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BOOK REVIEW

Philosophy and the Adventure of the Virtual: Bergson and the Time of Life, by Keith Ansell Pearson

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This book is two things. It is a joint examination of the philosophies of Henri Bergson and Gilles Deleuze. And it is a study of a concept at the center of much contemporary philosophical discussion: the 'virtual', with its putative relations to the nature of perception, recollection, time, and life. As a study of these two philosophers it makes valuable contributions, casting light where previous scholars have not cared to look, making aspects of their thought which have seemed opaque, intelligible. It also reveals (what ought to have been obvious) the continuity of their philosophies.

Pearson states two secondary goals for his essay. The first is to overcome the 'erasure' of Bergson from post-Kantian philosophy; the second is to contribute to our understanding of Deleuze's unique conception of philosophy. The first task will be difficult precisely to the extent to which Bergson's thought, beginning from a peak of international acclaim around 1920, has suffered marginalization, especially among English-speaking philosophers. The latter will be difficult because of the complex many-textured structure of Deleuze's thought.

The reviewer will deal throughout with Pearson's close examinations of Bergson and Deleuze. Insights into the nature of the virtual will emerge naturally from the treatment of the two authors. Given the erasure of Bergson from main-line philosophy, it will sometimes be necessary to deal at greater length with Bergson's arguments than would otherwise be the case. With luck it will be possible to steer an even course between at-length explanation and capsule sketch.

I

It is possible, in describing a philosophy, to start with its author's first book and proceed to its successors. Pearson takes a different route, dealing with the fundamental concepts in order of their centrality. His first chapter deals with Bergson's concept of 'virtual multiplicity' in relation to time. His second analyzes Bergson's concept of a single time in opposition to the multiple times of relativity physics. Pearson's third chapter explores the

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relation between duration and biological evolution while the fourth, which looks back to chapter two, examines Deleuze's ontology of the One. The fifth relates the concept of purpose in Bergson and Kant; it thus expands on the concept of evolution examined in chapter three. The sixth and seventh chapters explicate Bergson's *Matter and Memory*. The sixth chapter delves into Bergson's theory of perception. The seventh chapter consists of a culminating comparison of Deleuze's highly innovative Bergsonism with the thought of Bergson himself. The results distance Deleuze from Bergson on any number of points-points on which the author is convinced that Deleuze is undoubtedly correct.

Bergson is often associated with terms such as 'creativity', 'duration', and 'freedom'. For those familiar with his writings 'memory', 'impetus', or 'spatialization' might occur. The terms 'virtual' and 'multiplicity' probably would not. If Pearson and Deleuze are right, however, they should come first. For these two writers 'virtual multiplicity' is clearly the central Bergsonian concept. The whole of *Philosophy and the Adventure of the Virtual* is devoted to clarifying this concept. It will help at the beginning of this review to clear up two possible misunderstandings of 'virtual'. This term might be confused with computer reality (virtual life, virtual games). Clearly this is neither Bergson's meaning nor Deleuze's. Virtual – though in fact Bergson sometimes uses the term in this sense – is also not to be identified with 'at a high degree of potentiality' or 'verging on completion'. This meaning, Pearson argues, is secondary, not basic. Basic is the virtual in itself, without reference to its possible actualizations.

If the notion of 'time' is essential to Bergson's philosophy, 'virtuality' is, as Pearson will demonstrate, essential to time. Bergson protests that time is not a bare succession of instants much less a disembodied form of perception. Time is duration, and duration is something experienced. If I mix sugar in a glass of water, I have to wait for the sugar to dissolve. My impatience constitutes a single duration, which coincides with a portion of my life. There are many different durations, Bergson argues, briefer or more protracted. If one of the aims of philosophy is to explore these different durations in their relations to each other, then another aim of philosophy, Pearson argues, is to explore duration in itself, in its fundamental features.

Fundamental to duration, Bergson claims, there is memory, the massive carry-over of our past into our present. Without memory in this sense, the stream of consciousness would not flow, and even the most elementary mental acts (recognition, inference, concentration...) could not occur. Closely connected with the accumulation of memory is novelty: the emergence of the 'new'.

Bergson undertakes to study memory in its relations to volition, brain function, perception, and many other factors. While Pearson explores these with remarkable accuracy, his basic contention is that these factors are merely psychological. Underlying them are characteristics which, he holds, are far more profound. These primitive features are preconditions of ordinary psychological life. When we confront duration in itself, Bergson states in *Creative Evolution*, we find that it is fundamentally a virtual continuity. Pearson defines virtual continuity as: 1. 'indivisible' in each of its actualizations 2. inescapably qualitative 3. a movement which proceeds from a condition of virtuality to an actualization 4. not a pre-existing universal or power. Deleuze is thus correct to argue "That in Bergson duration comes to be seen as less and less reducible to a psychological experience and becomes instead the 'variable essence of things'" (p. 36). Psychological duration should be viewed as, while a 'clearly determined case', an opening into ontological duration (p. 36).

A full understanding of the 'variable essence' of things will not be possible until Pearson's encounter with memory in chapter eight. In the interim he posits two fundamental questions for examination: 1. What sort of multiplicity is a virtual multiplicity? 2. How, if

there is a plurality of durations, can it be said that over and above them there is a single time? These questions are given an initial response in Pearson's second chapter, on time and relativity physics.

Bergson's *Duration and Simultaneity* (1922) is an attack on the multiple times of relativity physics. Pearson adds to the many criticisms of this work, arguing that in it Bergson falls prey to a narrow empiricism which leads him to an almost solipsist standpoint. Equally unfortunate is Bergson's failure to see the difference between uniform and accelerated motion. In spite of these and other difficulties Pearson defends Bergson's notion of universal temporality. Utilizing Deleuze's meditations on Bergson, Pearson states: "...duration is not simply the indivisible, but rather that which has a very special style of division. It is at the level of the virtual where no divisions have been carried out that the single time is to be located. As a virtual multiplicity duration divides into elements and lines that differ in kind..." (p. 64). Therefore, implicated in the one physical time there are an infinity of actual fluxes (a plurality of times). Temporality is one and yet many. It is one and generates multiplicity.

In a review of this length it is not possible to deal in depth with either the strengths or weaknesses of Deleuze's approach. In brief compass, its strengths would be first its capacity to explain in general terms why a single, unitary time need not be taken as contradicting an Einsteinian temporal plurality. Second, the Bergsonian–Deleuzeian treatment of the duration of matter reinforces Maurice Merleau–Ponty's contention (in "Einstein and the Crisis of Reason") that Bergson's universal duration is intended to explain and provide a foundation for the multiple times of relativity physics. Bergson, therefore, cannot be understood as opposing relativity. The weakness of Pearson's approach lies in the difficulty, which he admits, of following Deleuze's arguments here. If these point the way to solutions of vexing problems, they also raise another set of problems, closely aligned with the effort to define and explicate the virtual. Does the virtual, in its oneness, pre-exist everything that actually exists? How can we think the virtual and its actualizations, including its unity and its self-pluralization?

In his third chapter Pearson deals with these questions through a consideration of evolutionary time. Physical time, he states, is a series of 'nows' independent of their pasts: it lacks history. Biological evolution, by contrast, is inherently historical. In it the past remains active at any moment. Hence evolution can embody neither reversibility nor simple repetition. The 'self-generation' of plurality typical of the virtual reigns supreme in biological evolution. Though not limited to living organisms, duration is present in them far more fully than in non-living matter.

Pearson's account of biological evolution brings out another character of the virtual over and above its irreversibility and non-repetitiveness, that is, its incompatibility with the merely possible. If evolution is creative, then its creations must be more than the recombination of previously existent elements, whether physical or ideal. More broadly, its course must not in any sense be conceived as a choice between pre-existing 'possibles'. This is the universe proposed by Daniel Dennett, for whom a universal 'design space' contains all the possibilities for all organisms that will ever exist from the prokaryote to the Bengal tiger. Pearson's critique of Dennett is highly effective. A universe of preordained possibility is one in which, in the last analysis, novelty and creativity cannot exist. A universe which accommodates the virtual, however, transcends the merely possible. In it possibilities are, literally, created.

But if the virtual is not a single vast set of possibilities, neither is it a single form or a collection of forms. Pearson's fourth chapter ("The Simple Virtual") is largely a

confrontation with the contemporary French philosopher Alain Badiou, who likens the virtual as it appears in Bergson and Deleuze to a single Platonic form and labels their thought a "Platonism of the virtual." Pearson replies to Badiou that Deleuze (the main target of Badiou's attack) is in no way simply a philosopher of the One, because Deleuze's 'One', by its very nature contains a multiplicity that does not contradict itself. It is this one–many that self-differentiates: "...the simplicity of the virtual denotes the pure positivity of being as a power of self-differentiating which, in differentiating itself ceases to be what it is 'all the while keeping something of its origin'" (p. 99). Such an existence may require a real effort to comprehend. But it is clearly not a Platonic or a Plotinian One. The virtual cannot contain every feature it will produce or generate. It is neither a vast logical space containing all subsequent possibility, nor a metaphysical cornucopia discharging preformed components of life. There are no Platonic eternal objects. There are no homunculi.

The fifth chapter confronts yet one more issue in the effort to define the virtual: the question of teleology. Is the ceaseless self-differentiation of the virtual to be understood as purposive? The issue is complex. On Bergson's terms our ordinary concepts of purpose and of mechanism are two sides of the same coin. When we construct something we start with not only an idea of what we want to make but a notion of what its parts will be and how they fit together. If we concentrate on the end in view we will be teleologists, stressing the goal; if we concentrate on the parts and how we fit together, we will be mechanists. In either case, we will tacitly suppose that the result is given at the beginning and that the process adds nothing to it. Life, for Bergson, transcends this dead end dilemma through its creativity. At the end of the evolutionary process there is more than was present or predictable at the beginning.

Bergson's middle course between mechanism and teleology has, of course, a famous precedent. Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgment* arrives at a similar position, proposing that in the biological sciences we must use both the concept of purpose and the concept of mechanism. For Kant mechanism is based on our *a priori* forms of perception and the categories of the understanding. Teleology, by contrast, is a regulative concept. It allows us to organize our biological knowledge via purpose or function, but without our being able to go any further.

There are two problems, Pearson states, with Kant's treatment of mechanism and teleology. First, Kant leaves us with an unresolvable dilemma: We hesitate between two concepts of nature, without resolution. Second, for Kant both mechanism and teleology are merely human ways of thinking. Is the world really mechanical? Does it contain teleology? Kant warns us that we can never know. By contrast Bergson urges us to transcend human epistemic dilemmas *via* the notion of a creative force animating evolution. This notion, though admittedly speculative, leads to 'fluid concepts' capable of following evolution in its continuity, its mobility, and its 'vector' character (p. 125). As in Bergson's theory of perception, here metaphysics and science can both be brought nearer to experience. Escaping the Kantian dilemma, Bergson attains a quasi-teleology (the reviewer's term).

Pearson's final chapters (six and seven) deal with Bergson's least read work, *Matter and Memory.* A grasp of the full development of Bergson's thought is not possible if this work, with its penetrating studies of memory and perception, is ignored. Equally, without an understanding of *Matter and Memory* it is scarcely possible to comprehend Pearson's claims that the 'virtual' is prior to and makes possible either our ordinary mental acts or our personal persistence through time.

In the sixth chapter Pearson strives to rescue Bergson from the charge of idealism – a misunderstanding based on Bergson's treatment of objects of perception in *Matter and*

Memory as images. Pearson succeeds in showing why the treatment of the ordinary objects around us as 'images' in no way renders them subjective. In 'pure perception' we are, for Bergson, in direct contact with the pulsations of matter, which impinge on us from all sides. Out of this welter, through our sense organs and brain, we fashion distinct objects, exaggerating their distinctness and their stability by 'subtracting' those aspects of the welter that are not useful to us and 'selecting' out particulars or particular aspects of things for exclusive attention. Our sense organs and nervous systems, then, act as 'choke filters', eliminating the general flux and flow of nature, leaving stable, simply located 'images' around us: coffee cups, pens, paper. If some of their characteristics are exaggerated, however, these objects are nonetheless real.

For Bergson, then, we are not isolated from the world. If the 'images' around us are actual objects, however, our representations of them are not subjective, in the sense of being derived from or produced by the subject. Rather, they are derived from the objects of experience (by abstracting their surfaces or surface features). Representations thus cannot be construed as epistemological absolutes standing between us and a world tenuously connected to them and dubiously known.

Bergson's theory of perception, Pearson proclaims, is revolutionary. It frees us from a host of unquestioned assumptions bequeathed to us by Descartes and his successors. Among those assumptions is the belief that there is a wedge between perception and the world, and hence between philosophy and science. Bergson does away with this wedge. The world we perceive and the world science studies are one and the same.

II

Up to this point *Philosophy and the Adventure of the Virtual* has painstakingly reinvestigated Bergson's thought, rescuing it from a retinue of faulty interpretations and showing its real significance. He thus goes a long way towards his goal of rescuing Bergson's from 'erasure'. In his concluding chapter, however, he reverses this trajectory. Dealing first with Bergson's concept of memory from the vantage-point of Bergsonian psychology, he then deals with the same subject-matter *via* his and Deleuze's concept of ontology (hence the chapter's title "The Being of Memory"). Bergson's viewpoint is thus corrected, leaving a philosophy markedly different from Bergson's original philosophy.

To deal with Bergson's concept of memory from a psychological standpoint has never been easy. As Pearson amply demonstrates, Bergson 'reverses' many of our common assumptions about recollection, perception, and forgetting, transforming them in the process. The evidence Bergson uses to support them can, however, be situated in neurophysiology and in clinical and experimental psychology. To deal with the ontology of memory is to deal with data even farther removed from our usual ways of thinking and investigating. The analysis of the 'being of the virtual' is a daunting task, verging at times, Pearson tells us, on the strange and the 'uncanny'.

We ordinarily associate memory with, for example, recalling the multiplication table or, by contrast, an event in our lives. For Bergson and Deleuze memory is far more extensive and far more omnipresent than this. For them (as for Freud) our personal pasts are retained in their entirety and are thus always present, a fundamental basis for our thinking and our personalities.

Not all memories are personal, or closely connected with our personal pasts. There are also habit memories, inscribed in our neurophysiology, which allow us to ride a bike or recite the

multiplication table. These memories are, simply, in the present. Personal reminiscences ('episodic' memories), however, are not in the brain. The interplay between the prepared habit memories in the brain and our episodic recollections makes it possible for us to recognize objects (images) and understand them. We cope by focusing old memories on new situations.

This bare outline of Bergson's concept of recollection will help us understand Pearson's Deleuzean treatment of memory. Put simply: If the past as the sum of our personal, episodic memories, is given 'alongside' the present, then though it is past, this past is also simultaneous with the present. If so, psychological time cannot be a succession of evanescent 'nows'. All such present nows would exist within an overarching fundamental reality which perpetually remains and, unlike the fugitive 'nows', does not pass away. What Deleuze makes of this Bergsonian memory is interesting. If Bergson is right, each of us lives in a broad temporality-in-depth, stretching from our distant past and 'covering' our present moment. Such temporality-in-depth contains and compresses innumerable memories 'all at once'. It contains a matter comprised of memories. But, more important, it possesses a fundamental form. Bergson, Deleuze insists, did not go far enough. His theory needs to be enlarged and transformed by means of a quasi-Kantian 'transcendental empiricism': a series of transcendental questions of the form "what are the necessary preconditions of ...?" Where Kant answered these questions by singling out categories of the understanding and forms of perception sufficient to constitute a basis for Newtonian physics, Deleuze proposes a series of temporal syntheses (originary synthesis, organic synthesis, synthesis of the pure past, and transcendental synthesis). These would form, he believes, the ultimate grounds for a Bergsonian psychology.

It would not be too much of a caricature to state that in trying to explain memory, Deleuze has 'laminated' it, placing one kind of synthesis on top of another, hierarchically. The first two syntheses are psychological and passive, the second two (ending at transcendental synthesis) are ontological and active. Deleuze is thus able to distinguish between an empirical self approachable by psychology; and a 'noumenal' self approachable through ontology (or art). The empirical self is not, as in Kant, a mere appearance, and the noumenal self does not exist outside of 'time': "The difference between them is that the one is everyday, the other is rare; one is ordinary, the other extraordinary" (p. 188). The one (the noumenal or virtual) transcends any present with which it is related, and "...has to be defined in accordance with the actual present of which it is in the past; absolutely and simultaneously, and although it is also part of the past in general and receives its being there" (p. 193). The pure virtuality, the basis of active synthesis, is thus 'a past that was never present'. If Pearson is right, it is the ultimate ground of our existence, transcending that existence while intimately bound up with it.

Unquestionably, the author has succeeded in showing that the terms virtual/actual and pure memory/present memory are central to Bergson's philosophy. He also succeeds in his painstaking analysis of the virtual's fundamental characteristics. Those are real achievements and valuable additions to the literature on Deleuze and on Bergson. But there are problems. If in *Matter and Memory* Bergson uses terms like 'pure memory' and 'pure perception', he makes it very clear that these are 'limit concepts'. That is, these are limits which are never fully reached. There is no absolutely pure pure perception: there is no absolutely pure pure memory. The same is true of the term 'virtual'. For him the virtual is only virtual: never perfectly achieved, never sufficiently complete to be a pure form of being. To render these as pure form is thus to reify concepts which Bergson wished to leave open and incomplete.

It is thus doubtful, in the last analysis, that fundamental temporality is a "form of change which does not change" (p. 198), or whether it is appropriate to view this formal time as a "crystal image" (p. 105). If this is true, then Deleuze's transcendental empiricism cannot deliver the pure preconditions it purports to. If the form of temporality – including memory – is not pure, then the four '*a priori*' syntheses by which Deleuze hopes to make temporality intelligible contain an '*a posteriori*' indefinite element.

One is equally puzzled by Deleuze's blithe acceptance of the analytic–synthetic dichotomy and the uncritical use of the term synthesis to define temporality. As much as he wanted to overcome dilemmas posed by teleology and mechanism or by consciousness and spatiality, Bergson hoped to overcome the hegemony of the analytic–synthetic distinction. Analysis, he argues, should not be contrasted with synthesis, but with intuition, which creates the possibility of new modes of analysis. Synthesis comes third: a construction based on some mode of analysis. 'Synthesis' cannot clarify Bergson's thought. One wonders whether it really suits Deleuze's.

Finally, there is a Pearson's (and Deleuze's) puzzling, seemingly nihilistic take on temporality (duration). Somehow, without explanation, it turns out that temporality is "unhinged and out of joint" (p. 197) and a "madness in the subject" (p. 203). Even if one wanted to agree with Pearson–Deleuze that duration is "pathological" (p. 192) and a perpetual "vertigo" (p. 198), one is not fully informed of why this is necessarily so. One is reminded here of the Sartrean self which, if it does exist, is forever in ceaseless and irresolvable conflict with itself, never able to achieve coherence except in illegitimate bad faith.

Pearson defends a kind of retrospective aestheticism, derived from Marcel Proust, according to which we cannot truly 'live' our lives and understand them contemporaneously. The truth of our existence is known in retrospect only: against the backdrop of the past. By retrospectively understanding the truth of our existence we 'save' or 'redeem' time: "Redeemed time is beyond good and evil. It is not a fable of moral redemption we are being offered or taught in these lessons on, and explorations of time" (p. 204). By going into the depths, as Nietzsche tells us, we do not become better persons: only more profound ones. Hence we must choose between Bergson (and Levinas) and Nietzsche (and Proust), between either the ethical or the aesthetic. If we choose the latter, we may become deep. If we choose the former, it seems inescapable that we will not. Pearson, in his final chapter does not so much prove this point as insinuate it. I am much puzzled as to how it can even be stated without sheer presumption. Pearson is equally satisfied with the implication that the latter view is the correct culmination of Bergson's thought. Those led to think so should read Bergson's final work, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* (1932) which Pearson never mentions and which clearly situates Bergson at the center of the ethical.

Though Pearson's concluding chapter is the longest in his book, its 38 pages are too few to bear the heavy burden he has placed on them. It is not possible in such a limited space to spell out the fundamentals of Bersonian memory plus Deleuze's reformulations of them, much less Pearson's claims to have achieved a secular aesthetic salvation. Even if brief, a succeeding chapter would make Pearsons' position more fully accessible – and comprehensible.