to an "intellectual *expansion*" of thought and intuition is, in fact, "*intellectual* sympathy" (2007a: 32 and 40; my emphases).

Merleau-Ponty notes that for Bergson many traditional questions of philosophy, such as "Why have I been born?," "Why is there something rather than nothing?," and "How can I know anything?," can be held to be "pathological" in the sense that they fail to acknowledge that we are subjects already installed in being; they are the questions of a doubter who no longer knows whether he has closed the window (Merleau-Ponty 1988: 12). A strictly "positive philosophy," therefore, notes Merleau-Ponty, will not aim to "resolve" classical problems, but rather "dissolve" them. It is not a question of losing ourselves in Being, of being absorption into it, but of being transcended by it: "It is not necessary for him [the philosopher] to go outside himself in order to reach the things themselves; he is solicited or haunted by them from within" (*ibid.*: 14–15).

Bergson's critique of ethical rationalism

On a cursory reading Bergson's statement in *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* that "all morality is in essence biological" would seem to lend support to the criticism that his project amounts to biologism. In this final section I want to show that this is not in fact the case, and to do by looking at the critical points he make against the rationalist approach to ethics and as found largely, but not only, in Kant.

Nietzsche famously challenges any and all attempts to establish morality on a rational foundation (*Begründung*) (Nietzsche 1998: §186). Bergson makes virtually the same point. For him it is the ease with which philosophical theories of ethics can be built up that should make us suspicious:

> … if the most varied aims can thus be transmuted by philosophers into moral aims, we may surmise, seeing that they have not yet found the philosophers' stone, that they had started by putting gold in the bottom of their crucible. Similarly it is obvious that none of these doctrines will account for obligation. For we may be obliged to adopt certain means in order to attain such and such ends; but if we choose to renounce the end, how can the means be forced upon us? And yet, by adopting any one of these ends as the principle of morality, philosophers have evolved from it whole systems of maxims, which, without going so far as to assume an imperative form, come near enough to it to afford satisfaction. The reason is quite simple. They have considered the pursuit of these ends … in a society in where there are peremptory pressures, together with aspirations to match them and also to extend them … Each of these systems then already exists in the social atmosphere when the philosopher arrives on the scene.… (Bergson 1979: 90–1)

Bergson's contention is that moral philosophers treat society, and the two forces to which it owes its stability and mobility (pressure and aspiration), as established facts. At the same time they take for granted the matter of morality and its form, all it contains and the entire obligation with which it is clothed.

Bergson wishes to expose what he regards as the essential weakness of a strictly intellectualist system of morality, which covers, he holds the majority of the philosophical theories of duty. The error of intellectualism is that it fails to appreciate the extent to which morality is a "discipline demanded by nature" (*ibid.*: 269; compare Nietzsche 1998: §188). Moreover, intellectualism supposes that there is a difference of value between motives or principles and that there exists a general idea to which the real can be estimated. It is led to take refuge in Platonism in which the Idea of the Good dominates all others. For Bergson there are essentially two forces acting upon us and to which we respond as duties, namely, impulsion and attraction. Without this emphasis on *forces* moral philosophy has great problems in explaining how a moral motive could take over our soul and impel it to action.

> That reason is the distinguishing mark of man no one will deny. That it is a thing of superior value, in the sense in which a fine work of art is indeed valuable, will also be granted. But we must explain how it is that its orders are absolute and why they are obeyed. Reason can only put forward reasons, which we are apparently always at liberty to counter with other reasons. Let us not then merely assert that reason, present in each one of us, compels our respect and commands our obedience by virtue of its paramount value. We must add that there are, behind reason, the men who have made mankind divine, and who have thus stamped a divine character on reason, which is the essential attribute of man. (*Ibid.*: 68)

Bergson is keen to share in philosophy's promotion of reason: "the rational alone is self-consistent" and cannot be devalued; in civilized society morality is essentially rational (*ibid.*: 81). The danger of reason, however, must equally be recognized: it can give us only a diagram of action and in so doing it runs the risk of rendering our decisions and deliberations automatic. As part of living a vital life we need the joy and exuberance of moral inventions and transformations. Any morality that claims reason as its basis in the guise of a pure form without matter is deluding itself; it is metaphysical in the bad sense of the word (*ibid.*: 87). Social life cannot be taken as a fact we begin with but requires an explanation in terms of the vital necessities and imperatives of life itself. If we pursue matters of morality purely in intellectualist terms we reach a transcendental dead-end; if we place the emphasis on life, we can explain both the static and the dynamic dimensions of life, as well as both the closed and the open forms of morality and religion:

> Let us then give to the word biology the very wide meaning it should have, and will perhaps have one day, and let us say in conclusion that all morality, be it pressure or aspiration, is in essence biological. (*Ibid.*: 101)

Bergson's final text is an inquiry into the sources and origins of morality. Such an approach is possible according to him because in spite of the development of civilization and the transformations of society that have taken place in history the tendencies that are organic in social life have remained what they were in the beginning. There is an "original nature," the bedrock of which is covered over by a "thick humus," namely all the acquisitions of culture or civilization such as the deposits of knowledge, traditions, customs, institutions, syntax and the vocabulary of language, and even gestures (*ibid.*: 83). If we scratch the surface and abolish everything we owe to education we find in the depth of our nature primitive humanity, or something near it. Although society and education make all the difference and overlay the natural, "let a sudden shock paralyse these superficial activities, let the light in which they work be extinguished for a moment: at once the natural reappears, like the changeless star in the night" (*ibid.*: 127). It is intelligence and its pride that will not admit our original subordination to biological necessities. The illusion is that intelligence is pure, unrelated to either nature or life, with no correspondence to vital needs. Intelligence wants man to be superior to his actual origins, higher than nature. And yet intelligence, in the form of science, shows man to be part of nature. However, neither Nietzsche nor Bergson is wedded to origins. Nietzsche argues that he who grows wise about origins will seek out sources of the future and new origins and he appeals to a new earth and new peoples to come (Nietzsche 2005a: "Of Old and New Tablets"). For Bergson there are two moralities, one of pressure and one of aspiration. Whereas the former is one of social constraint, the morality of the city as he calls it, the latter concerns humanity's expansion that brings into existence new ways of living and new emotions.

The natural morality of pressure is a "screen" in which the possible immorality that lies behind the exterior which humanity presents itself to the world is not seen under normal circumstances. As Bergson notes, we don't become misanthropes by observing others but on account of a feeling of discontent with ourselves; only then do we come to pity or despise mankind: "The human nature from which we then turn away is the human nature we have discovered in the depths of our own being" (Bergson 1979: 11). For Bergson the social imperative has a religious source. The first effect of religion is to sustain and reinforce the claims of society. Society needs religion because it "knows" that its execution of the law is imperfect and without divine authority; it dishes out rewards and punishments and needs to believe that these are justly sanctioned. Religion helps here since it gives us the idea of an order that is perfect and self-creative, which is the image society wishes for itself (to hide the effect that in actuality all is imperfect, arbitrary, and so on). In this respect it is like the realm of Platonic ideas in the sphere of knowledge: it enables us to replace the uncertain with the certain, and the empirical with the eternal.

Kant's ethics rest on an absolute distinction between inclination and duty, or between nature and reason, which for him amounts to the difference between heteronomy and autonomy. Contra Kant, Bergson maintains that obligation is in not a unique fact incommensurate with others, "looming above them like a mysterious apparition" (*ibid.*: 20). Moreover, he argues that when we seek to define the essence

and origin of obligation by laying down that obedience is primarily a struggle with the self, a state of tension or contraction, "we make a psychological error which has vitiated many theories of ethics" (*ibid*). Here there is confusion over the sense of obligation – which Bergson defines as "a tranquil state akin to inclination" – with the violent effort we exert on ourselves now and again to break down possible obstacles to obligation:

> We have any number of particular obligations, each calling for a separate explanation. It is natural … a matter of habit to obey them all. Suppose that exceptionally we deviate from one of them, there would be resistance; if we resist this resistance, a state of tension or contraction is likely to result. It is this rigidity which we objectify when we attribute so stern as aspect to duty. (*Ibid*.: 21)

Bergson appreciates that when we resist resistance – the temptations, passions and desires – we need to give ourselves reasons. There is the call of an idea, and autonomy (the exertion of self-control) takes place through the medium of intelligence. However, "from the fact that we get back to obligation by rational ways it does not follow that obligation was of a rational order" (*ibid*.: 22).

Bergson stresses the social origins of obligation. When we neglect this we posit an abstract conception of our conformity to duty (we obey duty for the sake of duty, Kant says). The "totality of obligation," by which Bergson means our moral habits taken as a whole, represents a force that if it could speak would utter: "You must because you must" (23). What intelligence does is to introduce greater logical consistency into our lines of conduct. However, is it not the case that we never sacrifice our vanity, passions, and interests to the need for such consistency? We go wrong not when we ascribe a spurious independent existence to reason but when we conceive it as the controlling power or agency of our action: "We might as well believe that the fly-wheel drives the machinery" (*ibid*). Bergson is not denying that reason intervenes as a regulator to assure consistency between rules and maxims. His point is that it oversimplifies what is actually taking place in moral agency. Reason is at work everywhere in moral behavior. Thus, an individual whose respectable behavior is the least based on reasoning, as someone acts in accordance with sheepish conformity, introduces a rational order into his conduct from the mere fact of obeying rules that are logically connected to one another.

Bergson makes the striking claim that "an absolutely categorical imperative is instinctive or somnambulistic, enacted as such in a normal state…" (*ibid*.: 26). The "totality of obligation" is, in fact, the *habit of contracting habits*, and this is a specifically human instinct of intelligence. Let us imagine that evolution has proceeded along two divergent lines with societies at the extremities of each. On the one hand, the more natural will be the instinctive type (such as ants or bees). On the other hand, there is the society where a degree of latitude has been left to individual waywardness. For nature to be effective in this case, that is, to achieve a comparable regularity, there is recourse to habit in place of instinct. Bergson then argues:

> Each of these habits, which may be called "moral," would be incidental. But the aggregate of them, I mean the habit of contracting these habits, being at the very basis of societies and a necessary condition of their existence, would have a force comparable to that of instinct in respect of both intensity and regularity. (*Ibid.*: 26–7)

No matter how much society progresses through refinement and spiritualization this original design will remain. For Bergson then, social life is immanent, if only as a vague ideal, in instinct and intelligence. The difference in human societies is that here it is only the necessity of a rule that is the cardinal natural thing (rules are not laid down by nature). Obligation can be treated as a kind of "virtual instinct" similar to what which lies behind the habit of speech. Obligation needs to lose its specific or sublime character in our thinking so that we recognize it as among the most general phenomena of life (*ibid.*: 29).

The other morality Bergson inquires into is the morality of aspiration, which can be regarded as "anti-natural" in the sense that it takes humanity beyond what nature prescribes for it. The primitive instinct, hidden under the accretions of civilization, is love of our community or tribe: "it is primarily as against as all other men that we love then men with whom we live …" (*ibid.*: 33). To proclaim love of humanity is to decree that each and every human being possesses an inviolable dignity and this is take a (spiritual) leap since, Bergson argues, it is impossible to arrive at such ideas by degrees. There is a difference in kind between the two moralities: the former consists in impersonal rules and formulae, the latter incarnates itself in a privileged personality who becomes an example, such as exceptional human beings, be they Christian saints, sages of Greece, prophets of Israel, or the Arahants of Buddhism. Whereas the first morality works as a pressure or propulsive force, the second morality latter has the effect of an appeal. In it new life is proclaimed that goes against what nature prescribes, be it the survival of the fittest or the will to power of the strongest or the weakest. Here Bergson departs from Nietzsche's often brutally naturalist approach to ethics that must struggle harder to meet the charge of biologism (see Amrine 1992: 135–8; on Bergson's alleged reduction of the spiritual to the biological see Maritain 1943: 79).

Bergson insists that in the second morality it is not simply a question of replacing egoism with altruism. It is not simply a question of the self now saying to itself, "I am working for the benefit of mankind," simply because such an idea is too vast and the effect too diffuse. So what is taking place and being asked of the self? In the closed morality of pressure the individual and social are barely distinguishable: it is both at once and at this level spirit moves around a circle. Can we say that operative in the open soul subject to the open morality of aspiration there is the love of all humanity? For Bergson this would not go far enough since the openness can be extended to animals, plants, and all nature. It could even do without these since its form is not dependent on any specific content: "'Charity' would persist in him who possesses 'charity', though there be no other living creature on earth" (Bergson 1979: 38). It is a "psychic attitude" that, strictly speaking, does not have an object. It is not acquired by

nature but requires an effort and transmits itself through feeling. Think, for example, of the attraction or appeal of love and its passion in its early stages. It resembles an obligation (we must because we must) and perhaps a tragedy lies ahead, with a whole life facing the prospect of being wrecked, wasted, and ruined. This does not stop our responding to its call or appeal. We are entranced, as in cases of musical emotion which introduces us into new feelings, and as passers-by are forced into a street dance. The pioneers in morality proceed in a similar fashion: "Life holds for them unsuspected tones of feeling like those of some new symphony, and they draw us after them into this music that we may express it in action" (*ibid.*: 40).

The error of intellectualism is to suppose that feeling must hinge on an object and that all emotion is little more than the reaction of our sensory faculties to an intellectual representation. In music, Bergson notes, the emotions are not linked to any specific objects of joy, of sorrow, of pity, or of love. The difference he wants us to think about is between an emotion that can be represented (in images and through objects) and the creative emotion that is beyond representation and amounts to a real invention. States of emotion caused by certain things are ordained by nature and are finite or limited in number; we recognize them quite easily because their destiny is to spur us on to acts that answer to our needs. Bergson is not blind to the illusions of love and our propensity to psychological deception. However, he maintains that the effect of creative emotion is not reducible to this because here we are faced with emotional states that are distinct from sensation, that is, they cannot be reduced to being a psychical transposition of a physical stimulus. For Bergson such an emotion informs the creations not only of art but of science and civilization itself. It is a unique kind of emotion, one that precedes the image, virtually containing it, and is its cause (*ibid.*: 47). His position is not equivalent, he insists, to a moral philosophy of sentiment, simply because we are dealing with an emotion that is capable of crystallizing into representations, even into an ethical doctrine. Moreover, he insists that if a new emotion, such as charity, wins over human beings this is neither because some metaphysics has enforced its moral practice nor because the moral practice has induced a disposition towards its alleged metaphysical claims. It is an "attraction" we are freely responding to in such cases and on the level of *both* intelligence and will (*ibid.*: 49).

Bergson acknowledges that many will find this account of the second morality difficult to accept: is it not the domain of the irrational par excellence? Is it not the domain of fanatics and of sad cases desperately in need of a doctrine of redemption? With Nietzsche, however, Bergson is keen to challenge the assumption that the superhuman can be born only out of reactive forces or energies and he credits the inspirers of humanity with "overflowing vitality" (*ibid.*: 95; admittedly Nietzsche does not see such vitality in the examples that inspire Bergson! For Nietzsche's suspicion of intoxicating states experienced by moral and religious geniuses, see 1997: §50). Neither of the two moralities exists in a pure state today: the first has handed on to the second something of its compulsive force, whilst the latter has diffused over the former something of its aroma. Nevertheless, analysis will find it useful Bergson thinks to hold onto the salient differences between the two. The first, for example, finds its essential character in

remaining fixed to self-preservation: "the circular movement in which it carries round with it individuals, as it revolves on the same spot, is a vague imitation, through the medium of habit, of the immobility of instinct" (it is one rendition of the eternal return of the same) (Bergson 1979: 51). In this morality we attain pleasure, such as the well-being of individual and society, but not joy. By contrast, in the open morality we have progress that is experienced in the enthusiasm of a forward movement. There is no need to resort to a metaphysical theory to account for this difference since it is not necessary to picture a goal we are trying to achieve or envisage a state of perfection we wish to approximate. Rather, it is an opening out of the soul and a breaking with nature. Such an open soul expresses Bergson's commitment to a pure movement that cannot be conceived as a series of discrete stages, as in Zeno's paradoxes, since this is incapable of producing real movement. Rather, real movement involves an action in which we find the impression of a coincidence, real or imaginary, with the generative effort of life (*ibid.*: 55).

Bergson's thinking has its normative dimension in this positing of an open morality. Whilst the first morality has its source in nature, the second has no place in nature's design. Nature may have foreseen a certain expansion of social life through intelligence but only of a very limited kind:

> Nature surely intended that men should beget men endlessly, according to the rule followed by all other living creatures; she took the most minute precautions to ensure the preservation of the species by the multiplication of individuals; hence she had not foreseen, when bestowing on us intelligence, that intelligence would at once find a way of divorcing the sexual act from its consequences, and that man might refrain from reaping without forgoing the pleasure of sowing. It is quite another sense that man outwits nature when he extends social solidarity into the brotherhood of man … . (*Ibid.*: 56–7)

For Bergson the two forces of pressure and aspiration are to be treated as fundamental data and are not exclusively moral; rather, they have their sources in the twin tendencies of life: preservation and enhancement or overcoming (*ibid.*: 96). There cannot be an absolute break with nature since this is never possible. Rather: "It might be said, by slightly distorting Spinoza, that it is to get back to *natura naturans* that we break away from *natura naturata*" (*ibid.*: 58). If the human is part of nature, then it is not far fetched to claim that our moral inventions amount to a nature expressing itself and as freedom.

Conclusion

Bergson's texts have exerted an influence on several generations of French thinkers, including some of the most important philosophers of the twentieth century, such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Emmanuel Levinas, Paul Ricoeur, and Gilles Deleuze. In contrast to Nietzsche who accurately predicted that he would be born posthumously, Bergson was born in his own lifetime, being the

most celebrated philosopher of his time with an influence on intellectual life that extended far beyond the academy. However, his reputation fell into serious decline after his death and the end of the Second World War where existentialism became the new intellectual fashion. Today, however, we are witnessing something of a renaissance of interest in Bergson's writings, and his contributions figure in new research in philosophy of mind (McNamara 1999, Ricoeur 2004), the philosophy of time (Durie 2000a, b; Turetzky 1998), and the philosophy of biology such as complexity theory (Durie 2002). In addition, he is now granted a place of crucial significance in histories of twentieth century thought (Gutting 2001; Ansell Pearson 2009). Gary Gutting, for example, locates Bergson's enduring greatness as a philosopher in the combination of descriptive concreteness and systematic scope and metaphysical ambition that characterizes his work (Gutting 2001: 384). In a recent review of the publication of Bergson's correspondence in the *Times Literary* Supplement, the eminent critic George Steiner wrote of the sense of delight and philosophical scruple one experiences in returning to Bergson after decades in which French philosophic debate was conduced in a jargon of almost impenetrable pretentiousness and opportunistic obscurity (Steiner 2003: 7). Although Bergson possessed tremendous knowledge of the history of philosophy – he was in his lifetime a professor of both ancient philosophy and modern philosophy – he was primarily interested in problems and in ascertaining whether our problems are good ones or ones badly posed. All of Bergson's major concerns closely correspond to today's practice in philosophy, and there is nothing that is peculiarly "continental" about his interests (freedom, consciousness and mind, time and memory, evolution and life, morality and religion).

A number of important thinkers have found liberation in Bergson's new modes of thinking. These include William James who said that it was Bergson who liberated him from intellectualism (James 1909: Lecture 6). James compared what Bergson accomplished in *Matter and Memory* to a Copernican Revolution and considered it a work to be ranked alongside Berkeley's *Principles of Human Knowledge* and Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. Upon its publication he hailed *Creative Evolution* as marking a new era in thought. Gilles Deleuze locates in Bergson's writings a "superior empiricism" that can prove its contemporary worth and relevance (Deleuze 1991 and 1999). Emmanuel Levinas argues that against our pan-logical civilization Bergsonism brings to bear an inestimable message, namely, its perception of a mode of change which does not stop at any identity and teaches that time is something other than a mobile image of an immobile eternity, which is what it has been in the history of Western thought, signifying the forfeiture of the permanence of being and the privation of eternity. Levinas wishes to underline the importance of Bergsonism "for the entire problematic of contemporary philosophy" on account of the fact that it is no longer a thought of a "rationality revealing a reality which keeps to the very measure of a thought." In effecting a reversal of traditional philosophy by contending the priority of duration over permanence, Bergson has provided thought with "access to novelty, an access independent of the ontology of the same" (Levinas 1987: 132). There is a Bergsonian revolution and it amounts to an upheaval in philosophy comparable in significance to those we encounter in Kant, Nietzsche, Heidegger and Wittgenstein,

and with which we are much more familiar. Bergson occupies an important place in intellectual modernity and his work remains highly relevant today.

Note

1 For Bergson in his original French I have used the edition of his works, *Oeuvres*, published by Presses Universitaires de France (Paris) in 1959.

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Further reading

K. Ansell Pearson, *Philosophy and the Adventure of the Virtual: Bergson and the Time of Life* (London: Routledge, 2002), features essays on TFW, MM, and CE and insights into Bergson's relation to Kant. Both G. Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, trans. H. Tomlinson and B. Habberjam (London: Continuum Press, 1986), and his *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. H. Tomlinson and R. Galeta (London: Continuum, 1989), draw heavily on Bergson's ideas to produce a startlingly novel and wide-ranging appreciation of cinema. See also E. During, "'A History of Problems': Bergson and the French Epistemological Tradition," *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 35 (2004), pp. 4–24, in a special issue devoted to "Bergson Now." D. Emmet, "'Open' and 'Closed' Morality," in *Function, Purpose, and Powers*, by Emmet (London: Macmillan, 1972), pp. 137–68, contains important insights into Bergson's distinction between the closed and the open. M. A. Gillies, *Henri Bergson and British Modernism* (Montreal, Canada: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996), is a study of Bergson's influence on British writers such as Virginia Woolf; and contains a helpful introduction on Bergson and his philosophical antecedents. S. Guerlac, *Thinking in Time: An Introduction to Henri Bergson* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006), is a fine new introduction, written with the needs of students in mind, and focused on TFW and MM. D. R. Griffin, J. B. Cobb Jr, M. P. Ford, P. A. Y. Gunter, and P. Ochs (eds) (1993), *Founders of Constructive Postmodern Philosophy: Peirce, James, Bergson, Whitehead, and Hartshorne* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1993), contains an essay on Bergson by renowned specialist P. A. Y. Gunter. To date the only full-length study of Bergson and political philosophy, an important study, is E. Kennedy, *Freedom and the Open Society: Henri Bergson's Contribution to Political Philosophy* (New York: Garland, 1987). A short and helpful introduction is L. Kolakowski, *Bergson* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985). A volume in the 'Arguments the Philosophers' series is A. R. Lacey, *Bergson*, London: Routledge, 1989). An advanced appreciation is L. Lawlor, *The Challenge of Bergsonism* (London: Continuum Press, 2003). A. D. Lindsay, *The Philosophy of Bergson* (London: Dent, 1911), is superb on Bergson's reworking of Kant. M. S. Muldoon, *Tricks of Time: Bergson, Merleau-Ponty and Ricoeur in Search of Time, Self and Meaning* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2006), offer valuable new study. J. Mullarkey, (ed.) *The New Bergson* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), is a collection of essays presenting new work and insights. D. Papineau, *Thinking about Consciousness* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), argues against dualism in favor of the view that our general concept of phenomenal consciousness must depend on material properties and contains an appendix on the completeness of physics that discusses

the principle of the conservation of energy that was of such interest to Bergson; alas, Bergson is nowhere mentioned and his important contribution goes unacknowledged. A. E. Pilkington, *Bergson and His Influence: A Reassessment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), contains valuable insights into Bergson's influence on important French intellectual figures and writers, such as Julian Benda, Charles Péguy, Marcel Proust, and Paul Valéry, as well as Bergson's key concepts. T. Quirk, *Bergson and American Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), focuses on the influence of Bergson on the novels of Willa Cather and the poetry of Wallace Stevens. M. Sachs, *Objectivity and Insight* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), features a chapter on James and Bergson. J.-P. Sartre, *Imagination* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1962 [1936]), has an important chapter on Bergsonism. W. J. Scott, "Bergsonism in England," *Monist* 27 (1917): 179–204, presents Bergson as an enemy of scientific naturalism but argues that his philosophy is one that should appeal to scientifically minded philosophers. See also A. Styhre, "Knowledge as a Virtual Asset: Bergson's Notion of Virtuality and Organizational Knowledge," *Culture and Organization* 9 (2003): 15–27, in a special issue on "Bergson and Creative Social Science." A. Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time: Reflections on the Cinema*, trans. K. Hunter-Blair (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999), contains reflections by one of the most original film-makers of European cinema on how the art of cinema can capture time and memory, echoing Bergson's insights into them. H. Wickham, *The Unrealists* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1933), presents Bergson as a supreme and laughable irrationalist.