# PHI2202 & PHI3202 Texts in Contemporary Philosophy:

**Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory***

**Semester II**

2023–24

10 credits One Semester

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{What follows is a collection of lecture notes devoted to a complete — or near complete — reading of Henri Bergson’s *Matter and Memory*, which were delivered as part of a lecture course entitled *Texts in Contemporary Philosophy* at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne, in the Spring Semester of 2023–24, as part of the BA Philosophy. I have included the accompanying sheets that were occasionally handed out in the lectures themselves. Occasional reference is made to the sister course, delivered earlier in the year, by Adam Potts, and devoted to William James’s *Pragmatism,* a book and a thinker with which and with whom Bergson enjoyed a close relationship. The conversion process that transformed the originals into the current format has introduced some errors of formatting and some inelegances, but hopefully nothing that should interfere with the general legibility of the text.

ML, Sunday 12th May 2024}

***Weekly Readings***

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| **Timetable Week Teaching Week W/b** | | | **Reading** |
| 22 | 1 | 29/1/2024 | Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory,* Introduction  (i.e. pp. 9–16) |
| 23 | 2 | 5/2/24 | Ch. 2. Of the Recognition of Images (pp. 77–98 [to just before the start of sub-section III]) |
| 24 | 3 | 12/2/24 | Ch. 2 (99–131 [end of chapter]) |
| 25 | 4 | 19/2/24 | Ch. 3. Of the Survival of Images (pp. 133– 58) |
| 26 | 5 | 26/2/24 | Ch.3 (pp. 158–77 [end of Ch. 3]) |
| 27 | 6 | 4/3/24 | Ch. 4 (pp. 179–188 [to just before the subheading, ‘1.  Every movement….’ |
| 28 | 7 | 11/3/24 | Ch. 4. Pp.188–223 [end of chapter] |
| 29 | 8 | 18/3/24 | Summary and Conclusion (pp.225–49 [end of book]) |
| 30 |  | 25/3/24 | Easter Vacation |
| 31 |  | 1/4/24 |  |
| 32 |  | 8/4/24 |  |
| 33 |  | 15/4/24 |  |
| 34 | 9 | 22/4/24 | WORKSHOP: form and content to be determined, but you might go back and attempt to read Ch. 1 |
| 35 | 10 | 29/4/24 | [Note the different time and place:] Wednesday 1st May 2024, 3pm-5pm, HDB9.02: talk on Bergson by Mark  Sinclair, |
| 36 | 11 | 6/5/24 | WORKSHOPS: perhaps an essay writing session |
| 37 |  | 13/5/24 | Semester 2 Assessment |
| 38 |  | 20/5/24 | Semester 2 Assessment |
| 39 |  | 27/5/24 | Semester 2 Assessment |
| […] |  | […] |  |
| 49 |  | 5/8/24 | Assessment – Resits |
| 50 |  | 12/8/24 | Assessment – Resits |

##### MATTER AND MEMORY ITSELF (1896)

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| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| 22 | 1 | 29/1/2024 | Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory,* Introduction (i.e. pp. 9–16) |

**Introduction (new for the English translation, from 1910, 14 years after the book’s publication).**

So let’s get into MM and see what its specific problem is, and then very gradually, over the next eight weeks, we’ll come to see how this specific problem relates to Bergson’s philosophy as a whole, and the more general problematics I’ve just laid out.

So let’s begin to read the Introduction to *Matter and Memory,* to get a sense of what the problem is that it’s attempting to solve and how it is to go about solving it. (you can more or less read along with this in the text, as I’m commenting on the Introduction quite closely).

The problem addressed by MM is very simple: it is the relation between the mind and the body: or the soul and the body, the psycho-physiological relation (B uses all these terms) or, spirit and matter.

Crucially, and the import of this, like with so much of Bergson won’t perhaps have leapt out at you, Bergson sets out to prove that spirit and matter are *both real*. In other words, and this is important too, but it won’t have seemed so: the principal philosophical positions on the question both say that one half of the opposition is *not* real: idealism says matter isn’t real; and materialism says that spirit isn’t real. Bergson says both are real.

He describes his own position as dualistic. Now in fact idealism and realism are also dualistic in their own way, but their form of dualism is not worthy of the name; Bergson’s is.

Even more surprising is the way in which B proposes to define the *relation* between spirit and matter; and he’s going to do this by studying one particular part of our spiritual life, one part of spirit, one ‘faculty’: and that is *memory*. For him, the most promising way of

determining the relation between spirit and matter, is by looking at memory, and in the end determining the relation between memory and matter. Matter and memory, precisely.

Oppositions are crucial for Bergson, but it’s always important to find the RIGHT opposition; a lot of the ones philosophy uses to think about problems (like that of realism vs. idealism) are false oppositions. As we’re about to see.

So we’ll need to see why memory is special, and why the opposition of matter and memory — or simply why the focus on MEMORY — will solve or bypass a lot of the problems which philosophy has got itself caught up in.

##### The problem with realism and idealism

So let’s examine this opposition between idealism and realism, to see an example of how Bergson goes about treating philosophy, past philosophy, and the oppositions it uses to help solve problems; rather like Kant, he seems to think that these battles between opposing positions are endless, and that’s because the oppositions themselves are not the RIGHT oppositions. There is something wrong with them. Let’s try to see what that is, in this case.

As examples, for idealism think Berkeley; for realism, think Descartes. I’m going to find Locke quite useful later. So when we say realism we can be talking about both rationalism and empiricism. We’ll have to perhaps think about this.

You know Berkeley thought that *to be* is to be *perceived*; matter is entirely reducible to the perception that we have of it. That’s idealism. Subjective idealism.

Descartes: ‘made [matter] one with geometrical extensity [i.e. extension]’ (MM11). Matter is a spatial affair, it is extended in space; it is a part of the res extensa, the extended

substance. This res extensa, matter, is to be opposed to the res cogitans, the thinking substance, or the spirit. And for realist, the extended spatial substance exists INDEPENDENTLY of the spirit, the thinking thing (note the broad extension of ‘spirit’ then: not just OUR spirit, but the spiritual substance itself).

Bergson translates the opposition of realism and idealism into his own terms, and speaks of them in terms of how they think of the relation between matter and perception: Idealism: perception produces matter; realism: matter produces perception, i.e. it makes us perceive it, or it spontaneously engenders a perception within us.

How to overcome both realism and idealism in our conception of matter?

He suggests that we think of matter in a new way, an almost unheard of way: he suggests that we think of matter as an ‘aggregate of “images”’ (MM9).

##### Matter as image

Now, first note that it is possible that Bergson is thinking of matter in this way with a very particular aim in mind: to understand the mind-body problem — if that’s so, it would be possible to think of matter in a *different* way, and not as an image: almost everyone does think of matter in a different way! But they have failed to solve the mind-body problem. And if one wants to solve that problem once and for all, Bergson proposes that it will help us if we think of matter as a set of images. (And this is important to remember: there is a strategy behind this theory of matter: it is engineered, perhaps solely, in order to solve the mind body

problem; perhaps in itself, matter need not be understood in quite this way — this explains why Bergson recommended that we start the book by reading Ch. 2, for this is where the mind body problem begins to be addressed. The rest, chs. 1 and 4 are to do with the theory of the image and matter which subtends that problem.).

It will take us some time to understand why Bergson chooses this word ‘image’, but for the moment we can say that it is a word that designates something with a very special ontological character, and on the scale of being, on the ladder of being, it lies somewhere between something purely real and something purely ideal. Or if that’s imprecise, let’s read this sentence of Bergson’s which I promised you a while ago: a slippery sentence one would say, but we should always seek the reason WHY, rather than dismissing something as without reason, which is lazy: an image is ‘a certain existence which is more than that which the

idealist calls a *representation*, but less than that which the realist calls a *thing —* an existence

placed halfway between the “thing” and the “representation”’ (MM9).

That is a difficult sentence to read; and it’s because Bergson is trying to loosen the hold that certain entrenched ways of speaking have on the real: and he’s doing that with respect to not just one but two sets of terms: he speaks of words that the idealists use, and words that the realists use. And he tries to prise away the thing in question — matter — he tries to prise that away from both sets of terms, so that it rather floats in a void, indeterminate, waiting to be defined.

Into this strange void, or this state of slight indetermination, Bergson intervenes with his term ‘image’.

##### Common Sense

Now, however obscure this idea is (matter = image), Bergson thinks in fact it is the position taken by *common sense*. Why we should listen to common sense at all is another matter, and one we’ll have to come back to some time.

But what we can say is that one of the merits of common sense is that it is *indifferent to philosophy*, and philosophy is a problem for Bergson. One of its main problems is its tendency to think in terms of oppositions — or rather, its tendency to distribute the things it thinks about between the terms of the *wrong* opposition, a false opposition. Bergson suggests that we place ourselves in the perspective of common sense because thereby…

‘We place ourselves at the point of view of a mind unaware of the disputes between philosophers’ (cf. the overcoming or the undercutting of dualisms in 20th C philosophy; the philosophical, or sub-philosophical critique of philosophy itself).

i.e. ‘we consider matter before the dissociation which idealism and realism have brought about between its existence and its appearance’ (MM10).

Now already this is moving a little fast: why does Bergson say that idealism and realism split reality and appearance apart? Reality and appearance, or existence and appearance? — They both say that matter is not what it seems. [[It is not what it seems to be to common sense. But also, I think it is not what it seems tout court.]]

I think this is how it works: for the realist, matter does not have the properties it appears to have (secondary qualities); and for the idealist, perhaps it’s that matter does not exist independently of the mind, as it *appears* to (think here of Locke as an example of a kind of realist, who would say that *secondary* qualities may be mental, but *primary* qualities, like extension, shaper etc. are part of the real, part of matter; or simply think of Descartes).

So common sense vs. philosophy, common sense vs. philosophical oppositions. Or at least *versus some* oppositions (for Bergson is going to insist upon DUALISM). Common sense — at least we can agree on this — is not going to accept that matter is not real: common sense tells us that matter does not just exist for the mind (in BOTH its primary qualities and its secondary qualities) (idealism); and it also tells us that it has the *secondary* as well as the primary qualities we perceive it as having (contra realism, cf. the ‘secondary qualities debate’).

Can we go further and say that common sense also believes in the reality of spirit, just as it believes in the reality of matter? It seems so.

But the important point seems to be that matter is what it seems for common sense in that it really has the properties it appears to us to have: they are not bestowed upon it by the mind, and that seems to be a notion common to both realism and idealism (it’s just that in one case it is secondary qualities, and in the other both primary and secondary).

So you can see that common sense bypasses completely the artificial opposition between appearance and reality, appearance and existence, that philosophy introduces when it starts to think about things.

##### From common sense to ‘image’

Now it seems as if this coincidence of opposites is one of the reasons why Bergson chooses to say that matter should be thought of as an *image*; for an image just is what it seems to be, it has no reality beyond its shimmering, and it has all the qualities it seems to have. It is nothing beyond what it presents itself as being.

And this leads Bergson to a further justification for his choice of the term ‘image’ to describe *matter*:

‘For common sense, then, the object exists in itself, and, on the other hand, the object is, in itself pictorial, [it is] as we perceive it: image it is, but a self-existing image [which I

assume means that it is not dependent on the human imagination to conjure it up]’ (MM10).

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Semester 2 Credit Value: 10

(ECTS Credits: 5)

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**Recapitulation**

So last week we introduced the general problematic that Bergson addresses, and we started to read *Matter and Memory*. We said its problem was the mind body problem. And that to solve that problem Bergson found it necessary to produce a new theory of matter. Matter as an image, or an aggregate of images. And indeed he has to make a number of other conceptual moves that we shall continue to delineate today.

One of the other moves is to produce a new theory of memory, which is what we’ll get onto in the discussion that we’ll have I think in the second hour of the class.

But to lay the ground for that, and to understand why memory is so important, we are going to have to look at Bergson’s theory of *perception*: all parts of matter ‘perceive’, in the sense that they receive movement, influence from every other part of the universe. But not every piece of matter has a memory, which anchors these impersonal perceptions in a centre, in a subjectivity.

This is what happens as we ascent the chain of being, when we reach the living thing.

Living things can acquire habits, and as you’ll have seen this week, habit is the first, most primitive form of memory. The other form is a more useless spiritual type of recollection which recalls dated events in their singularity. We’ll come to these two types of memory later today. I think it’s not clear yet whether *all* types of life have *both* types of memory. Certainly human beings do.

But in any case, one of the very first things we have to do is to understand the positions that Bergson is kicking against and what his own position is by contrast. We have to understand the former because then we shall know WHY Bergson does what he does; what problem is he trying to solve.

Now the book in a way takes a lot for granted in terms of the audience, and at the time it was able to since French education was remarkable when it came to philosophy. But it means the book doesn’t always do things in the order that it might.

So the problem with epistemological positions like realism and idealism, which we looked at last week, is that they cannot solve the problem of scepticism. More or less.

Bergson doesn’t use that word, and perhaps it’s too simplifying. But it seems to me right.

So then he looks at WHY they are unable to solve the problem: and he finds that it is due to a fault in their theory of perception. Perception and matter.

Here we come to a crucial philosophical move in Bergson’s thought: there are two kinds of difference. (Deleuze lays stress on this in his own way): differences in kind/differences in nature, on the one hand, and on the other hand, differences in degree/intensity.

The way he wrestles with the philosophical tradition is that, at different points in the debate, the tradition, these idealists and realists pick the wrong kind of difference. Sometimes they mistake a difference of degree for a difference in kind and sometimes vice versa.

So when it comes to matter and perception, they see a difference in kind. These two things are radically distinct. Matter does not perceive, and perception is not a processes that is material in any way.

Bergson says, precisely not: you, philosophers, are mistaking a difference in kind for what is in fact a difference in degree, or a difference in intensity.

This leads Bergson to create his theory of perception, as a way to solve the problem of scepticism: matter and perception are the same KIND of thing: matter can be said to perceive as well. Or at least, let’s put it this way, if you slacken the difference between perception and matter to a difference in intensity, you are obliged to say this rather peculiar thing: matter perceives just as much as we do.

How do we make sense of that notion? By thinking perception in terms which ALLOW IT to be common to both us and the material world: we think of it as a process of movement, or transmission, or conduction: movements are pulsating throughout the material world, through nature, according to the laws of nature. They hit a material object, and that object registers that gesture in some way, even if only by obeying the laws of inertia and momentum.

But Bergson’s philosophical gesture has a second stage: first stage: replace one kind of difference for another. Second stage: show how CONSEQUENT to this, some OTHER kind of difference then opens up.

What do I mean?

Here we have taken the difference of perception and matter. It was taken as a difference in kind; Bergson tries to think it as a difference in degree (ultimately to help him solve the supposedly insoluble mind-body problem: so he has a particular strategy in mind). BUT THEN he has to say, well we can’t say that there is NO difference between the way *we* perceive and the way MATTER perceives: so we need to SPECIFY that difference.

We’ve said it’s a difference of intensity or degree, but what does that mean. IS our perception of a higher intensity or a lower one?

We tend to think, he says, that we perceive MORE, to a higher degree, than lesser organisms and particularly inorganic life. But that is precisely the wrong way to conceive this difference of degree.

In fact we perceive less. We select, we filter. We perceive only a certain number of the vibrations that are passing through the material universe.

Now why do we do that?

It’s got something to do with the brain. And I raised this last week.

The brain evolves not to serve a contemplative function; but a practical one. It has evolved naturally that way. Sometimes Bergson speaks of the brain, sometimes of the nervous system more generally, the spinal cord, etc. The central nervous system: he speaks of it using the technological metaphor (and there are a lot of those: photography, telephones, cinema: remember I mentioned his position at the turn of the century last week), he speaks of the central nervous system as a telephone exchange (you’ll have seen these things, even if

they almost predate you: the operator, sitting in a room, receiving calls, and plugging in wires to connect the call to the other end: inputs and outputs, receiving and sending).

The brain receives inputs from the senses via the afferent nerves, centripetal; it receives stimulus; now what?

In lower forms of life, indeed in very simple organisms, the reaction is close to that of mechanical things: it is automatic. There is one stimulus, and just one response, that happens immediately.

Now, as the organism develops, it becomes more complex (and the process is not something I can go into now, but you can read about it: a process of differentiation, sensory organs become separate from motor organs etc.). It develops more possibilities, more functions, and more needs. The central nervous system develops in tandem. And what happens is that a kind of delay, or what Bergson calls a zone of ‘indetermination’ starts to be generated IN The brain. What this means is that we have a CHOICE, we are not mechanically DETERMINED to act in a certain way, when we receive a certain stimulus. We have a number of choices, and the brain makes that decision. And when it has made that decision, it then sends a signal down the efferent nerves, to the motor system, and provokes a movement.

The brain is eminently PRACTICAL in this sense. And the big mistake of the tradition has been to think that the brain is inherently THEORETICAL. Or perhaps more precisely, since the brain CAN contemplate, it CAN do theory; the mistake has been to think that PERCEPTION is contemplative, theoretical. In what sense? Well, in the sense that perceiving was thought to be like taking a photograph. It captures everything, it doesn’t select. It sits back and it realistically captures whatever is out there.

Here we are back at the selective nature of our perception: if perception is in fact practical, if our sensory organs have evolved only to serve practical functions, the brain will perceive of the outer world only those features which it NEEDS to perceive. The others will

be filtered out. All those distant influences, those wavelengths of light that have no practical function for us, will not be perceived at all.

Because the brain is practical, in the first instance. Perception is too. What we perceive, Bergson says is not just things; but rather what we receive is something like those aspects of things which offer us or ‘afford’ us possibilities for MOVEMENT. It is as if ‘virtual’ paths, virtual possibilities are presented to us on the surface of the real.

‘Virtual’ is the word Bergson uses here. Deleuze will make a lot of it.

So the difference in intensity between matter (qua image, qua unconscious impersonal perception) and perception in the *narrow* sense, our conscious personal perception, is that the latter is SUBTRACTIVE, it subtracts from the real and focuses solely on those aspects which appeal to some need that the organism has, and that offer us ways in which to move our organs and our whole body, so as to SATISFY those needs.

##### Memory

So we’ve seen that Bergson’s philosophical gesture involves a series of differentiations of different kinds: replace a difference in kind with a difference of intensity; and then show what nature this latter difference has.

But this process can work in the opposite direction too: sometimes the philosophical tradition puts a difference of INTENSITY where it should put a difference in kind.

So this is tricky the first time you hear it, I know. But this is why it takes work, to learn it: we have just distinguished perception and matter: philosophy thought it was a difference in kind; Bergson says it’s a difference in degree.

Now we come upon another distinction: perception and *memory*. The tradition thinks this as a difference of intensity. Bergson now wants to make the point that the difference between perception and memory is rather a difference in KIND.

So you see, Perception and matter is really a difference of degree; Perception and memory is really a difference in kind.

And the philosophical tradition has got both of those differentiations wrong.

So, memory then: what is it? Why would we want to make this distinction in kind between memory and perception.

We saw last week, and we reminded ourselves earlier, that memory is responsible for subjectivising perception. For giving it a centre. For rendering our perception’s individual and peculiar to us, since we each have different memories (different past moments are ‘contracted’ together with the present moment, to form a multiplicity of moments: the present moment, every moment is more or less complex).

But here’s something more basic: perception we said was practical. People thought it was contemplative and theoretical and disinterested; but it was the opposite. It was tied to the brain, and the body, with its sensory motor system, the telephone exchange.

Perception is BODILY. That’s one reason for (or perhaps a result of) reducing perception to the level of matter and thinking matter as perceiving, matter as images that perceive and ARE perceived.

Perception is something that happens to bodies.

Memory is spiritual. Memory is what allows us to do all those things that philosophy thought were specifically human. And first of all that means contemplation, disinterested theoretical contemplation.

Remember that the tradition assigned that function to PERCEPTION; but in fact, it is due to MEMORY.

So remember that the ultimate problem that Matter and Memory, the book, is trying to solve is the relation between body and spirit, body and mind, or matter and spirit. This is why it’s necessary to make all the distinctions that we’ve made today, and that’s why it’s necessary to make them in the right way (are they are difference in kind or a diff in degree; and if so, is the degree higher or lower in each case?). These distinctions are necessary because we will then be able to properly identify the moment at which the mind and the body are distinct.

Perception is bodily; memory is spiritual.

Now, we don’t yet exactly know what spiritual means, but we have an inkling.

Then, we get onto another differentiation.

So Bergson’s philosophy is a series of differentiations. It makes it difficult to read. But it’s difficult for good reasons; it’s necessarily difficult.

Here are the differences we have so far, and their nature for Bergson (unlike the phil tradition):

##### Perception and matter (difference in degree) Perception and memory (difference in kind)

**Third difference: two kinds of memory.** I don’t yet want to say what kind of difference, because this is what we’re going to discuss today. And often, things seem to get undercut later. But as far as I can see, Bergson says this is a **difference in kind**.

If we say there is a difference in kind between perception and memory, okay: but then Bergson says ‘there are two kinds of memory’, that are differentiated in some way yet to be determined.

Now this does indeed muddy the waters. We had a nice clean cut, a nice clean difference in kind between perception and memory, and this distinction of two kinds of memory, is going to, it seems, ameliorate that difference. This makes things difficult, because it pulls the rug from under our feet. But that’s the challenge of reading Bergson.

There are differentiations and then differentiations of differentiations…

I don’t want to disrupt the flow, or delay the end, but it’s important to say WHY it’s necessary to muddy the waters, and it’s to do with this notion of purity. Bergson finds it necessary to make these distinctions in kind, for instance between perception and memory; and what that results in is what he terms a ‘pure perception’, on the one hand, a ‘pure memory’ on the other. BUT he says, at least in our own case, this distinction can be made IN THEORY, but not IN FACT. I think it can be made *in fact* perhaps when it comes to real material objects and their type of perception, but not in our case. So we have another crucial difference: between in theory and in fact; de jure and de facto; and this really corresponds to the difference between the pure and the impure: we can THINK perception and memory are different in kind, in their purity; but in fact, they are always intermingled. And it’s necessary to think the precise way in which that intermingling occurs.

This intermingling is what I meant by ‘muddying the waters’.

So I said that the distinction between two *kinds* of memories muddies the waters, it sullies the pure distinction between pure perception and pure memory. In what way? Because we said at first that perception was bodily, and memory was spiritual. BUT the first of the two kinds of memory seems tied to the body, and to action, and to movement, whilst only the SECOND type of memory is truly spiritual.

Habit memory, and spontaneous ‘image-memory’… To be discussed. And read about

We have to keep perception and memory distinct, in order to then understand how if at all they interact with one another… how memory and perception interact with one another in different types of organic life, and in different types of human activity.

So there are a number of ontological questions that are going to be answered by Bergson’s philosophy: he begins by installing a continuity at the level of matter: EVERYTHING has something in common: everything perceives. Everything is an image, it is seen and it can in some sense ‘see’. But…. And then eventually, we are going to differentiate the real, but in a new way, not distributed along the lines of the unperceiving matter and the perceiving mind, that characterised realism and idealism.

And in a way yet to be defined, this way of thinking perception, and then relating it to memory, is going to help us to solve the mind body problem, or, perhaps more pertinently, more grandly, the problem of the relation between matter and spirit.

Now I said that, philosophy hadn’t helped us here: neither philosophy, nor our evolved bad habits of thinking, in fact they have made us think of most things in a spatial way. And these bad habits have become enshrined in the language we use. So one of the things I want to do first is go through something I missed last week, which was a certain theory of Bergson’s use of language, and perhaps that will help us understand a tiny bit more what spatialisation means; and then we’ll get on to Bergson’s theory of perception, which is intimately tied up with this theory of matter as a set of images, a set of pictures. And eventually that will help us

get onto the problem of the relation of spirit and matter, which starts being addressed in earnest in ch. 2.

So if I do all that, and lay out the theory of perception, impersonal, unconscious perception, and how that becomes personal, — and that perception has to be separated from memory, but that it is connected to memory in our own case, or in the case of organic beings; that will hopefully lay the grounds for you to discuss what you’ve read this week, in Ch. 2, which relies on ch.1 and this theory of perception, and action, a little bit.

##### Bergson’s language

So first of all, let me say something about Bergson’s critique of language and his use of language.

I said in an announcement that Bergson won the Nobel prize for literature in 1927/28. And at least we can take that to mean he is careful with his words, and that he has a strategy when he writes in a certain way.

We’ll learn more later about why it is necessary to use language carefully, — broadly speaking it’s because our language, our words, are not naturally suited to expressing the types of thoughts that Bergson wants to. But more practically, one of the difficulties of reading Bergson is that he is trying to loosen the hold of language upon the real; or he’s trying to loosen the hold that a particular way of speaking has on this real. Pinning a label on something is a good excuse to stop thinking about something. He wants to make us think, by asking us to think about things using *other terms*. Or more precisely, perhaps, if things in themselves are fluid, flowing, in flux, subjected to duration and change, and creation, then perhaps we cannot be content with one set of terms, one word that would pin something

down and freeze the flow of the river forever, maybe we need a constant flux of words, or a certain linguistic strategy. Heraclitus was expert at this.

Here’s a particularly extreme example of language being somewhat pried away from the real, and an example of how this linguistic strategy can make reading Bergson feel perilous, as if one can’t easily grasp the topic he’s engaging with in the way one normally feels one can. This is the first very obscure thing that Bergson does to try to overcome the opposition of realism and idealism: so we’ll say what that is, and then we’ll pass onto a more complex set of sentences that make a similar point about language and its fluidity.

How to overcome both realism and idealism in our conception of matter?

He suggests that we think of matter in a new way, an almost unheard of way: he suggests that we think of matter as an ‘aggregate of “images”’ (MM9). And then consider this sentence which we read out last week. I described it as a slippery sentence, hard to grasp: but what that means is that as philosophers we should seek the reason WHY it’s so hard to grasp, rather than dismissing something as without reason, which is lazy: an image is ‘a certain existence which is more than that which the idealist calls a *representation*, but less than that

which the realist calls a *thing —* an existence placed halfway between the “thing” and the “representation”’ (MM9).

That is a difficult sentence to read; and it’s because Bergson is trying to loosen the hold that certain entrenched ways of speaking have on the real: and he’s doing that with respect to not just one but two sets of terms: he speaks of words that the idealists use, and words that the realists use. And he tries to prise away the thing in question — matter — he

tries to prise that away from both sets of terms, so that it rather floats in a void, indeterminate, waiting to be defined.

Into this strange void, or this state of slight indetermination, Bergson intervenes with his term ‘image’.

‘For common sense, then, the object exists in itself, and, on the other hand, the object is, in itself pictorial, [it is] as we perceive it: image it is, but a self-existing image [which I

assume means that it is not dependent on the human imagination to conjure it up]’ (MM10).

##### Memory as solution of mind body problem.

The book we are reading is entitled not *Spirit and Matter*, but *Matter and Memory.* So why memory?

Memory is to give us the solution to the mind body problem (Hypothesis: ‘memory […] is just the intersection of mind and matter’ (MM13)), and it is to solve it in such a way as to allow dualism to be possible, and that means it will allow spirit and matter to constitute a dualism which really *is* a dualism: one which affirms that both spirit and matter are equally real. So we shall have to see over the coming weeks how on earth it might do this.

But we’re still reading the Introduction, and one of the things Bergson says is that he is here employing a certain amount of empirical science, and that means psychology.

Psychology as the empirical study of the soul, and one of the things psychology studies is memories.

More importantly, and this was important to Freud to and a number of others at the time, psychology studies *forgetting* (the opposite of memory). And in particular, one of the most important forms of forgetting: the forgetting of words: aphasia.

Now crucially, psychology had uncovered instances of people losing the ability to speak, or forgetting certain words, as a result of certain injuries, cuts or lesions, to the brain. So a purely physical incision had led to a spiritual loss, the loss of a spiritual, mental capacity, the capacity to remember.

Bergson attributes a singular importance to aphasia: ‘Anyone who approaches, without preconceived ideas and on the firm ground of facts, the classical problem of the relations of soul and body, will soon see this problem as centring upon the subject of memory, and, even more particularly, upon the memory of words’ (MM13).

We will meet this idea again, but in the introduction to the book, this is about as much as Bergson will tell us. But I will come back very soon to the question of psychology, and role that psychology plays in the book, and I’ll say something, as Bergson does, about psychology’s relation to metaphysics, to philosophy. But we need a slight detour before we can get there.

##### Towards Bergson’s theory of perception: The utilitarian character of the brain: towards unconscious perception

First of all, Bergson’s theory of perception, which is remarkable. For to him, everything material, so matter, matter understood as an image, perceives. It is not conscious of the fact that it does, but it nevertheless perceives. This is, in the case of inorganic things, *un*conscious perception.

Now, again leaping ahead: this is a perception which is not individuated, it does not belong to any one organism; and one of the reasons for that, is that this perception does not have a memory. It does not retain anything, it does not form a ‘personal history’. It is like the Atlantic ocean. It has no memory. (At least that’s how I understand it at the moment: maybe later we’ll come back to that and revise it — but it seems that even habit-memory doesn’t belong to inorganic things).

Here, we need to begin with Bergson’s conception of the brain and the body. Because we need to understand something of how novel is his conception of the *mind*, and how the mind is *different* to the body.

I wonder if we can summarise Bergson’s whole thesis like this: the mind (or the spirit) can do much *more* than the brain can. The brain is a naturally evolved organ, it has a function, a pragmatic or utilitarian function. Whereas the *mind* (‘spirit’) can do things which are not practical at all.

Bergson: ‘the psychological state [note misprint ‘physical’ in the Zone edition] seems to us to be, in most cases, immensely wider than the cerebral state. I mean that the brain state indicates only a very small part of the mental state, that part which is capable of translating itself into movements of locomotion’ (MM13).

This is moving very fast, so let’s slow it down: the brain has something to do with locomotion. It commands the body to *move*, on the basis of what the senses *perceive.* You’ll have heard tell of the ‘sensori-motor system’. This is more or less what Bergson is talking about. It characterises every animal organism, assuming that animals are defined BY animation, i.e. by the capacity to move, and above all to move themselves.

This takes us right to the heart of what I’m going to risk calling Bergson’s ‘naturalism’. It is a kind of pragmatic vision of the brain, a UTILITARIAN vision — Bergson doesn’t have a conventional view of evolution, but perhaps we can speak of the brain as having evolved, along with the rest of the body, the physical, *material* body, and as having evolved in tandem with it. The body is what moves us around, and it is what we use to satisfy our needs as animals. The body has evolved for the sake of ACTION, movement, a function, a practical purpose. Obviously we shall have to spend a long time trying to explain and justify this thesis — that’s what Ch. 1 is all about.

Here in the Introduction (p.14), Bergson says ‘our cerebral state contains more or less of our mental state in the measure that we reel off our psychic life into action or wind it up into pure knowledge’ (MM14). Contemplation vs action, theoretical vs. practical. Spirit vs. Matter, vs. body. Perhaps this is the heart of it.

Let me read and comment on this long passage from Bergson (14–15): ‘There are then, in short, divers *tones* of mental life, or, in other words, our psychic life may be lived at different heights, now nearer to action, now further removed from it, according to the degree of our *attention to life* [it will turn out that this is attention to the life out there in the physical world, the world around which we have to MOVE, in space]*.* Here we have one of the ruling ideas of this book — the idea, indeed, which served as the starting point of our inquiry. That

which is usually held to be a greater complexity of the psychical state appears to us, from our point of view, to be a greater dilatation [sic, the same in French — clearly it means something like a ‘dilation’ a stretching out, or an unfurling: this image of the unrolling, say of a roll of film or a reel, is common in Bergson] of the whole personality, which, normally narrowed down by action, expands with the unscrewing of the vice in which it has allowed itself to be squeezed, and, always whole and undivided, spreads itself over a wider and wider surface. That which is commonly held to be a disturbance of the psychic life […] appears to us, from our point of view, to be an unloosing or a breaking [*perversion* in French, p.7] of the tie which binds this psychic life to its motor accompaniment, a weakening or an impairing of our attention to outward life’ (MM14–15).

So ‘attention to life’ means practical life, the life in which we perceive and focus on the outside world, in which our needs can be satisfied, if we move around and reach out for what we need.

So we are beginning to get a dim awareness of a picture of psychic life that is bound, thanks to the brain, and its natural evolutionary origin (perhaps) to practical active life, to *spatial* movement. (And this is important to underline: SPACE is aligned with the practical, the utilitarian, the part of us that relates to *needs:* thinking in terms of space is *essential* at this level). This spatial movement is carried out by the body (so we have a link between the mind and the body), BUT, the mind is capable of much more than just these practical physical gestures; it can withdraw from practical life and enter the theoretical life, — it can turn *inwards,* away from the life going on outside in the physical world, and it can contemplate, quite uselessly.

**Practice and Theory: Psychology and Metaphysics**

Note how Bergson associates these two attitudes, and the way the mind is capable of these two things, practice and theory, with two disciplines: psychology and metaphysics: ‘psychology has for its object the study of the human mind working for practical utility, and […] metaphysics is but this same mind striving to transcend the conditions of useful action and to come back to itself as to a pure creative energy’ (MM15). Metaphysics of course as the mind straying beyond the physical, so beyond the spatial world of praxis.

Bergson exhorts us to keep hold of these two guide ropes, throughout the book: psychology and metaphysics, the empirical and the transcendent, the practical and the theoretical: ‘The first [of these guide-ropes] is that in psychological analysis we must never forget the utilitarian character of our mental functions, which are essentially turned toward action. The second is that the habits formed in action [here we need to slow the sentence down, because what is happening here, what B is describing, is an *illegitimate* move, or a kind of ‘transcendental illusion’ that takes place when this utilitarian and spatial way of thinking exceeds the sphere in which it’s pertinent….] find their way up to the sphere of speculation, where they create fictitious problems, and that metaphysics must begin by dispersing this artificial obscurity’ (MM16)

We are talking about matter, so we are talking about physical things, and in our case, that means the body, not the mind or the spirit. Now we’ve said that Bergson wants us to think of all material things as images.

What Bergson tries to think is how my body, as a material thing, relates to other material things. All of this remember is a relation between ‘images’.

There are effectively two relations: perception and movement.

My body is distinguished from the other images by the fact that I can perceive it not just from without but from within: we perceive our body by means of what Bergson calls ‘affection’. This seems to mean what happens within me when I perceive something, and it is to do with HOW these perceptions AFFECT me. What is it that a certain perception conveys to me? According to Bergson’s account, what I perceive presents me with certain possibilities for acting, and that means for moving:

Thus, B says that affections ‘always interpose themselves between the excitations that I receive from without and the movements which I am about to execute’ (MM17). These affections contain an ‘invitation to act’ ( which I can freely decline).

(PHOTOGRAPHS emerge here: the problem is that we have a sort of direct realist, non-subtractive theory of perception: we think of it as like a photograph, taken by a camera.

The objection Bergson makes to this idea is that this does not distinguish the body from any other piece of matter: this is quite a jump, but think of it like this: every point in the universe is constantly being affected by every other point, directly or indirectly. Everything is ACTED upon by everything else. Whatever philosophy one has, he suggests, one has to admit this. Whatever physics one has: cf. Leibniz, he refers to the Leibnizian monads, which are mirrors of the whole world: they somehow PERCEIVE the world and all of its parts, obscurely or distinctly.)

# PHI2202 & PHI3202 Texts in Contemporary Philosophy:

**Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory***

**Semester II**

2023–24

**Class 3**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Timetable Week Teaching Week W/b** | | | **Reading** |
| ~~22~~ | ~~1~~ | ~~29/1/2024~~ | ~~Henri Bergson,~~ *~~Matter and Memory,~~* ~~Introduction~~  ~~(i.e. pp. 9–16)~~ |
| ~~23~~ | ~~2~~ | ~~5/2/24~~ | ~~Ch. 2. Of the Recognition of Images (pp. 77–98 [to just~~ ~~before the start of sub-section III])~~ |
| 24 | 3 | 12/2/24 | Ch. 2 (99–131 [end of chapter]) |
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| 27 | 6 | 4/3/24 | Ch. 4 (pp. 179–188 [to just before the subheading, ‘1.  Every movement….’ |
| 28 | 7 | 11/3/24 | Ch. 4. Pp.188–223 [end of chapter] |
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1. **Perception and matter (difference in degree) Perception and memory (difference in kind)**

**Third difference: two kinds of memory.** As far as I can see, Bergson says this is a

##### difference in kind.

1. another crucial difference: in theory and in fact; de jure and de facto; in principle or by rights and in fact.
2. Habit memory, and spontaneous ‘image-memory’.
3. Memory is to give us the solution to the mind body problem (Hypothesis: ‘memory […] is just the intersection of mind and matter’ (MM13)),
4. Psychology as the empirical study of the soul — memory and forgetting
5. e.g. the forgetting of words (or the inability to RECOGNISE words due to a faulty memory): aphasia. — word *blindness* or word *deafness.* A failure to RECOGNISE words, to compare our present perception to a memory, to a knowledge of these words and letters, that we acquired in the PAST.
6. ‘lesions’ to the brain.
7. Hypothesis: ‘memory […] is just the intersection of mind and matter’ (MM13). (cf. aphasia, i.e. loss of speech due to brain lesions, so a connection of mind and matter, mind and brain.)
8. ‘Anyone who approaches, without preconceived ideas and on the firm ground of facts, the classical problem of the relations of soul and body, will soon see this problem as centring upon the subject of memory, and, even more particularly, upon the memory of words’ (MM13).

##### Practice and Theory: Psychology and Metaphysics

1. ‘psychology has for its object the study of the human mind working for practical utility, and […] metaphysics is but this same mind striving to transcend the conditions of useful action and to come back to itself as to a pure creative energy’ (MM15).
2. the problem of spirit and matter, memory and matter (‘*Matter and Memory’)*, involves taking a metaphysical problem (matter, and its existence and essence) ‘into the open field of observation’ (MM15–16).
3. two guide ropes: psychology and metaphysics, the empirical and the transcendent, the practical and the theoretical:
4. ‘The first [of these guide-ropes] is that in psychological analysis we must never forget the utilitarian character of our mental functions, which are essentially turned toward action. The second is that the habits formed in action find their way up to the sphere of speculation, where they create fictitious problems, and that metaphysics must begin by dispersing this artificial obscurity’ (MM16).

##### Against the localisation of memory in the brain

1. Bergson is opposing the idea each memory has a particular part of the brain in which it is stored (and so when that part of the brain is damaged, the memory is destroyed). We could call that the ‘localisation’ theory.
2. →bound up with an ‘atomistic’ theory of mental states, sometimes identified with associationism: think ‘Hume’!
3. the opposition: ‘{{In those cases where recognition is attentive, i.e. where memory-images are *regularly* united with the present perception,}} is it the perception which determines mechanically the appearance of the memories, or is it the memories which spontaneously go to meet the perception?’ (99).

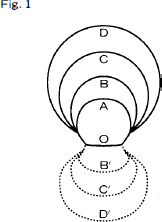
##### More practical forms of memory

1. ‘our memory directs upon the perception received the memory-images which resemble it and which are already sketched out by the movements themselves. Memory thus creates anew the present perception, or rather it doubles this perception by reflecting upon it either its own image or some other memory- image of the same kind’ (101).
2. At a very low level, these associations of perceptions with past memories can be almost mechanical; so we can make responses that we’d describe as ‘reflex- actions’.

##### On ‘attention’

1. **Attention** is glossed as ‘we are able to discover in a perception that which could not be perceived in it at first’ (102)
2. ‘this analysis is effected by a series of attempts at a synthesis, i.e. by so many hypotheses: our memory chooses, one after the other, various analogous images which it launches which it launches in the direction of the new perception. But the choice is not made at random. [this seems to approach the laws/an understanding of ‘association’:] What suggests the hypotheses, what presides, even from afar, over the choice is the movement of imitation, which continues the perception, and provides for the perception and for the images a common framework’ (102).
3. ‘we are dealing here with images photographed upon the object itself, and with memories following immediately upon the perception of which they are but the echo. But, behind these images, which are identical with the object, there are others, stored in memory, which merely **resemble** it, and others, finally, which are only more or less distantly akin to it. All these go out to meet the perception, and, feeding on its substance, acquire sufficient vigour and life to abide with it in space’ (103)
4. ‘any memory-image that is capable of interpreting our actual perception inserts itself so thoroughly into it that we are no longer able to discern what is perception and what is memory’ (103).
5. the example of ‘speed reading’: ‘Our distinct perception is really comparable to a closed circle, in which the perception-image, going toward the mind, and the memory-image, launched into space, careen the one behind the other’ (103).

##### Perception, Object, Memory: Diagram



1. PERSONAL recollections, ‘our past existence’ , ‘make up, all together, the last and largest enclosure of our memory. Essentially fugitive, they become materialised only by chance’. ‘But this outermost envelope contracts and repeats itself in inner and concentric circles, which in their narrower range enclose the same recollections grown smaller, more and more removed from their personal and original form, and more and more capable, from their lack of distinguishing features, of being applied to the present perception and of determining it after the manner of a species which defines and absorbs the individual’ (106).
2. As the recollections get nearer to movements, and so to perception, ‘the work of memory acquires a higher practical importance’ (106). And further away, it becomes more speculative, more contemplative, and it seems, more peculiar to us.
3. ‘Past images, reproduced exactly as they were, with all their details and even with their affective colouring, are the images of idle fancy or of dream: to act is just to induce this memory to shrink, or rather to become thinned and sharpened, so that it presents nothing thicker than the edge of a blade to actual experience, into which it will thus be able to penetrate’ (106).

##### A turn to the empirical

1. ‘If our hypothesis is well founded, these failures of recognition are in no sense due to the fact that the recollections occupied the injured region of the brain’ (107–8)
2. ‘in either case, it is actual movements, which are hindered, or future movements, which are no longer prepared: there has been no destruction of memories’ (108).
3. In word-deafness/aphasia, the patient ‘finds himself, in regard to his own language, in the same position as we all are when we hear an unknown tongue’ (110), a foreign language, that we hear but we do not understand. Sometimes we can’t even distinguish words and syllables. We just hear a continuous sound (‘given to the ear as a continuity of sound’ (110)).
4. ‘there is more in these various phenomena than absolutely mechanical actions but less than an appeal to voluntary memory. They testify to a *tendency* of verbal auditory impressions to prolong themselves in movements of articulation; a tendency which assuredly does not escape, as a rule, the control of the will, and perhaps even implies a rudimentary discrimination, and expresses itself, in the normal state, by an internal repetition of the striking features of the words that are heard. Now our motor diagram is nothing else’ (114).
5. ‘How are we to explain the fact that amnesia here follows a methodical course, beginning with proper nouns and ending with verbs? We could hardly explain it if the verbal images were really deposited in the cells of the cortex: it would be wonderful indeed that disease should always attack these cells in the same order. But the fact can be explained, if we admit that memories need, for their actualisation, a motor ally, and that they require for their recall a kind of mental attitude which must itself be engrafted upon an attitude of the body. If such be the case, verbs in general, which essentially express *imitable actions*, are precisely the words that a bodily effort might enable us to recapture when the function of language has all but escaped us: proper names, on the other hand, being of all words the most remote from those impersonal actions which our body can sketch out, are those which a weakening of the function will earliest affect’ (120).

##### Reifying tendency of the mind

1. ‘the constant tendency of discursive intellect to cut up all progress into *phases* and afterwards to solidify these phases into *things’* (125).
2. ‘the invincible tendency which impels us to think on all occasions of *things* rather than of movements’ (121).
3. This leads psychologist to resist B’s understanding of ‘interpretation’, which he summarises in this way:
4. ‘we start from the idea, and […] we develop it into auditory memory-images capable of inserting themselves in the motor diagram, so as to overlie the sounds we hear. We have here a continuous movement, by which the nebulosity of the idea is condensed into distinct auditory images, which, still fluid, will be finally solidified as they coalesce with the sounds materially perceived.’
5. ‘But scientific thought, analysing this unbroken series of changes, and yielding to an irresistible need of symbolic presentment, arrests and solidifies into finished things the principal phases of this development’ (122).
6. Bergson concludes: ‘there is not, there cannot be in the brain a region in which memories congeal and accumulate [because memories are not to be thought of as things; rather they are to be thought of as part of a broader process]. The alleged destruction of memoires by an injury to the brain is but a break in the continuous progress by which they actualise themselves’ (126).
7. ‘a memory, as it becomes more distinct and more intense, tends to become a perception, though there is no precise moment at which a radical transformation takes place, nor, consequently, a moment when we can say that it moves forward from imaginative elements to sensory elements’ (127).
8. ‘[on the mistaken account] distinct perception and memory-image are taken in the static condition, as *things* of which the first is supposed to be already complete without the second; whereas we ought to consider the dynamic *progress* by which the one passes into the other’ (127).
9. ‘we do not go from the perception to the idea, but from the idea to the perception; the essential process of recognition is not centripetal, but centrifugal’ (130).

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##### Recapitulation

Difficult reading this week. I’m going to try to explain why it is difficult and to ameliorate that difficulty a little bit. [[We should always ask WHY something is difficult, and never assume it is some sort of contingent fault on the part of the author; to ask ‘why?’ is to assume that there could be a REASON for it, and to look for reasons is the business of philosophers; in other words, we should give him credit that there are essential reasons for it, before we try to pass the buck and criticise someone much better than we — generally it is WE who are not up to the task; rather than the philosopher failing to be up to his.]]

But first, a recapitulation of the course we’ve charted so far, and a reminder of where we’ve got to in our journey through this classic text of recent philosophical history.

Last week, we spoke about Bergson’s philosophical gesture, and we spoke of differentiation and integration. Philosophers have a tendency to mistake one type of difference for another. They replace a difference in degree with a difference in kind, so they replace a continuum with a discontinuity, a smooth transition with a clean break or a categorial difference; *or* philosophers replace a difference in kind with a difference in degree.

Bergson restores order. He institutes a difference in kind where a difference of degree was mistakenly installed, and vice versa.

And if he installs a difference in kind, that’s not the end of the story: then something else happens. He generally goes on to say that this distinction is one that can be made in *theory*, but not in ‘practice’; it can be made by rights, but not in fact: the purity of the distinction has to be impurified.

On the other hand, and symmetrically, if Bergson installs a difference in degree, he will then go on to make a further differentiation. But this time carving the meat at the joint, following the articulation of the real [[(I think this might be Deleuze’s way of putting it, but it originates in Plato, probably). ]]

I referred to this as a two stage process of differentiation and integration; or integration and differentiation. [[(Maybe we could say something like the same thing in terms of genera and species… generic classification and specification… (probably thinking ahead unconsciously to *Creative Evolution*).)]]

More concretely, this philosophical method, when applied to the mind-body problem

— or the matter-spirit problem — resulted in the following diagram: [on handout]

##### Perception and matter (difference in degree) Perception and memory (difference in kind)

**Third difference: two kinds of memory.** As far as I can see, Bergson says this is a **difference in kind**. Nevertheless, more importantly for now is that this distinction is going to undercut the difference in *kind* between perception and memory. In other words, Bergson muddies the waters; why? Because the waters are muddy, or at least they exhibit a gradation of shades, which our thinking must respect. We had a nice clean cut, a nice clean difference in kind between perception and memory, and this distinction of two kinds of memory, is going to ameliorate that difference.

In this context, Bergson is employing another crucial distinction: between in theory and in fact; de jure and de facto; in principle or by rights, and in fact. And this really corresponds to the difference between the pure and the impure: we can THINK perception and memory are different in kind, in their purity, pure memory and pure perception; but in fact, in human beings at least, they are always intermingled. And it’s necessary to think the precise way in which that intermingling occurs. Only thus will the relation between the mind and the body be properly understood.

So I said that the distinction between two *kinds* of memories sullies the pure distinction between pure perception and pure memory. In what way? We said at first that the difference in kind between perception and memory could be summed up by the idea that perception was *bodily*, and memory was *spiritual*. BUT the first of the two kinds of memory is much closer to perception, the body, and movement, action in space — habit memory is much more tightly bound together with perception, and we’ll see more of how that works today; so that’s habit memory; but the second kind of memory, which contemplates events in their unrepeatable singularity, is going to be far removed from perception and action, — it is going to be a part of the realm of spirit.

Now, I wonder if what we are going to see today is precisely an attempt to understand how this putative difference in kind is *in fact* something like a gradual continuum, as memory becomes more and more remote from perception, and retreats into more and more inaccessible depths. But at least on the basis of this week’s reading (which may later be undermined) it seems that even the most profound, remote spiritual memory is not *altogether* distinct from perception and from the habit memories that trace virtual pathways through the perceived world, — the perceived world in this way ‘affording’ us possible movements through it, possible ways of utilising it, that we have learned through habit: memory is responsible for that way of perceiving things in other words (that’s my reading at the moment anyway).

##### Memory as solution of mind body problem.

To lay the grounds for an understanding of this week’s reading I want to go back to something that Bergson says in the Introduction to MM, about the relation between psychology and metaphysics. That relation, or at least the relation between psychology and *philosophy*, is what is at stake in this week’s reading, the second half of ch 2.

Let me take a big step back: the book we are reading is entitled not *Matter and Spirit*, but *Matter and Memory.* So why memory?

Memory is to give us the solution to the mind body problem (Hypothesis: ‘memory […] is just the intersection of mind and matter’ (MM13)), and it is to solve it in such a way as to allow dualism to be possible, and that means it will allow spirit and matter to constitute a dualism which really *is* a dualism, a ‘difference in kind’ we would now say: one which affirms that both spirit and matter are equally real, and different from one another; BUT of course, memory will ALSO help us to understand how two such different things can be RELATED. As always, we have to distinguish two things in the right way, but then show how they nevertheless relate to one another.

In this case, matter and spirit, the two relate ‘in fact’, de facto. In actuality, the purity of the distinction does not hold in every case. But here’s the question: how do we know what happens *in fact, in reality*? These are, I think, more or less, *empirical* questions. We need simply to do empirical investigations into how the mind works: how perception, thought, and memory work, IN FACT. And what empirical science does that? — It’s psychology.

Bergson says in the Introduction that in this book he will be employing a certain amount of empirical science in the pursuit of his goals — and that means psychology. Psychology as the empirical study of the soul, the psyche, and one of the things psychology studies is memories. — More importantly, and this was important to Freud to and a number of others at the time, psychology studies *forgetting* (the opposite of memory, disorders of memory). And in particular, psychology had in Bergson’s day recently discovered some important aspects of one of the most important forms of forgetting: the forgetting of words: aphasia. In this week’s reading, Bergson is more prone to speaking of word *blindness* or word *deafness.* Not actual blindness or actual deafness, but rather a failure to RECOGNISE words, to compare our present perception to a memory, to a knowledge that we already supposedly retain *of* these words and letters, — a knowledge that we acquired in the PAST. So recognition presupposes memory. If we can’t recognise words any more, it must signal a disorder of the memory.

At the turn of the century, psychology had uncovered instances of people losing the ability to speak, or forgetting certain words, as a result of certain injuries, cuts or ‘lesions’, to the brain. So a purely *physical* incision had led to a *spiritual* loss, the loss of a spiritual, ‘psychical’, mental capacity, the capacity to remember. And this led a great many people to think that this meant that individual memories were stored in a very particular, determinate parts of the brain. Cut those parts out, or damage them, and the memory is eradicated along with it. We’ll see that’s exactly the picture of the brain that Bergson has set himself to refute, in the second part of Ch. 2.

In the introduction to MM, Bergson attributes a singular importance to aphasia: ‘Anyone who approaches, without preconceived ideas and on the firm ground of facts, the

classical problem of the relations of soul and body, will soon see this problem as centring upon the subject of memory, and, even more particularly, upon the memory of words’ (MM13).

##### Practice and Theory: Psychology and Metaphysics

So can we say in general why psychology is important to philosophy in this context?

We know now that the mind is capable of two separate things: more or less, practice and theory. Perception and the brain and the body are concerned with *doing* things, with moving in space, with acting. But the mind is capable of more, — it is capable of theory and contemplation.

Now, in the Introduction, these two general types of human activity are associated with two distinct disciplines: psychology and metaphysics: ‘psychology has for its object the study of the human mind working for practical utility, and […] metaphysics is but this same mind striving to transcend the conditions of useful action and to come back to itself as to a pure creative energy’ (MM15). In metaphysics, the mind by definition strays beyond the physical, so beyond the world of praxis, the spatial world of movement, locomotion, and action.

Bergson tells us that to *solve* the problem of spirit and matter, memory and matter (‘*Matter and Memory’)*, we must transport this metaphysical problem [[(matter, and its existence and essence)]] ‘into the open field of observation’ (MM15–16). And it might thereby actually be solved, which would not happen if we left it purely to philosophy, in which it would remain insoluble, involved in a dispute which is interminable in principle: because there would be no way, Bergson tells us, to *verify* philosophy’s hypotheses.

The coming together of philosophy and the empirical sciences, i.e. of metaphysics and psychology, is what Bergson suggests makes the book, *Matter and Memory,* difficult to read. Perhaps you’ve experienced that difficulty this week.

But Bergson exhorts us to keep hold of these two guide ropes, throughout the book: psychology and metaphysics, the empirical and the transcendent, the practical and the theoretical: ‘The first [of these guide-ropes] is that in psychological analysis we must never

forget the utilitarian character of our mental functions, which are essentially turned toward

action. The second is that the habits formed in action [here we need to slow the sentence down, because what is happening here, what B is describing, is an *illegitimate* move, or a kind of ‘transcendental illusion’ that takes place when this utilitarian and spatial way of thinking exceeds the sphere in which it’s pertinent…. {regather thread of quotation}: ‘habits formed in action…’] find their way up to the sphere of speculation, where they create fictitious problems, and that metaphysics must begin by dispersing this artificial obscurity’ (MM16)

So let us heed that warning, and see how this confluence of psychology and philosophy works itself out in this week’s reading, in the context of thinking about the relation between the two kinds of memory and perception, the purely spiritual, theoretical, contemplative, dreaming of absolutely virtual memory, the more practical memory that allows us to navigate the perceptual world, and perception itself, purely practical, oriented towards action, achieving goals.

##### Against the localisation of memory in the brain

I said last week that it is often a challenge to find Bergson’s enemy. What is the position against which he is pitting his own work?

Here Bergson is opposing the idea each memory has a particular part of the brain in which it is stored (and so when that part of the brain is damaged, the memory is destroyed). We could call that the ‘localisation’ theory. It seems to be bound up with an ‘atomistic’ theory of mental states (atoms are usually one of the enemies of Bergson’s thought, which is a thought of PROCESSES: processes, that are only artificially broken up into atoms or substances or things (broken up by the mind, and for practical purposes usually, or under the tacit influence of the practical bent of the mind)). So Bergson is opposing something like an atomistic theory of the mind which seems sometimes to be identified with what is called associationism: think ‘Hume’! Perceptions and memories are distinct, compartmentalised: originally and forever: they only ever get joined together because the mind comes habitually to associate the one with the other: according to the laws of association (resemblance, contiguity, constant conjunction etc.)

Thoughts are atomic, like things, and they must be if they are to occupy individual isolated spots within the brain.

Now, Bergson goes very far in opposing this whole idea of atomism and localisation, to the point of saying quite simply that *memories are not stored in the brain at all*. Remember we are trying to distinguish matter and memory. And memory is precisely that part of spirit which is capable of altogether exceeding the material world, the world of action and perception.

Why is this localisation theory a problem? It seems fine on the face of it. Remember always that the brain is a practical, evolved organ, a telephone exchange tied up with the sensory-motor system, — the brain stands at the heart of this system. It receives signals and transmits them, causing movement. In the present. The body is thus intimately related to perception, which in turn perceives broadly speaking what is PRESENT. Or at least it perceives what is there IN the present.

Memories in the strict sense, in the SECOND sense, are not tied up with all that. They are spiritual, not bodily, they remember the past not the present.

That said, however impractical a memory is, perceiving something can still stir it up (cf. Proust’s madeleine).

So Bergson has to talk about HOW perceptions stir up memories. And what he has to avoid saying is that a perception MECHANICALLY arouses the recall of a memory. Again, this is the position of the enemy: this is the position that philosophy usually holds — that perceptions trigger memories, memories that are associated with this particular perception, or that have been associated with this perception in the past: [[associationism, an associationistic theory of mind.]]

This is how Bergson puts the opposition between atomistic associationism and his own philosophy: ‘[[In those cases where recognition is attentive, i.e. where memory-images are *regularly* united with the present perception,]] is it the perception which determines mechanically the appearance of the memories, or is it the memories which spontaneously go

to meet the perception?’ (99). It will be the latter, at least in the case of those remote spiritual

forms of memory that are distinct from what we called habit memory, but really I think in ALL cases.

Hence the strange or unaccustomed contortions of language that Bergson involves himself in when he keeps having to say things like memories ‘insert themselves’ into perceptions, or ‘go out to meet’ perception. Memories are ACTIVE, or spontaneous; they are not just sitting in some determinate part of the brain, that ‘storehouse of memories’, just passively waiting to be called up, by association. They are actively involving themselves in our perception all the time. (I said in the first week that in the end, this is what makes our perceptions peculiar to us, subjective rather than asubjective, like the perceptions that matter has; but things are a little more nuanced here, as we’ll eventually come to see).

How does this idea relate to the question of the localisation of memories in the brain?

— What Bergson is going to say is that when a certain part of the brain is damaged, and people develop aphasia or some other sort of memory loss, it is not that a memory has been destroyed, it is rather that the memory has been cut off, isolated from any possible actualisation of that memory in a movement and a perception. The memory is stored intact forever, but it has been cut off, become inaccessible. It can’t be reactualised. It can’t make its way into our perceptual field.

But all this means that, to overcome the associationist picture, Bergson has to give an alternative account of how memories can spontaneously impose themselves upon perceptions, or relate themselves to perceptions, in general, and how certain memories are in a sense (to be specified) ‘closer’ to perception and to movement than others. This very fact that there is some sort of continuum here suggests to me that what had appeared to be a

difference in kind between the two kinds of memory is in fact only a difference of degree. But that remains to be seen.

##### More practical forms of memory

So, as we have said, there are two kinds of memory; and some kinds are more closely related to perception and action than others: this is the habit memory; and it’s by focussing solely on this latter type of memory that association psychology has got its idea that the mind works SOLELY according to the principle of association, with perceptions calling up passive memories that are ‘contiguous’ with the perception we are currently having.

So in other words, when it comes to habit memory, Bergson and the associationists are relatively close to one another, even if Bergson never thinks that memories are simply passive. But at this level the relation between perception and memory works something like this: we perceive something. Practically speaking, we need to know how to respond to what we see. So we turn to our memory, and see what we did last time. Or rather, already a memory will be associated with the perception and this memory will tell us what we did last time, or what events habitually followed this perception in the past. Memories of past reactions, past movements, will suffuse our very perception, in the form of those virtual pathways I mentioned.

Bergson puts it like this: ‘our memory directs upon the perception received the memory-images which resemble it and which are already sketched out by the movements themselves. Memory thus creates anew the present perception, or rather it doubles this perception by reflecting upon it either its own image or some other memory-image of the same kind’ (101). And if one memory does not quite cover everything that the present perception gives us, memory looks deeper into itself for other memories.

I think the purpose at the moment is practical, associative: to see what to do in light of the present perception: what tended to happen after the perceived event happened *last time*, what did and what could we do? [[(but then again the page (100) on ‘**attention’** might militate against that: it seems slightly more contemplative…)]]

At a very low level, these associations of perceptions with past memories can be almost mechanical; so we can make responses that we’d describe as ‘reflex-actions’.

Here’s a nice passage that describes how ACTIVE memories are in getting involved in perception: ‘we are dealing here with images photographed upon the object itself, and with

memories following immediately upon the perception of which they are but the echo. But,

behind these images, which are identical with the object, there are others, stored in memory,

which merely **resemble** it, and others, finally, which are only more or less distantly akin to it.

All these go out to meet the perception, and, feeding on its substance, acquire sufficient

vigour and life to abide with it in space’ (103)

It is always possible to see more in a perception than is presently perceived in it. Bergson seems to call the gesture whereby we attend to the content of a perception ‘attention’. But in any case, what happens in everyday life is that we often perceive things very sketchily. We only see some elements of what is before us, we skim over the rest, inattentively; and *memory* fills in the gaps.

In this context, Bergson speaks of memory as INTERPRETING perception, discerning its MEANING: ‘any memory-image that is capable of interpreting our actual perception inserts itself so thoroughly into it that we are no longer able to discern what is perception and what is memory’ (103).

Cf. the example of ‘speed reading’: we don’t discern every aspect of every letter, we don’t read every single word; no, we perceive only bits and bobs; our memory supplies the rest. ‘Our distinct perception is really comparable to a closed circle, in which the perception- image, going toward the mind, and the memory-image, launched into space, careen the one behind the other’ (103).

##### The diagram on p.105

Cf. this diagram of the relation between perception and memory on p.105. We are speaking of a nested sequence of memories, which as they move further and further from the object, are less closely bound up with the object. In what sense? In the sense that they are less and

less close to habit memories, which tell us what actions we generally tend to make in response to perceptions. So these memories are further and further away from perception and action.

It seems as if as we get further and further away from action, these memories become more and more PERSONAL.

PERSONAL recollections, ‘our past existence’ , ‘make up, all together, the last and largest enclosure of our memory. Essentially fugitive, they become materialised only by chance’.

‘But this outermost envelope contracts and repeats itself in inner and concentric circles, which in their narrower range enclose the same recollections grown smaller, more and more removed from their personal and original form, and more and more capable, from their lack of distinguishing features, of being applied to the present perception and of determining it after the manner of a species which defines and absorbs the individual’ (106).

As the recollections get nearer to movements, and so to perception, ‘the work of memory acquires a higher practical importance’ (106). And further away, it becomes more speculative, more contemplative, and it seems, more peculiar to us. More bound up with the singular unrepeatable events that perhaps make us who we are.

n.b. ‘souvenir’ = ‘recollection’/’remembrance’; ‘mémoire’ = ‘memory’, for the most part (but we’ve found more muddying of this translation as we go along).

This is how Bergson describes the two types of memory, the impractical ones in which we remember the unrepeatable event in all its singularity and detail, and that same memory stripped down to its essentials, in which we retain only what is USEFUL: ‘Past images, reproduced exactly as they were, with all their details and even with their affective colouring, are the images of idle fancy or of dream: to act is just to induce this memory to

shrink, or rather to become thinned and sharpened, so that it presents nothing thicker than the edge of a blade to actual experience, into which it will thus be able to penetrate’ (106).

##### A turn to the empirical

Now, finally, we can return to where we began: psychology and philosophy, and to the disorders of memory.

We know that contrary to the localisation theory, and atomism, Bergson does not think that when the brain is damaged a memory that was stored there is altogether destroyed. So what *is* destroyed when the brain is damaged? It is rather the *connection* that links these

memories with certain kinds of bodily movements: ‘in either case, it is actual movements, which are hindered, or future movements, which are no longer prepared: there has been no destruction of memories’ (108).

Here’s a nice way of explaining what psychic blindness/deafness, or aphasia is.

In word-deafness/aphasia, the patient ‘finds himself, in regard to his own language, in the same position as we all are when we hear an unknown tongue’ (110), a foreign language, that we hear but we do not understand. Sometimes we can’t even distinguish words and syllables. We just hear a continuous sound (‘given to the ear as a continuity of sound’ (110)).

The usual understanding of recognition is the associationist one, and here we can reveal a little bit more about that theory: for the associationist the perception of sound is just a perception of sonic matter, without meaning; this bare perception brings back the memory of the sound, and the memory then jolts the idea, which is something like the MEANING of the word.

In other words, the meaning, the idea, would exist separately, in isolation from the other moments of the process of recognition. But this cannot be so on Bergson’s account of the perceptual system, in which perception is so bound up with movements, that what we perceive is not so actual, but is bound up with virtuality, with virtual pathways for movement. And above all, as we are now starting to see, these pathways seem to join together perception and memory, and indeed to join together the two kinds of memories. [[be related somehow to

memories, perhaps memories of past movements that we have discovered to be appropriate responses to certain perceptions. ]]

So perceptions are not just atomic, material, stupid, inert: they indicate movement.

Maybe I can end with just one very clear example of how empirical data, from psychology, disproves the localisation theory of memory: this is very interesting: I didn’t know this, but I have experienced it: when you start to lose your memory, the very first thing you forget is names. I so often fail to remember people’s names even if I know them well.

When one has aphasia, there is in fact a certain typical ORDER in which one forgets different *types* of words: proper nouns, common nouns, verbs:

Now THIS is an empirical fact which Bergson thinks cannot be explained if memories each have their own isolated location in the brain: if the latter were the case, then what would explain why one type of word was forgotten before any other type?

‘How are we to explain the fact that amnesia here follows a methodical course, beginning with proper nouns and ending with verbs? We could hardly explain it if the verbal images were really deposited in the cells of the cortex: it would be wonderful indeed that disease should always attack these cells in the same order. But the fact can be explained, if we admit that memories need, for their actualisation, a motor ally, and that they require for their recall a kind of mental attitude which must itself be engrafted upon an attitude of the body. If such be the case, verbs in general, which essentially express *imitable actions*, are precisely the words that a bodily effort might enable us to recapture when the function of language has all but escaped us: proper names, on the other hand, being of all words the most remote from those impersonal actions which our body can sketch out, are those which a weakening of the function will earliest affect’ (120).

##### Reifying tendency of the mind

We’ll have seen towards the end of a chapter Bergson make a general point about what he calls ‘scientific thinking’, but perhaps it characterises all understanding and all language. We misunderstand movement. We have a tendency to break movement down into distinct phases, to which we give a word, and we think of these phases as things. cf. 125: ‘the constant

tendency of discursive intellect to cut up all progress into *phases* and afterwards to solidify these phases into *things’* (125).

Bergson speaks of ‘the invincible tendency which impels us to think on all occasions of *things* rather than of movements’ (121). — this leads psychologist to resist B’s understanding of ‘interpretation’, which he summarises in this way:

‘we start from the idea, and […] we develop it into auditory memory-images capable of inserting themselves in the motor diagram, so as to overlie the sounds we hear. We have here a continuous movement, by which the nebulosity of the idea is condensed into distinct

auditory images, which, still fluid, will be finally solidified as they coalesce with the sounds materially perceived.’

There are no clear beginning or end to the various stages, these ‘phases’:

‘But scientific thought, analysing this unbroken series of changes, and yielding to an

irresistible need of symbolic presentment, arrests and solidifies into finished things the

principal phases of this development’ (122).

And this tendency lets us reverse the natural order of the process, and suggests we go from perception to memories, and from memories to the idea.

Cf. Zeno’s paradoxes of/engendered by motion. But not really read in favour of Parmenides, but rather an atomic conception of space will never allow of it, or perhaps an atomic conception of time.

Bergson concludes: ‘there is not, there cannot be in the brain a region in which memories congeal and accumulate [because memories are not to be thought of as things; rather they are to be thought of as part of a broader process]. The alleged destruction of memoires by an injury to the brain is but a break in the continuous progress by which they actualise themselves’ (126).

And what is this process? Bergson puts it like this, speaking against the compartmentalisation in brain centres of perception and memory: ‘a memory, as it becomes more distinct and more intense, tends to become a perception, though there is no precise moment at which a radical transformation takes place, nor, consequently, a moment when we can say that it moves forward from imaginative elements to sensory elements’ (127).

‘[on the mistaken account] distinct perception and memory-image are taken in the static condition, as *things* of which the first is supposed to be already complete without the second; whereas we ought to consider the dynamic *progress* by which the one passes into the other’ (127).

‘we do not go from the perception to the idea, but from the idea to the perception; the essential process of recognition is not centripetal, but centrifugal’ (130).

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# PHI2202 & PHI3202 Texts in Contemporary Philosophy:

**Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory***

**Semester II**

2023–24

**Class 4 (now Class 5)**

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| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Timetable Week Teaching Week W/b** | | | **Reading** |
| 22 | 1 | 29/1/202  4 | Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory,* Introduction (i.e. pp. 9–  16) |
| 23 | 2 | 5/2/24 | Ch. 2. Of the Recognition of Images (pp. 77–98 [to just before the start of sub-section III]) |
| 24 | 3 | 12/2/24 | Ch. 2 (99–131 [end of chapter]) |
| 25 | 4 | 19/2/24 | ~~Ch. 3. Of the Survival of Images (pp. 133– 58)~~ [moved to the following week due to illness] |
| 26 | 5 | 26/2/24 | Ch. 3. Of the Survival of Images (pp. 133– 58) |
| 27 | 6 | 4/3/24 | Ch.3 (pp. 158–77 [end of Ch. 3]) |
| 28 | 7 | 11/3/24 | Ch. 4 (pp. 179–188 [to just before the subheading, ‘1. Every movement….’ |
| 29 | 8 | 18/3/24 | Ch. 4. pp.188–223 [end of chapter] |
| 30 – 33 |  | 25/3/24 | *Easter Vacation – four weeks* |
| 34 | 9 | 22/4/24 | Summary and Conclusion (pp.225–49 [end of book]) |
| 35 | 10 | 29/4/24 | [*Note the different time and place:*] Wednesday 1st May 2024, 3pm-5pm, HDB 9.2: talk on Bergson by Mark Sinclair |
| 36 | 11 | 6/5/24 | Overflow and/or Essay Advice – in my office, unless otherwise advertised |

**Recapitulation**

So let’s recapitulate where we’ve got to after three weeks of the course and a week off last week:

We are here simply to read *Matter and Memory.* Why? because it’s one of the philosophical classics of the century, and because it is hard to fit Bergson into the curriculum in any other way than on a course devoted to him.

*Matter and Memory* is devoted to solving the problem of the relation between the soul and the body. Put in ontological, metaphysical terms, this means the relation between spirit and matter.

We said that these problems had proved interminable in the millennial debates between realism and idealism.

Bergson’s solution is to not privilege either the reality of matter or the reality of spirit, but to be properly *dualist* in affirming both.

But, we have been learning that when Bergson posits a difference, or where a difference exists, that is by no means the end of the story. What matters is what KIND of difference there is between the two differentiated terms, and what matters just as much is the point at which we make the differentiation or the distinction.

So to take a privileged instance: usually, PERCEPTION has been chosen as a representative of spirit, and has been taken to be something that belongs only to spirit, and not to MATTER. But Bergson shows that in fact that is the wrong place in which to carve out the difference between matter and spirit — you have to carve the real at its joints, not just any old place: only a bad cook does that.

Bergson’s prima facie surprising way of showing that perception is the wrong place to try to find a difference in kind between spirit and matter is to insist that what we call

perception may be said to inhabit matter as well, along the lines of Leibniz’s conception of the monads as living mirrors of the whole universe.

If there is a difference between our conscious perception (what Leibniz called apperception) and the perception that is found in monads, in matter, it is a difference in degree; not a difference in kind. Our perceptions may be more clear, less obscure, less confused, but they are the same kind of thing (our perceptions and those belonging to matter).

No, the correct place to institute a difference between matter and spirit is in MEMORY. And this is a difference in kind.

But, not so fast. That difference holds only in principle, not in practice. It is an ABSTRACTION. In fact, there are two kinds of memory and they stand on a continuum with each other, and the second kind of memory, habit memory, is intimately bound up with perception. So perception and memory stand on a continuum as well.

Today we shall see this continuity exhibited in the famous diagram of the cone. Or something like a continuity.

Now Bergson says all this, but he does even more: he not only corrects philosophy, and produces his own original philosophy in its stead; he explains the reason *why* philosophy has gone wrong. In almost every respect it is due to two related errors (at least two): philosophy has a tendency to think that the body, the brain, and perception are designed for the sake of disinterested contemplation or theory. That they are designed to do *philosophy*.

Not such a surprise that philosophers should think such a thing! But in any case it’s still wrong: our perception has ‘evolved’ out of earlier animal forms of the sensory-motor system, and it serves the same function: a practical function.

The function of perception is to guide *action*, and action takes place in *space*.

Now this leads us on to the second error that philosophers have made and which has led them astray in understanding the workings of the spirit and the precise way in which spirit

is differentiated from matter — and yet related to matter at the same time: spirit is primarily memory (memory is the quintessential form of spirit), and memory is a matter of TIME, it is a matter of the past, and, as we shall see more clearly today, it is a MOBILE affair, in which memories move nearer and further away from consciousness and from perception — memories are in fact, counterintuitive though it might seem to philosophers, something like a PROCESS.

In any case, somehow, memories involve a temporal process, and time is the thing that philosophers have understood least of all. When they speak about it, they tend ineluctably to understand it in a spatialising way. So they will often have recourse to images like a line, a timeline, or to a clock, which precisely reduces the movement of time to a spatial form. I.e. they convert succession into simultaneity. Time into space.

Why? Because of the way in which the understanding is designed, and that is to have a practical function, and that is the function of aiding our movement around *space*, which is necessary for mobile animals if these animals are to satisfy their needs. Was it La Mettrie who described man as an uprooted plant? Or simply Aristotle?

Now this is related to a general problem which I wanted to stress, because I didn’t find time during the last session: the mind not only has a tendency to spatialise, but also to *reify*. Perhaps these are the same thing, but in any case, let us say something now, even if it prolongs our recap unnaturally, since this seems to be the logical place for it: it was part of the reading but not part of the lecture.

##### Reifying tendency of the mind in relation to phases

Why do we have such *difficulty* in coming to terms with difference, and properly understanding the way in which a difference in kind can also be a difference in degree, a

continuum, an integration? Well, it’s to do I think with the spatialising tendency of the mind, or perhaps more precisely, its tendency to reify.

We have a tremendously difficult time in thinking PROCESSES, things that unfold in duration, and not in space, things that don’t take the form of things, that are discrete separate, like the individual frames on a roll of film, unfurled and laid out before us. The mind finds it convenient to reify things. For practical purposes this is useful, but it always leads us astray at the level of theory. We have to keep theory and practice as firmly apart as we can.

We’ll have seen towards the end of the second chapter Bergson make a general point about what he calls ‘scientific thinking’, but perhaps it characterises all understanding and all language. We misunderstand movement, we misunderstand processes. We have a tendency to break movement down into distinct *phases*, and upon each of these phases we bestow a distinct WORD, and we then think of these phases as *things*. [[cf. 125: ‘the constant tendency of discursive intellect to cut up all progress into *phases* and afterwards to solidify these phases into *things’* (125).]]

‘scientific thought, analysing this unbroken series of changes, and yielding to an

irresistible need of symbolic presentment, arrests and solidifies into finished things the

principal phases of this development’ (122).

And this tendency to reify has implications for every aspect of Bergson’s philosophy, and above all for his explanation of why philosophers go wrong. Particularly in the current context, when it comes to the distinction between memory and perception. Remember that we said, even if we haven’t yet come to concretely understand what this means, that memory at least is something like a *process*, itself.

But think of this: this tendency to reify processes, to spatialise time, stands in the background of the theory that memories have particular *locations* in the brain, and that when those parts of the brain are destroyed the memory is gone too. We described this as the localisation theory, atomism, or associationism. And we began to see how certain contemporary psychological accounts of aphasia disproved this theory for Bergson.

This localisation theory assumes that a memory is a discrete, separate thing, and it must do so since only such a thing could have its own location.

Memories are part of a process, and indeed, this process flows into the realm of *perception.* And perceptions are also not things, they are incomplete, and they are filled in with varying types and degrees of *memory*. Bergson puts the point as follows: ‘[on the mistaken account] distinct perception and memory-image are taken in the static condition, as *things* of which the first is supposed to be already complete without the second; whereas we ought to consider the dynamic *progress* by which the one passes into the other’ (127).

Here we need to note something that does not in the first instance stand out in the following passage about brain DAMAGE, which is that the disruption caused by a lesion is

not a damage inflicted upon an individual or individualisable memory, but rather the disruption of a PROCESS:

‘there is not, there cannot be in the brain a region in which memories congeal and accumulate [because memories are not to be thought of as things; rather they are to be thought of as part of a broader process]. The alleged destruction of memories by an injury to the brain is but a break in the continuous progress by which they actualise themselves’ (126).

And what is this process? Why should we not call it a ‘becoming’? Bergson does.

Bergson puts it like this:

‘a memory, as it becomes more distinct and more intense, tends to become a

perception, though there is no precise moment at which a radical transformation takes place, nor, consequently, a moment when we can say that it moves forward from imaginative elements to sensory elements’ (127).

And this leads us directly on to this week’s material, which might be summarised by the most famous diagram in Bergson’s text, the diagram of the inverted cone. It deals precisely with the *continuity* or the continuum (if that is what it is) that spans the two kinds of memory and perception. And it addresses the precise processual character of this relation, the mobility of all these things. Perhaps we could say that it tries to specify the precise moment and place at which memory flows into perception (at the tip of the cone) and the manner in which that takes place.

The following will become clear: things are not really things, at least in the realm of spirit, but perhaps everywhere (in every realm that is governed by time). They are not substances, they are not islands, complete of themselves. Memories, perceptions are UNFINISHED, they are mobile, they are constantly changing because new memories are intermingling with perceptions, and filling those perceptions with new virtualities. This in fact is not a bad way to speak of the unfinished character of things: the actual is always mixed in with the virtual: multiplicities interpenetrate one another (I can only hear the phrase ‘interpenetrating multiplicities’ in the mouth of my teacher of Bergson, Keith Ansell Pearson).

For a bit of concretion here, remember that lovely example of speed reading that Bergson gave: when we skim the surface of a text, we don’t perceive every part of every letter, just a few fundamental strokes that let us recognise the letter and the word, and the gaps are filled in, more or less competently by memory, by our habitual practice, by what we are used to seeing there.

Or think of this: remember the way in which perception is tied up with practical affairs, with our action; perception is so bound up with movements that what we perceive is not just an actuality, but an actuality that AFFORDS us possibilities for movement: delineated within the perceived object are virtual pathways for movement, ‘affordances’. And above all, as we are now starting to see, these pathways seem to join together perception and memory, and indeed to join together the two kinds of memories. Let us try now to see something of the logic of this intertwining.

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| WEEK 4 | 19/2/24 | Ch. 3. Of the Survival of Images (pp. 133– 58) |

##### On the purity of memory and perception, towards the unconscious

Let me begin to approach this matter in the following way.

When it comes to perception, in relation to memory, what does it mean to speak of ‘purity’? In perception’s case it means to think solely in terms of the present moment; to think in terms of the thinnest possible slice of time, absolutely unbound from past and future.

We wondered last time if this type of perception was possible in fact only for material things, which might have no memory, like the pacific ocean.

Now I wonder if even that is true in the end, since Bergson has started this week to speak of the general movement of ‘becoming’, of duration, which seems to characterise ALL things. And it means that every single present moment (of time, and of things that unfold IN time) HAS to ‘contract’ within itself multiple moments of the past and to be somehow related to the future, heavy with the future, pregnant with future, with the virtual.

This would mean that every single event in the history of the world, in the history of nature, would ultimately affect somehow, however minimally, the nature of the present moment — they would be present there in a virtual way. Everything is in relation to everything else. [[And of course every moment would have a similar relation to every future moment. There is such a thing as a world-memory.]]

##### The unconscious

Okay, so perception is impure, it’s always infiltrated by memories. But what of memory? Is there a pure memory? To answer this question, we need to speak about the unconscious.

About the *Bergsonian* theory of the unconscious. For pure memories are precisely *unconscious* memories. I think this failure, which was inevitable, was at the heart of the problems we were having last time. So now that we have read further, we can rectify those deficits, those obscurities that we were unable altogether to dispel in the last session.

There is abroad a scepticism with respect to the existence of the unconscious. Bergson explains that this is due to a prejudice. Or rather, there are two prejudices, one psychological and one philosophical. The psychological one is that all psychic states must be conscious; the more fundamental philosophical prejudice is to do with the meaning of being: and much like Heidegger, for Bergson, philosophy has assumed that to *be* is to be *present*. Being = presence.

So anything that is not there in the present simply does not exist. That is at the root of the prejudice against unconscious mental states, which are precisely *not present*. Therefore, they cannot exist.

Let us tarry with the first, psychological prejudice: it has a reason: it is due to the bias towards theory and contemplation that we have already recognised as at the heart of Bergson’s critique: the brain and body and its sensory-motor system are eminently practical, but the brain has been taken to be theoretical, devoted to knowledge, and that means

effectively that when the mind perceives or remembers, it must bring its perceptions and memories into full presence before it.

In a mind so conceived, everything within the mind would have to be *present* to the mind, and that means conscious; on this — false — account, there could be no unconscious mental states.

##### Isolating the Present

That the mind should be thought of as containing only conscious states; and that being should be understood solely as what is present, is, Bergson suggests, due to our misunderstanding of time. It is due to our tendency to think in reifying terms of atoms, substances, things, hypostatically; rather than in terms of processes, and duration.

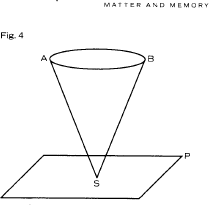
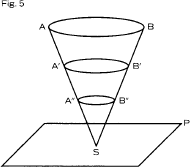
In other words, philosophers have tended to think that it is possible to *isolate* the present moment from the past and the future, to differentiate the presence from the absent: as Bergson will reformulate it, the actual from the virtual.

Note that the *present* is a spatial *and* a temporal designation. When we speak of perception we tend to mean the spatial present, and in the case of memory, the temporal present. But the two are intimately related, and the perception of things that are spatially present is always coloured by memories of the past, so the present in the spatial sense always intersects with the present in the temporal sense, [[and as a result of that the present perception is caught up in a durational flow.]]

Now, for Bergson, this isolation of the present moment, is perhaps the most basic form of the reifying tendency of the mind that we began by speaking about. Even *time itself* is spatialised by the mind!

So Bergson’s response is to replace the present moment in a durational flow. And here we begin to approach the question of the continuity of the past and the future, memory and perception, memory and matter. And it’s here that we encounter the famous cones.

##### The cone diagrams

Let us look at the most famous diagram of MM: it attempts to depict the actual relation of memory and perception. It is perhaps to be understood as a rewriting of the diagram of the concentric circles, gradually ‘relaxing’ as the memories move further away from presence and activity, from habit memory and so from perception. Gradually becoming more personal, more individuated, as they move away from perception and habit.

##### Personal memories and the concentric circle diagram

So let us remind ourselves of the diagram we encountered on p. 105: [[we didn’t say much about this last time. Let’s say some more, to flesh out what we failed to flesh out last time.]]

As we get further and further away from action, these memories become more and more PERSONAL.

As the recollections get nearer to movements, and so to *perception*, ‘the work of memory acquires a higher practical importance’ (106). And further away, it becomes more

speculative, more contemplative, more detailed, and more peculiar to us: more personal. More bound up with the singular unrepeatable events that we witnessed.

(Returning to the cone diagram:) As Bergson I think says somewhere, we need to think of the diagram as in motion; not static, otherwise we are falling into the trap that all diagrams set, which is that they themselves spatialise time, they present a temporal or durational process in a spatial form — flat, simultaneous, laid out before us.

Bergson at least speaks of the plane as moving, as the present moves forward through time, but also, the memories that inhabit different layers of memory will infiltrate perception depending on the things that we encounter *in* perception. So whilst the deep, less conscious memory IS relatively stable in comparison with the memories that are more habitual, nearer to the tip of the cone; nevertheless, they do move, as for instance when we desperately and agonisingly try to conjure up a memory that we feel is just on the tip of our tongue or on the edge of consciousness. And they move to the forefront of our minds in sleep.

The cone signifies memory. The base of the cone, so the top of the diagram, is the furthest memory from the present, furthest from the useful: it is the furthest from consciousness, not even dimly present to us; it is unconscious.

Now, in terms of the diagram, why is it broader than the other levels of memory? So why does the diagram give memory the form of a CONE? Well, I think it is because the further away from the present the memory is, the *broader* it gets, the less ‘pared down’.

Remember the concentric circles: these are the more PERSONAL memories, more individuated: in this type of memory one remembers every detail, one remembers the singularity of the event with all of its extraneous details.

What happens when memories get closer to perceptions (and so move down the cone, towards its tip) is that a lot of this detail is stripped away.

We might compare this to the way in which induction operates, taking particular instances and trying to derive a generality from them. Because the memory is here being treated with a view to action, so what matters is *similarity* rather than difference. We have to see what is similar in past instances in relation to the present one, IF those past memories are to inform our action in the present. [[remember that contemplative memory involves memorising all of the details of a situation, even the useless ones, as if the moment had been frozen in time, as in tableau.]]

The cone depicts the *continuity* between the two types of memory, habit and personal/image-memory. Even the furthest memory can occasionally penetrate the plane of perception. But it has to move down the cone, towards the tip, and to become pared down in the process.

Image memory (personal memory, ineffective impractical memory) is the base of the cone and habit-memory the tip of the cone. The tip of the cone is where memory intersects with the present and with perception:

‘the memory of the past offers to the sensori-motor mechanisms all the recollections capable of guiding them in their task and of giving to the motor reaction the direction suggested by the lessons of experience. It is in just this that the associations of contiguity and likeness consist. But, on the other hand, the sensory-motor apparatus furnishes to ineffective, that is unconscious, memories, the means of taking on a body, of materialising themselves, in short of becoming present’ (153).

To appear in consciousness, a recollection has to descend from ‘heights of pure memory down to the precise point where *action* is taking place’ 153.

So why do we have an unconscious, this huge weight of memory, which is here depicted as the bulk of the cone? To use an image from Freud I think — memory is like a huge ice berg with most of the ice invisible beneath the surface of the ocean.

It is because of the practical bent of the brain and of perception: Bergson says that almost all our past is hidden from us since it is inhibited by ‘the necessities of present action’. It is blocked from attaining consciousness or ‘presence’.

To be unconscious is to be INEFFECTIVE, powerless when it comes to acting: this is pure memory 141.

We wondered last time how we might get to these unconscious memories, and what matters it seems is precisely to allow our conscious mind to ‘renounce the interests of effective action’, to allow our mind to think its way into the layers of memory that stand further away from the interests of the present and of action.

As Bergson puts it, we ‘[[to]] replace ourselves, so to speak, in the life of dreams’.

And indeed, this is literally one of the ways in which we access unconscious memories,

through sleep, and curiously enough, Bergson gives the example also of ‘near death experiences’ (155), when our entire life passes before our eyes, including all of the scenes from our distant past with all the richness of their details; most of which we imagined ourselves to have forgotten. This is what Bergson suggests happens in dreams as well. I’m often amazed by just how much detail a dream can construct, or perhaps rather how accurate a reality it can construct.

But this is the Bergsonian unconscious: the ineffective. And it approaches consciousness, or it may approach consciousness, perception, as part of a PROCESS, a durational process, a temporal process, and gradually become capable of becoming effective, of infiltrating our conscious perception.

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# PHI2202 & PHI3202 Texts in Contemporary Philosophy:

**Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory***

**Semester II**

2023–24

##### Class 6

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **~~Timetable Week Teaching Week W/b Reading~~** | | | | |
| ~~22~~ | ~~1~~ | ~~29/1/202~~  4 | | ~~Henri Bergson,~~ *~~Matter and Memory,~~* ~~Introduction (i.e. pp. 9–~~  ~~16)~~ |
|  |  |
| ~~23~~ | ~~2~~ | ~~5/2/24~~ | | ~~Ch. 2. Of the Recognition of Images (pp. 77–98 [to just before~~ ~~the start of sub-section III])~~ |
| ~~24~~ | ~~3~~ | ~~12/2/24~~ | | ~~Ch. 2 (99–131 [end of chapter])~~ |
| ~~25~~ | ~~4~~ | ~~19/2/24~~ | | ~~Ch. 3. Of the Survival of Images (pp. 133– 58) [moved to the~~ ~~following week due to illness]~~ |
| ~~26~~ | ~~5~~ | ~~26/2/24~~ | | ~~Ch. 3. Of the Survival of Images (pp. 133– 58)~~ |
| 27 | 6 | 4/3/24 | | Ch.3 (pp. 158–77 [end of Ch. 3]) |
| 28 | 7 | 11/3/24 | | Ch. 4 (pp. 179–188 [to just before the subheading, ‘1. Every movement….’ |
| 29 | 8 | 18/3/24 | | Ch. 4. pp.188–223 [end of chapter] |
| 30 – 33 |  | 25/3/24 | | *Easter Vacation – four weeks* |
| 34 | 9 | 22/4/24 | | Summary and Conclusion (pp.225–49 [end of book]) |
| 35 | 10 | 29/4/24 | | [*Note the different time and place:*] Wednesday 1st May 2024, 3pm-5pm, HDB 9.2: talk on Bergson by Mark Sinclair |
| 36 | 11 | 6/5/24 | | Overflow and/or Essay Advice – in my office, unless otherwise advertised |

**WEEK 6:**

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| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| 27 | 6 | 4/3/24 | Ch.3 (pp. 158–77 [end of Ch. 3]) |

##### Recapitulation

I’m going to talk today about induction and habit, at least these are the signifiers that will give a new twist to what we know already of how memory and perception interact.

But let’s begin as we always do, with a straight enough recapitulation of last week’s

class.

I think we don’t need perhaps a lengthy recapitulation of the *whole* book now, since we’re fairly well into it. Suffice it to say, everything is in the title: *Matter and Memory*: Matter and Memory as the name of the particular way of conceiving the difference between matter and SPIRIT that Bergson thinks is going to let us finally solve the problem of that relation. Ch. 4, so the last chapter, which we start next week, is going to explicitly present itself as giving the *solution* to this problem; as if the rest of the book is simply an attempt to clarify the *question* and to lay the groundwork necessary for finally *giving* that answer.

So far, in general, we have seen how the various differences in kind and differences in degree established by philosophical tradition turned out to be mistaken; so the difference in *kind* between matter and perception (or the unconscious and the conscious, traditionally conceived) came to be replaced by Bergson with a difference of degree (a gradual fading into consciousness or coming into focus, or clarity, from a state of obscurity that was never in fact absolute); then the difference in degree that philosophy posited between perception and memory was shown by Bergson to be a difference in kind. And indeed this is where the question of vivacity came up, since one of Bergson’s potential bêtes noires, David Hume, the

empiricist and associationist, thought of perceptions as vivid impressions and memories as less vivacious ideas, faded copies of vibrant originals. We’ll come to Hume himself later today. Bergson disagreed with his theory: if anything memories animate perceptions, and come to fill in its gaps. The two exist on a continuum. And perhaps we might even say, though the work we do today might well clarify this possibility: memories are more vivid than perceptions. They are certainly at times, towards the base of the cone, the ucs, more personal, more detailed.

Last week we tried to elucidate, with the help of the cone diagram, the reasons why in *practice,* in *fact*, that difference in kind between pure memory and pure perception could be understood as a continuum, as a difference in degree.

In this context, we spoke about the different LEVELS of memory, or the ‘cross sections’ cut out within the memory cone, which moved up and down the different floors of this storehouse of treasures that is the Memory as such, Mnemosyne. On the upper floors, hidden far away in the dusty recesses of that attic, we find our more or less unconscious memories, almost entirely forgotten, but in fact nothing is altogether forgotten (once is forever) — it is just that at the present time this memory is less useful to us, and so it is not at the forefront of our minds, at the tip of the inverted cone. The memory is fuzzy, indistinct, and not in focus, but it buzzes away at the margins of consciousness. We said that unconsciousness for B meant ‘inefficacious’, far away from action, distant from the sensory- motor system and so having only a negligible practical effect on our activity.

We saw how the memories that were least efficacious, most obscure and unconscious in our present moment, were the most PERSONALISED type of memory. Our uniquely personal memories, impossible to recreate or replicate, remembered as if frozen in time with all their vivid details — these memories only occasionally find a way to get into consciousness, because for the most part they don’t exactly RESEMBLE any present perception we could have. They represent an *unrepeatable*, or more or less unrepeatable circumstance. And I underline that word ‘resemblance’ since this is going to be our topic today: it’s at the heart of induction and the formation of habits.

I exemplified this idea of a largely unconscious personal memory with the long repressed memory of a schoolfriend falling off his chair (was it Ronnie Eaton-Rayner?) and being laughed at by Kavin Mistry.

At the tip of the memory cone, which as Bergson says, supports the weight of the entire edifice (that’s one reason for putting the cone upside down: to represent that the way the whole system operates centres upon action and perception, the practical), the cone of memories, the *cornucopia* of memories, is constantly trying to insinuate itself upon our perceptions, the past is infiltrating the present: memories assume the form of habit memories, habit. And indeed, we shall see habit take a central role in the thing we’re going to talk about today.

But in any case, the tip of the cone is sharp, and that means it facilitates the penetration: habitual memories find their way relatively easily into perception, and fill it out, and colour it, and give us advice on how we might behave, how we might move about in our present situation: the habit memories trace out virtual pathways [[or affordances]] within the present world.

We described both perception and memory as incomplete, as unfinished, and hence as completed by each other, with the habitual memories forming the virtual part of the actual perception, the present moment. So we have always a composite of virtual and actual parts.

Each of perception and memory by itself is incomplete, unfinished; it is not a substance, or a thing.

So we wondered why philosophy and psychology had come to think of them as things. And we said that the spatialising, pragmatic tendencies of the mind led us to think of

*movements* as comprised of *phases*, and these phases in turn as *things*. So the difference in kind between perception and memory was shown up to be a REIFICATION, a reification, a thingification, a hypostatisation, a substantialisation, that thought of perception and memory as distinct islands, as substances, fully formed, and complete of themselves, independently of the other. Which is not how they are.

Let me now recapitulate some related things that came up in our discussion, since this will set up the problem that my account of this week’s reading will attempt to solve or at least to clarify. It has to do with the vivacity of impressions, and the way in which, in the debate, a lot of people struggled to accept B’s idea that perception was somehow less personal and maybe less vivid to us, that were our memories.

##### Vivacity in the discussion

For Hume and the atomists, perception was vivacious, memory less and less so. Individual impressions were vivid, general ideas were less so. Whenever the mind operates on perception and does something with it, whether to remember or to abstract and generalise, it diminishes the liveliness of the impression: something is lost.

This led me to improvise something on the subtractive nature of perception. We are not god. We cannot see everything and we cannot see everything all at once, we can’t be everywhere, nor can we be at all times.

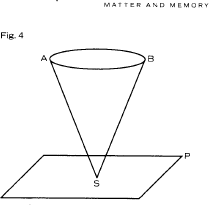
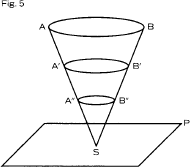
This is what it means to speak of the inherent and original finitude of perception. That was the way phenomenology put it anyway; but there is something like that in

Bergson. For phenomenology, objects are incomplete, we don’t see all of them. They are not

things, not substances; and what Bergson adds to this is that *memory* rushes in to fill the void. And perhaps he insists still more on the fact that it is not just OUR PERCEPTION of the object that is incomplete: the object *itself* (as a metaphysical entity) is incomplete, not least because it is constantly moving through time, and unfolding its potentials in time. (And I think memory is conceived as much less personal in phenomenology, but that’s just a hunch).

Perhaps the thing which is unusual in Bergson is that although there is perhaps no god who sees everything, maybe there is another sense in which everything *does* GET SEEN: and perhaps we could think of the impersonal perception of matter as being something like that seeing. Bergson is relatively close to Leibniz, although I don’t know if he’d talk about the monads’ perception as ‘obscure’ — rather, they, understood as a ‘network’, as a totality, perhaps… they see everything quite clearly.

##### The cone diagrams

##### The variable width of the cone

One of the ways in which we might address this question of the vivacity of perception and memory is by looking at how Bergson deals with the following question: in the diagram, why is the base of the cone *broader* than the other levels of memory? What does that represent?

More generally, why does the diagram give memory the form of a CONE at all? (Elsewhere, in a slightly obscure connection, Bergson broaches the image of the *pyramid*, which he seems to use to describe a healthy or balanced mental functioning; so a pyramid is a healthy sort of cone!).

But why this general shape of something wider at the bottom than it is at the top? The diagram is designed to express how much more DETAIL there is in the memories that are further away from action. These distant, almost unconscious memories, are more personal to us, and that means more particular, more detailed. As they move down the cone, they become *less* personal and more ***general***. More ‘streamlined’, we might say.

Now, here we find a useful way in to this week’s material, which will clarify all these questions about vivacity and the personal nature of memory as opposed to the general nature of perception: if we are talking about general and particular, we could be speaking of one of two things: deduction or induction. It turns out that we shall speak of induction: the movement from particulars to generalities. Particular perceptions to general ideas.

To put things very simply before we get into a bit of the detail: when memory is treated with a view to action, what matters is *similarity* rather than difference — we said earlier that what mattered was RESEMBLANCE, i.e. the detailed memories of particular aspects of a situation we have lived through are so specific TO that situation, to that one-off, unique situation, that they are of no use to me when it comes to deciding how to act in the PRESENT situation. Why? Because they bear no resemblance to the present situation — or very little. When it comes to acting, we have to discern what is *similar* in past instances in relation to the present one, IF those past memories are to inform our action in the present.

##### Genera and individuals, general and particular: the passages on General Ideas

It is in this context that we encounter an apparently rather arid and scholastic discussion of *general ideas,* and their formation by means of the process of induction. Or something *like* induction. It won’t be quite so simple as that in the end for Bergson will rework the very terms of the discussion. [[And as I’ve already said, the mechanism that is behind the process of generalisation, is *habit*. ]]

In fact, we can’t really speak of generalisation or induction here, because that will again *reify* the general and the particular; whereas, — you might have guessed this move was coming — these two are merely two poles of a single process, and we always begin a process somewhere in the MIDDLE, never at one end or the other. Philosophy has just reified these poles, and tried to solve the problem by beginning from one end or the other (and ended up as a rationalist in one case, if it begins from the general; and an empiricist if it begins from the individual or particular). As Bergson often says: you’ll never find a solution if you put the problem in those terms. Mental life is comprised of mental processes, durational processes, processes that unfold in time.

But let’s keep things simple and rough for now and talk of ‘induction’ rather loosely: The text begins with a discussion of how we form general ideas. Induction in a word.

Bergson as ever starts by assuming we know who the enemy is, and he even assumes I think that we know what the general problem *is* with their solution. So perhaps we can reorder his

exposition here, and say this: *later on* he speaks of associationism, but this is what we shall speak of FIRST, since associationists are one of the schools of philosophy most prone to use

induction, but they use it *badly*.

And the reason they use it badly… the problem that afflicts the associationist or atomist theory of the mind is that their account of induction is *circular*: it presupposes the very thing that it is intended to explain: the ability to recognise similarities. (Exemplify in

improvisation — we are supposed to infer a type from a set of tokens, or a genus from a set

of particulars, but in order to create that genus, we need to be able to SEE the resemblance between the particulars, but that would mean that we already HAVE the genus in our possession. We are trying to learn what a dog is, as a child, and we see multiple instances of dogs. But how do we even know which type of entity we might include in the comparison if we don’t already have a vague idea of what a dog looks like?). In this way, associationists beg the question, presupposing what they want to prove, petitio principii.

But at the same time, there is something more promising in what they say. Note here the word ‘resemblance’ in our description of associationism. What we are supposed to be able to spot is a RESEMBLANCE between particulars.

Now this might save the associationists a little bit from the accusation of circularity. But in any case, it gives Bergson a thread to grasp hold of, and this thread will lead him out of the asssociationist world and into his own.

So Bergson refers to the way that the associationists invoke the principles that govern mental functioning: and these are the principles of resemblance and contiguity [cf. Hume

book here]. Okay, so far so good. But here Bergson raises a similar kind of objection to the

objection he raised to the explanation more generally: circularity. At least we can say that these principles of the association of ideas are NON-EXPLANATORY.

As Bergson tries to explain, even if it’s acceptable to say that the mind perceives resemblance, nevertheless, the associationist leaves the very *mechanism* that *allows* the mind to SEE resemblance unexplained.

##### Critique of Associationism

What is the association of ideas? It designates a theory of mental functioning that calls to mind, to our minds, even if not to Bergson’s, Scottish philosopher David Hume, and more generally *empiricism*.

Empiricism as a theory of knowledge, of how the mind comes to know, is committed to a theory of how the mind forms general ideas: and it explains that formation as an inductive process. A presupposition of empiricism, as Hegel was among the first to see, is that the objects of perception are PARTICULAR individual things. Isolated from one another, like atoms.

Associationism is the idea that the mind has the *habit* of associating *atomic* ideas based on their similarity or contiguity with one another (contiguity meaning contact, conjunction, touching): the ideas happen to resemble one another in their *content*, (and perhaps their form?) OR two or more ideas happen to have constantly appeared to us at the same time, as in the ‘constant conjunction’ of the morning hour and the rising of the sun.

This constant conjunction then gives rise to the general and metaphysical idea of causality, once we see the conjunction occurring often enough — the inference of causality, of a ‘necessary connection’ FROM a repeated conjunction just IS induction as Hume understands it. From the fact that the sun has risen every morning from ‘very first morn’, we draw the general inference that the sun ALWAYS has and always WILL arise in the morning. That’s induction. And it is premised upon the empiricist’s implicit atomism. His atomic theory of perception. And it relies upon an associationist theory of the mind in general.

So this mechanism of association is meant to explain WHY certain ideas arise in the mind at a certain time and not others. Every idea arising in the mind is said to have a relation of similarity or contiguity with the previous one: and THAT connection explains why it arises now.

Now Bergson finds this idea of association to be non-explanatory. [[It doesn’t explain the mechanism of association, and indeed, it doesn’t explain why THESE ideas get associated, since]] Why? Because almost *every* idea will bear some resemblance with all other ideas, or it will have some point of contact with these others. 163 So to discover that contiguity or resemblance between two successive ideas, won’t explain WHY the one evokes the other 164. Since it could have invoked ANY other, or at least a whole cluster of others.

Skimming over the complexities of Bergson’s criticism, the fundamental problem with associationism is one that we have encountered before: it thinks in terms of substances and not processes. The substances it thinks of happen to be atoms: associationism thinks of ideas as being like atoms, and they draw near to each other by chance — as in Epicurus and Lucretius’s atomistic theory — and they hook on to one another.

Bergson puts the point like this: on HIS account, we start from the whole and move to the parts, [[and we do this ‘for the greater convenience of practical life’, ‘breaking up… the continuity of the real’ (165).]]

So, B concludes — contra Hume, contra empiricism and the associationist atomists — that association is *not* the most basic operation that the mind carries out; dissociation is.

**Bergson’s solution: habit** [no doubt Sinclair is good on this]

So if associationism is *wrong*; how does Bergson think that generalisation happens, or more precisely, how Bergson thinks the mind operates in the region of generality.

And here Bergson evokes a notion that we have met before, the notion of habit.

Broadly speaking what is responsible for the recognition of generalities, of types, is habit. Or perhaps more precisely, habit occupies a zone IN BETWEEN the two poles of singularity and generality.

We are talking here of habit memory, and the virtuality it installs in perception. So you can see that habit has always occupied a median position in Bergson’s schema, at the tip of the cone (between memory proper and perception proper). In effect we are talking about the memories that are built up and that lead us on the basis of past successes to see possible ways through the forest of beings that perception arrays before us.

So broadly speaking — a bit simplistically — we are speaking of the habit of reacting to a stimulus, in a way that is similar to the way in which we related in the past.

Bergson tries to explain why habit HAS to form by contrasting two things: our very finely grained sensory system, which can perceive an infinite or near infinite number of things, and the very limited range of *motor* responses that our body can carry out. Only a finite number of reactions, and so we need to sort the infinite number of individual perceptions into a finite number of generic types. And the habitual responses that we make to

them, or the habits we contract effectively are what allow these general ideas to form, or more precisely, they are the schema which mediates between the multiplicity of sensory input, and the limited, narrowed down, motor output. Perhaps more precisely again, habits might be (this is speculative)…

Habits might be aligned with the precise moment at which memory and perception overlaps. General perception, particular memory.

If that’s so, what habit involves is memories moving DOWN the cone, towards the tip, and learning to find their way into perceptions. Habit would be the virtuality within the actuality of perception, or perhaps the tendency on the part of memories to insinuate themselves within perception.

A habit is a tendency to do something, whether that tendency is realised or not. It is possibility, potential, a particular kind of potential that has proved appropriate to THIS perceptual situation.

We are speaking once again of memory and perception as a mutually intertwining PROCESS. And it is this idea of thinking of processes that associationism lacks. B puts the point in the following way: Psychology (Humean, associationist) has failed to think of the general idea as it is ‘in the making’ (162). It has thought of it solely at the two extremities, of

abs singularity and abs generality, the base of the cone and the tip of the cone. In other words, once again it has reified what is a process: it has taken the POLES between which a process sways and it has made them into things which pre-exist any process that there might be.

**The two movements of the cone**

So what Bergson has been explaining as he speaks about the generalisation of ideas is the way in which memories move down the cone and insert themselves bodily into perceptions, and so become conscious and effective, — they come to have an influence upon action. And here Bergson speaks of a curious type of movement, or two types of movement that the cone is supposed to make as this occurs.

##### The movements of the cone: contraction and rotation

One thing we can say is that we have now a better understanding of why the diagram of memory takes the form of a cone, that is turned upside down, this is why memories get ‘narrower’ as they approach more closely to perceptions. They are more and more general and less and less individual, they are treated more in terms of how they resemble and have something in common with others, and less in terms of how the memories are singular, and detailed, and peculiar to us personally.

This process of becoming less personal and closer to perception is what Bergson is describing when he speaks of the movements of the cone.

Memory ‘rotates’ and presents to the present only that ‘side of itself’ that is most useful; and the other motion is contraction: nothing is lost there, it is just shrunk. ‘Everything happens, then, as though our recollection were repeated an infinite number of times in these many possible reductions of our past life. They take a more common form when memory

shrinks most, more personal when it widens out, and they thus enter into an unlimited number

of different “systematisations”. ‘ (169).

Systematic, i.e. everything is there as an interconnected whole: nothing is lost. [[So in that sense, nothing is ‘pared down’ (as I might have said last week), or stripped away. ]]

When it comes to contraction, Bergson speaks of ‘degrees of tension’ which helps us to visualise what happens to these memories when they are contracted. They become more tense, more tightly bound, less relaxed. B even speaks of ‘vitality’. But it is not easy to define what that means: it seems to mean not an expansive rich personal memory, dwelt upon contemplatively, but rather a memory that would be closer to ‘the needs of life’, to utility, to action. 170

Now if vivacity is the same as vitality, you might have thought I was wrong to reject the idea that perceptions are more ‘vivid’ than memories… but I think we have to be careful here. Hume when he spoke of vivacity meant to refer to a surplus of liveliness in the CONTENT of the perception; Bergson is not speaking phenomenologically; he is talking about the USEFULness of the perception to the ‘needs of LIFE’, to vital needs.

So I hope this week what we’ve achieved, at least, is to make clearer the particularity of memories and the generality of perceptions, and the inductive or more precisely habituating process that runs between these two poles. Indeed, the process as ever comes first, and these two ends, of generality and particularity are just poles or islands that have formed in the flux. And the flux in its tendency to FORM islands goes by the name of ‘habit’.

We have seen something of how the different natures of the sensori-motor system and memory necessitate generalisation, and so necessitate the thinning out of memory, or the ‘contraction’ and ‘rotation’ of memories as they move down the cone, approaching consciousness and activity. And we have suggested that *habit* is the faculty that we have in which this movement takes place, as we gradually accumulate individual experiences and

form them into a general bit of behaviour. Or much more precisely, habit is the confluence of particular memories and general perceptions, which lays out the virtual lines of memory within the actuality of perception.

# PHI2202 & PHI3202 Texts in Contemporary Philosophy:

**Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory***

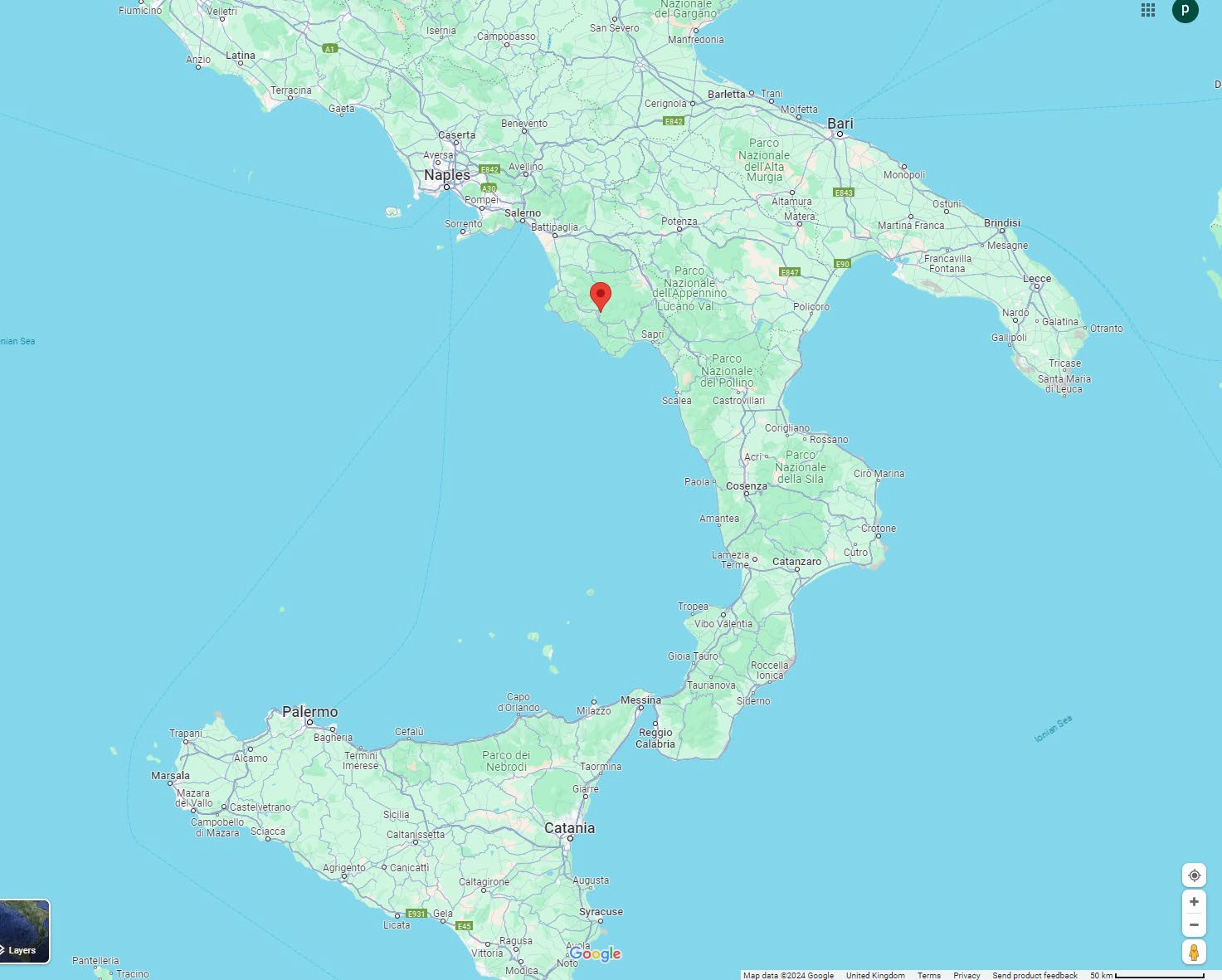
**Semester II**

2023–24

##### Class 7

**Provisional Title: Method and Motion**

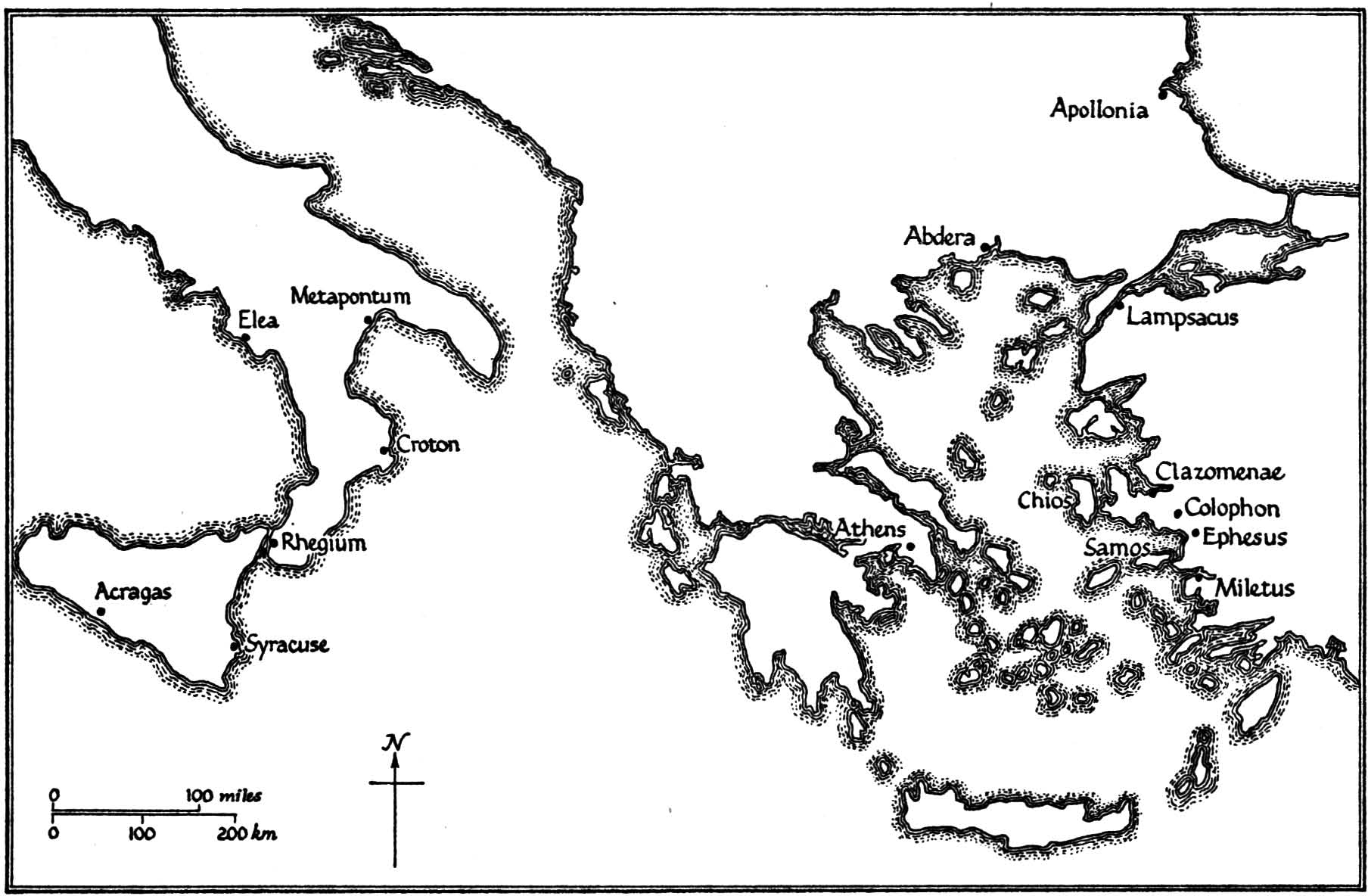
Novi Velia



Velia (Roman name for Elea):



Elea



##### An Eleatic preamble

1. The Eleatic Conception of Being
2. Parmenides of Elea, Zeno of Elea
3. Being and Nothing; no becoming
4. Movement leads to absurdity
5. Text: <https://www.loebclassics.com/view/zeno-doctrine/2016/pb_LCL528.185.xml>

**This week and next:**

**CHAPTER IV: The Delimiting and Fixing of Images. Perception and Matter. Soul and Body.**

**The unsolved problem**

1. ‘Strictly speaking, we might stop here, for this work was undertaken to define the function of the body in the life of the spirit.’ 180.

→ ‘metaphysical problem’ unsolved — the problem of the ‘union of soul and body’,

1. We still need to reconcile the distinction between the unextended and the extended, between quality and quantity (181).

##### Bergson’s Method: Intuition

1. ‘Pure intuition […] is that of an undivided continuity’. 183
2. Pure intuition gives us access to ‘the immediate givens of consciousness’, the immediate *data* of consciousness.
3. Introspection
4. IMMEDIATE receptivity. It does not involve spontaneity, it does not involve the intellect:
5. Intellect cuts things up into concepts, and allows us then to apply words to those concepts. Which divide up the continuity of the real.
6. immediate intuition reveals to us something about our mental states, and even about the real:
7. → that it is comprised of wholes, of totalities.
8. these totalities seem to be *made* whole by the fact that they unfold in a DURATION: they are MOVING, mobile.

##### The mistake of dividing up the real

1. Our practical thinking, thinking with a view to *action,* needs to divide experience up into individuated things with clear outlines.

→ The very first distinction that our perception makes is between a *need* and the object which will satisfy that need.

1. ‘needs of life’, or ‘vital needs’: this is the ‘vital context’ in which so called Life- philosophy resituates the philosophical subject.
2. we divide up this continuity and then ‘feel ourselves obliged to establish between the severed terms a bond which can only then be external and superadded’.
3. Think of Descartes’ pineal gland as an example in the context of the union of soul and body.
4. a ‘factitious unity’. A ‘lifeless’ unity.
5. So we need to distinguish between two kinds of unities, two kinds of wholes, the dead and the living.

##### Inhuman experience? Bergson between the superhuman and the human?

1. ‘there is a last enterprise that might be undertaken. It would be to seek experience at its source, or rather above that decisive *turn* where, taking a bias in the direction of our utility, it becomes properly *human* experience’ 184.
2. ‘Our knowledge of things would thus no longer be relative to the fundamental structure of our mind, but only to its superficial and acquired habits, to the contingent form which it derives from our bodily functions and from our lower needs. The relativity of knowledge may not, then, be definitive’ 184.
3. Keith Ansell Pearson: linking together Nietzsche, Bergson, and Deleuze.
4. But *perhaps* we don’t need the superhuman perspective that Nietzsche thinks is demanded by perspectivism

→ intuition = **either** the ability to see ‘beyond the human condition’

**Or**: the human just *is* the creature capable of seeing beyond its own

*natural* way of perceiving

1. Bergson urges us to ‘restore to intuition its original purity and so recover contact with the real’ 185.
2. get beyond the UTILITARIAN character of perception, its practical, needy character, I wonder if that is just the *naturalistic* side of Bergson’s account.

→ Intuition, and philosophy, ‘masterful, useless knowledge’

1. We need to move beyond the dissociations and juxtaposition of elements — beyond discontinuity — and into ‘a duration wherein our states melt into each other’.
2. ‘Certainly, it would be a chimerical enterprise to try to free ourselves from the fundamental conditions of external perception’ 187.
3. ‘More particularly, in regard to concrete extension, continuous, diversified and at the same time organised, we do not see why it should be bound up with the amorphous and inert space which subtends it — a space which we divide indefinitely, out of which we carve figures arbitrarily, and in which movement itself […] can only appear

as a multiplicity of instantaneous positions, since nothing there can ensure the coherence of past with present.’ 187

##### Space and movement, duration

1. the understanding spatialises: it distributes things into distinct spatial *positions*.

→ a ‘mental *diagram*’, a graph.

1. the practical is transplanted into the theoretical. And so the spatial juxtaposition is used to conceive things which really have perhaps nothing to DO with space.
2. ‘there can be no question here of construction a theory of matter’; we can only use this method of intuition to suggest (roughly, the outlines *of* such a theory) 188.

##### Four battle cries in Bergson’s war with the Eleatics:

1. *I. Every movement, inasmuch as it is a passage from rest to rest, is absolutely indivisible.*
2. *II. There are real movements.*
3. *III. All division of matter into independent bodies with absolutely determined outlines is an artificial division.*
4. *IV. Real movement is rather the transference of a state than of a thing.*

##### Contra Zeno: the indivisibility of the whole of motion

* 1. *Every movement, inasmuch as it is a passage from rest to rest, is absolutely indivisible.*

##### Introspecting a continuous movement, movement from within

1. distinction between movement as perceived from without and movement perceived from within as the distinction between the TRAJECTORY (or line, or path) that a movement follows, on the one hand, and the actual movement on the other.
2. Movements are ‘indivisibles which occupy duration’. 202
3. ‘movement is an undivided fact, or a series of undivided facts, whereas the trajectory is infinitely divisible’ 192.
4. It’s this notion of divisibility that is the topic of the disagreement between Bergson and Zeno.
5. ‘even my sight takes in the movement from A to B as an indivisible whole’ 188.
6. ‘a passage is movement and a halt is an immobility’ 189.

##### Zeno’s Paradoxes

1. Zeno’s arguments in favour of Parmenides often took the form of a reductio ad absurdum (RAA)

= we assume that motion IS possible, and then we show how this presupposition leads to a contradiction. The contradiction then ‘reduces the premise to absurdity, i.e. to a non-sense’, and the archetypal or the most extreme form of non-sense is a contradiction, because it is something that could not POSSIBLY make sense.

1. So Zeno begins by looking at various possible movements, and shows how they lead to various absurd results.
2. Bergson seems to take his account of Zeno from Aristotle’s *Physics* (239–40)

##### The paradoxes of motion:

1. **Dichotomy**. nothing moves because everything must first reach the half-way point of the motion before it reaches the end (dichotomy = cutting in two: dicho-tomy, temnein, to cut).
2. **Achilles** (and the tortoise). The slowest thing will never be caught by the fastest. Why? Because the pursuer must always reach the point from which the pursued set out; and that will mean he will have to traverse the same distance as his prey, but he will also, in order to catch up with the tortoise, cover more units of distance in the same length of time. The reason that is impossible will become clearer in later paradoxes, particularly the stadium paradox I think, but the idea seems to be that if space is infinitively divisible, then although Achilles (‘fleet of foot’) can narrow the distance between himself and the tortoise infinitesimally, he can never quite catch up, because the distance that separates them can always be subdivided again, and so there will always be an infinite number of steps still to cover, however small, before Achilles catches up.

This argument is in some way similar to the Dichtomy. The important point about both of these arguments is that they have to do with dividing space. I.e. it’s about presupposing that the trajectory of a movement can be divided, and indeed divided INFINITELY. And no-one can cover an infinite distance, or an infinite number of steps… The first two arguments presuppose the infinite divisibility of space.

##### Arrow.

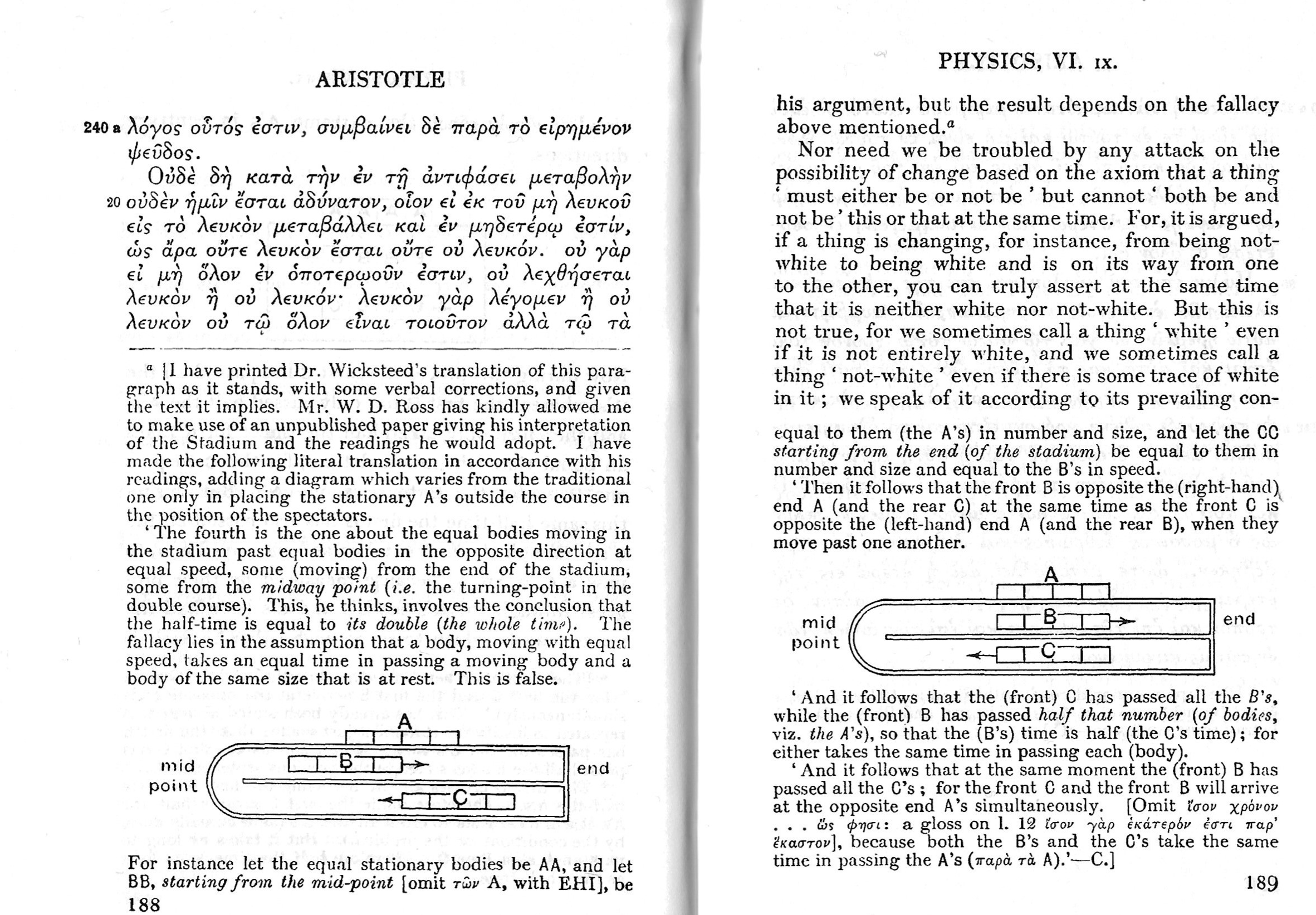
Perhaps the most useful of Zeno’s paradoxes to us (though Bergson thinks it is the stadium paradox) … but perhaps the most intuitive is that of the arrow, the arrow that never moves even though it is in flight. ‘The still arrow’.

Aristotle puts it like this: ‘if, he says, everything is always at rest when it is in a space equal to itself, and if what is travelling is always in such a space at any instant, then the travelling arrow is motionless’. ‘ ‘the travelling arrow stands still.’ And as Aristotle points out, Aristotle who is not convinced that motion is shown to be impossible by Zeno, ‘this ‘depends on the assumption that time is composed of instants’.

##### Stadium.

Two bodies of marching soldiers approach one another from opposite directions.

They are passing some stationery object, like a flag or something. That stands originally between them (though this seems to be Aristotle’s addition).



In the self same motion, the soldiers march past one unit of the stationary object and two units of the moving unit. Thus performing effectively two motions in the same instant, one being twice the size of the other.

1. A summary of Aristotle’s account (by the Loeb translators Philip Wicksteed & Francis Cornford) puts it like this: ‘That half a given period of time is equal to the whole of it; because equal motions must occupy equal times, and yet the time occupied in passing the same number of equal objects varies according as the objects are moving or stationary. The fallacy [Aristotle identifies] lies in the assumption that a moving body passes moving and stationary objects with equal velocity’ (Loeb, 179)
2. first two dilemmas suppose infinite divisibility and the latter two finite divisibility, and are meant to show that motion is impossible on either count.
3. there are two uses of the word ‘indivisible’: the only one Bergson advocates for is the one where indivisibility is applied to motion, in its totality, its wholeness; there is another sense that very occasionally comes up where he speaks of an indivisible moment or something like an atom. And that is NOT something he advocates.
4. Cf. Bergson’s opposition to atomism as a theory, and a-tom, *a-temnein* means ‘uncuttable’, undividable, indivisible. You can’t divide it into any smaller units. That’s also a possibility that Zeno entertains: and Bergson really wants to get away

from either of the possibilities Zeno entertains: infinite divisibility or finite divisibility leading to an indivisible remainder (as we used to say in mathematics), an atom. So matter is to be neither infinitely nor finitely divisible for Bergson.

##### Bergson’s answer to Zeno

1. What we must get beyond is thinking of motion as comprised of a multiplicity of instants, or stations, at which the movement may be said to halt, even if we understand these instants to be nothing but one-dimensional POINTS.
2. ‘it seems to me, then, when I reconstitute the total movement, that the moving body has stayed an infinitely short time at every point of its trajectory. But we must not confound the data of the senses, which perceive the movement, with the artifice of the mind, which recomposes it. The senses, left to themselves, present to us the real movement, between two real halts, as a solid and undivided whole’.
3. consider a storm: the whole mobile world is lit up momentarily and appears static and frozen:

‘like the instantaneous flash which illuminates a stormy landscape by night’

189.

1. ‘these points [on the line, stations] have no reality except in a line drawn, that is to say, motionless’ 189.
2. Representing movement as occupying these points, ‘you necessarily arrest it in each of them’ 190.
3. ‘You substitute the path for the journey, and because the journey is subtended by the path, you think that the two coincide. But how should a *progress* coincide with a *thing*, a movement with an immobility?’ 190
4. ‘The indivisibles [i.e. the BAD sense of ‘indivisible’: i.e. the atom, the instant] of duration, or moments of time, are born, then of the need of symmetry; we come to them naturally as soon as we demand from space an integral presentment of duration. But herein, precisely, lies the error’ (191).
5. The line represents an *already accomplished* motion, an already elapsed duration. ‘it cannot, motionless, represent the movement in its accomplishment nor duration in its flow’ 191. The line cannot present a movement ‘in the making’.
6. ‘The arguments of Zeno of Elea have no other origin than this illusion. They all consist in making time and movement coincide with the line which underlies them, in attributing to them the same subdivisions as to the line, in short, in treating them like that line’ 191.
7. ‘he [Zeno] merely proves that it is impossible to construct, a priori, movement with immobilities, a thing no man ever doubted’ 192.

# PHI2202 & PHI3202 Texts in Contemporary Philosophy: Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*

**Semester II**

2023–24

##### Class 7

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **~~Timetable Week Teaching Week W/b Reading~~** | | | | |
| ~~22~~ | ~~1~~ | 29/1/202 | | ~~Henri Bergson,~~ *~~Matter and Memory,~~* ~~Introduction (i.e. pp. 9–~~ |
| 4 | | ~~16)~~ |
|  |  |
| ~~23~~ | ~~2~~ | ~~5/2/24~~ | | ~~Ch. 2. Of the Recognition of Images (pp. 77–98 [to just before~~ ~~the start of sub-section III])~~ |
| ~~24~~ | ~~3~~ | ~~12/2/24~~ | | ~~Ch. 2 (99–131 [end of chapter])~~ |
| ~~25~~ | ~~4~~ | ~~19/2/24~~ | | ~~Ch. 3. Of the Survival of Images (pp. 133– 58) [moved to the~~ ~~following week due to illness]~~ |
| ~~26~~ | ~~5~~ | ~~26/2/24~~ | | ~~Ch. 3. Of the Survival of Images (pp. 133– 58)~~ |
| ~~27~~ | ~~6~~ | ~~4/3/24~~ | | ~~Ch.3 (pp. 158–77 [end of Ch. 3])~~ |
| 28 | 7 | 11/3/24 | | Ch. 4 (pp. 179–188 [to just before the subheading, ‘1. Every movement….’ |
| 29 | 8 | 18/3/24 | | Ch. 4. pp.188–223 [end of chapter] |
| 30 – 33 |  | 25/3/24 | | *Easter Vacation – four weeks* |
| 34 | 9 | 22/4/24 | | Summary and Conclusion (pp.225–49 [end of book]) |
| 35 | 10 | 29/4/24 | | [*Note the different time and place:*] Wednesday 1st May 2024, 3pm-5pm, HDB 9.2: talk on Bergson by Mark Sinclair |
| 36 | 11 | 6/5/24 | | Overflow and/or Essay Advice – in my office, unless otherwise advertised |

##### Let’s entitle this class ‘method and motion’

##### An Eleatic preamble

Zeno of Elea was said to be a disciple of Parmenides of Elea. Collectively they became known as the Eleatics — the people of Elea. The philosopher Parmenides, partly thanks to Zeno’s way of defending him, came to be understood as someone who attempted to disprove the possibility of motion, and prior to that he attempted to prove that Being was One and not Many. There was being and there was nothing, according to Parmenides’ poem on Truth, *Alētheia*. There was no third way. There was no becoming. No multiplicity.

So the Eleatic conception of being is one in which there is no becoming, and so no

*movement*.

You can see why Bergson would be dead set against Zeno.

Text: <https://www.loebclassics.com/view/zeno-doctrine/2016/pb_LCL528.185.xml>

Or Barnes collection will have diagrams. (cf. text, Bergson, folder)

##### Recapitulation

Bergson expresses retrospectively what the purpose of the book has been so far: ‘[[Strictly speaking, we might stop here, for]] this work was undertaken to define the function of the body in the life of the spirit.’ 180. And contrary to the tradition, at least to the realist tradition, this body, and its perception are not CAUSAL. They don’t cause representations or memories to form within spirit, within the mind. The body’s function is a LIMITING one. It limits the life of the spirit, by choosing among the memories that are most useful with respect to action in the present. The body is to be understood, like the brain which it houses, as having evolved for a PRACTICAL function. And Bergson feels he has now established what that is.

But Bergson is not ready to end with this, for in the course of the text, he speaks of a ‘metaphysical problem’ having been raised, precisely by this — the problem of the ‘union of soul and body’, and our work has given us an insight into how it ‘should be approached’ 180

Perhaps we can say this: Bergson has instituted a profound distinction between matter and spirit. And this renders the problem of how to UNIFY these two very vivid, and apparently difficult to solve. Having broken them in two, he must now put humpty dumpty back together again.

The way in which matter has been understood in the history of philosophy is as follows: matter is extended and lacking in qualities; one could read Descartes, perhaps Locke on this. Spirit on the other hand, thinking substance, is not extended and has qualities.

As Bergson puts it, we have instituted a vast de jure distinction between pure perception and pure memory, but at the same time he seeks something in that distinction which will allow him to reconcile the distinction between the unextended and the extended,

between quality and quantity’ (181).

And here in Ch. 4 he recurs to the theory of images that we broached in Ch. 1. So perhaps now would be the time to read that. In any case we saw there that perception was not a part of spirit, it was not opposed to matter, it was a part of matter, part of the natural world. Now that means that *matter* cannot be considered purely as extension in the geometrical sense. It must in some way partake of the nature of perception. So perception allows us to attenuate the distinction between extended and unextended.

On the other hand, pure memory should lead us ‘to attenuate the second opposition, that of quality and quantity’ (182). Now this part is more difficult. It is all this material to do with vibration. Now the easiest way to think about this, even if it does not perhaps cover the breadth of what is meant, is simply to think of WAVES, soundwaves and lightwaves. They have an amplitude. They vibrate across the breadth of this amplitude. And the speed at which they vibrate gives us the QUANTITY, the number of vibrations within a second, say; and this number of vibrations is correlated with a certain QUALITY of sound, a certain pitch and timbre, and a certain quality of light, say a colour.

Now, memory is needed here, because memory ensures that no present moment, which is to say no PERCEIVED moment, no PERCEPTION, is instantaneous: every instant, every now, every moment, however short, involves a multiplicity of perceptions (an ‘infinity’), which memory crushes together (‘contracts’) with it. Memory is needed precisely because WHAT we are perceiving is in MOTION, it is a vibration, a rhythm, and we would only be aware of that IF we held in *memory* where that vibration had come from. As Husserl

put it, you cannot hear a melody if you just hear each individual note. Along with the present note, one must retain the preceding ones, like a ‘comet’s tail’.

##### Our METHOD:

**The task of chapter 4: ‘putting the parts back together again’ (or rather, seeing how they were never separate)**

This week and for the next few weeks, our task is to *solve* the problem of how body and soul are united. We have so far shown how they are distinguished, by looking at the distinction between perception and memory.

Or perhaps more precisely, the problem is a more metaphysical one, of how we are to think the interaction of extended substance and thinking substance.

But in any case, Bergson puts the problem like this: we tore the two apart; now is the time to put them back together. — Or at least this is how Bergson puts it at the beginning of CH. 4. I’m not quite sure how to make this cohere with what we’ve been doing over the past few weeks, since I thought that we’ve been precisely establishing a *continuity* between perception and memory. So I thought we’d already solved the mind-body problem. But the next few weeks will help us to clarify why Bergson thinks something remains to be done. I’ll offer a few hypotheses today. Maybe we should simply think that we have so far been working on the level of individual human beings, and now he wants to shift to the metaphysical level of substance, as if perhaps translating these insights onto that metaphysical level.

And that would help explain why Bergson begins to talk about the problem in the terms that he does, at the start of Ch 4: and these terms are relatively new to us:

He says that we still need to reconcile the distinction between the unextended and the extended, between quality and quantity (181). So the properties of the two types of substance, the material and the spiritual MORE GENERALLY. So we’re talking at a level that is more general than that of perception and memory, which at least in the latter case belongs primarily to human beings.

Now although that metaphysical issue is a part of what you’ve read about this week, I think it can only be clarified by *next week’s* reading, so I’m not going to talk about that aspect of the text explicitly today, at least not in the lecture, and perhaps most of all I’ll talk about it next week, when I think I’ll understand the stakes much better, and it’s actually quite a challenging section, largely to do with vibrations, rhythms, wavelengths of light and sound.

And today I’m going to keep things easier.

In fact, I’m going to keep things more general, and deal with a broad philosophical debate to do with movement, and before that to talk about Bergson’s method.

##### The connection of movement and method to the general metaphysical problem of quantity/quality etc.

This might sound like a jump, but it’s not. Let me explain how these two topics, movement and method, will help us — eventually — to solve the metaphysical problem.

Let me conjecture the following: the reason why we might be perplexed by the opening of Ch. 4 is the following: Bergson has spoken about unifying two separate things: mind and body, as a problem yet to be solved; BUT this very way of putting the problem is misleading, and Bergson almost immediately subverts it. The very problem is that we think of these separate moments as PARTS at all. This will prove to be a mistaken way of putting the problem. And here we encounter for the first time what Bergson calls his method: intuition.

Why might looking at intuition demonstrate that this piecemeal way of putting the problem is a mistake? Because to speak of putting parts back together implies that a *discontinuity* already exists between them; and what intuition reveals to us, is continuity. And so the whole metaphysical problem has been wrongly posed, and indeed in general the means that philosophy has used to address it have been misguided.

Think first of all in terms of the Kantian distinction between the faculties of intuition and understanding, or intellect. Our task is to precisely think our way back towards the standpoint of intuition, from which we shall be able to see that in fact consciousness, and even the real, is actually continuous, ‘indivisible’ (i.e. it cannot be cut up into discrete ‘bits’), and it is only our *understanding*, our intellect, that breaks reality up into distinct things with clearly defined boundaries. And it does that (for Bergson, not for Kant) because of the practical bent of our minds (and an illicit transplantation of this practical tendency to the realm of theory, and so to speculative metaphysics). We’ll perhaps have time to speak more about that process of carving up the real and what governs it in a little while: Bergson certainly finds it necessary to do so in this Chapter.

But let’s stick with the method for now.

What we can say is that here, at the *end*, Bergson describes the method that he has been applying all along only. It is intuition. But of course, this could mean many things and we shall have to be careful here.

##### What intuition shows

B tells us quite clearly, not what intuition IS, but what the use of intuition *shows*: ‘Pure intuition […] is that of an undivided continuity’. 183 Pure intuition, is also what gives us access to ‘the immediate givens of consciousness’, the immediate *data* of consc. So intuition is at least in part ‘introspective’, it is the relation that we have with our own mental states.

These mental states are GIVEN to us, and we simply receive them. Introspection is something like the archetype of the intuitive relation. Not the only one, but the archetype. Intuition then is what allows an immediate relation to form between a giver and a receiver, a given and its reception; but there are other forms of intuition. In general, it seems so far as if Bergson’s conception of intuition is the same as Kant’s. It is IMMEDIATE receptivity. It does not involve spontaneity, it does not involve the intellect: the intellect is more or less the enemy: it cuts things up into concepts, and allows us then to apply words to those concepts. Which divide up the continuity of the real.

What immediate intuition reveals to us about our mental states, and even about the real, is that it is comprised of wholes, of totalities, of ‘interpenetrating multiplicities’ or manifolds.

And indeed, to stray ahead, these totalities seem to be *made* whole by the fact that they unfold in a DURATION. Not in a single moment, an instant, but in a duration, something which ‘endures’: these totalities are not static, but they are somehow MOVING, mobile (and movement and its nature is what we are going to talk about later today, in the context of this debate that Bergson is having with the Eleatics). (And note already that we shall today see obliquely why Bergson speaks of *duration* and not of TIME).

##### The mistake of dividing up the real

The whole problem with philosophy in the past, not to speak of psychology is, as we saw when we discussed atomism and reification, that philosophy and psychology tend to think in terms of *parts,* and not *wholes.* They analyse rather than synthesise: which means, they use the understanding or the intellect. [[This means that philosophy in the past has conceived its PROBLEMS mistakenly. And indeed, our humpty dumpty metaphor probably falls victim to that way of thinking too.]]

Our practical thinking, thinking with a view to *action,* needs to divide experience up into individuated things with clear outlines — and it needs to do this for practical purposes. The very first distinction that our perception makes, Bergson tells us, is between a *need* and the object which will satisfy that need. These needs are what Bergson sometimes calls the ‘needs of life’, or ‘vital needs’: this is the ‘vital context’ in which so called Life-philosophy resituates the philosophical subject. (But then again, we’re going to see today, that Bergson thinks the human actually goes beyond this vital context, so although Bergson does try to situate things like the understanding and perception in a natural context, he knows that we are also ‘meta-physical creatures’.)

The problem is not metaphysics itself, but the problem is the way in which metaphysics has been done. And we have seen throughout this course that the besetting sin of philosophers is to import a practical way of thinking into the purely theoretical metaphysical realm, into the realm of impractical useless non-utilitarian contemplation.

And this importation or transplantation leads us to forget that this dividing up of the continuum is *our own doing*; it leads us to think that the real is ACTUALLY divided and actually divided ALONG THESE particular lines. Now at the same time, this leads philosophy to a mistaken understanding not just of the problem but also of the solution: for it leads philosophy to think that we have certain discrete things, like a broken humpty dumpty,

that needs to be put back together. So it leads people like Descartes to think that we have two substances, extended and unextended, that need to be joined somehow. In this way, we divide up this continuity and then ‘feel ourselves obliged to establish between the severed terms a bond which can only then be external and superadded’. Think of Descartes’ often mocked pineal gland as an example of such a manner of connection between two radically distinct substances [[, in the context of the union of soul and body.]]

If you think of unity in this way, you will end up with what Bergson calls a ‘factitious unity’. A ‘lifeless’ unity. And this is not the unity Bergson wants, and it is NOT the unity which his *intuition* allows him to see.

So we need to distinguish between two kinds of unities, two kinds of wholes, the dead and the living.

##### Inhuman experience? Bergson between the superhuman and the human?

So, now we know what is responsible for the discontinuous, discrete vision of the real. It is our particular way of perceiving the world. We perceive it as divided up into discrete objects, that are separated from one another according to our ability to act upon them, to do things with them, to act upon these discrete objects in such a way as will meet our *needs*.

If we want to see the world as it really is, apart from this, if we want to view the real in its true continuity, we need somehow to look upon it from a perspective that is not governed by natural needs; and perhaps this perspective is not even *human* any more.

Bergson says: ‘there is a last enterprise that might be undertaken. It would be to seek experience at its source, or rather above that decisive *turn* where, taking a bias in the direction of our utility, it becomes properly *human* experience’ 184.

Intuition is what will allow us to do. As if intuition allowed us to see beyond our narrowly human perspective. Perhaps.

Here is how Bergson describes this gesture: ‘Our knowledge of things would thus no longer be relative to the fundamental structure of our mind, but only to its superficial and acquired habits, to the contingent form which it derives from our bodily functions and from our lower needs. The relativity of knowledge may not, then, be definitive’ 184.

Now my initial thought was that one has to read Bergson in a superhuman way, in Nietzsche’s sense — and then I reflected that perhaps in thinking of Bergson as invoking a superhuman intuition (a bit like intellectual intuition?) perhaps I was being overly influenced by my own teacher in Bergson, Keith Ansell Pearson, who did some sterling work in the 1990’s and 2000’s linking together three thinkers: Nietzsche, Bergson, and Deleuze, with Nietzsche being rather dominant there, and perhaps colouring the way Keith taught and wrote about the others.

So now I think perhaps that’s not quite what’s going on in Bergson, and perhaps he is saying that, in fact, human beings are unique in being able to transcend their own practically oriented perspective. In other words, perhaps — and I haven’t decided yet — we don’t need to adopt the *super*human perspective that Nietzsche thinks is demanded by the limits of perspectivism; but rather human beings are capable of rising above the relativity of knowledge, of seeing the world from somewhere other than their own corner, their own

perspective. And that means they are capable of being more than an *animal*, with *needs;* but that doesn’t mean they are capable of being more than a *human being*.

Along with this, and at the foundation of this idea, what Bergson adds to Nietzsche is that humans are able to see beyond their own corner thanks to their *intuition*. [[Maybe intuition is the superhuman in us, but at least it is a capacity that humans have.]]

What we have to do is to get beyond the UTILITARIAN character of perception, its practical, needy character, to see beyond the distortions in our experience that this utilitarianism imposes. Indeed, Bergson suggests that human perception, or at least the habits that it has got into, and which it has bequeathed to thought, is somehow enchained to this utilitarianism.

And so perhaps we should think of this account of perception and the body as the *naturalistic* side of Bergson’s account. Man insofar as he is an evolved animal IS enchained to these utilitarian habits of perception; but man is MORE than an animal, higher than nature, and he is capable of seeing *beyond* this natural utilitarian perspective: and that is where our intuition comes in, and indeed that is where our capacity to do philosophy comes in (for this capacity is utterly dependent on precisely that Intuition — provided that we do philosophy *well*).

In any case, to do philosophy, we need to get beyond this useful knowledge and into the true and useless knowledge that shows us the real not insofar as it can do anything *for us* but as it is *in itself.* We need, Bergson says, to move beyond the dissociations and juxtaposition of elements — beyond discontinuity — and into ‘a duration wherein our states melt into each other’.

##### Space and movement, duration

Now, so far we have spoken of discontinuity and continuity. We are relatively familiar with this way of putting the point, given our experience over the last 5/6 weeks. But now we need to invoke some new terms. Now we need to talk about space and time, or movement, which involves both space and time, since movement is a movement through space that takes time (at least this is what one type of movement, locomotion, does: but even if there are some motions that don’t involve loco-motion, motion a change of locos, a change of place, and so a motion that involves a movement through *space*, all movements of necessity must involve *time*, and a passage through time, or an unfolding of a *duration*).

In any case, at this point in Ch.4 Bergson moves on to talk about movement. One reason for doing this is the following: B reminds us that there is another way of thinking about what the understanding does when, with its practical, utilitarian bent, it thinks about the real. We know that the understanding or intellect divides the real up into discrete units, unified objects; but Bergson reminds us that this means that the understanding spatialises: it distributes things into distinct spatial *positions*. The understanding translates whatever it

encounters into *spatial* terms, and that means here that the understanding translates things into discrete discontinuous units, that are juxtaposed with one another, and that can be plotted according to their coordinates. This is why Bergson is prone to speak of its conception of space as a ‘mental *diagram*’. Like a graph, with stable axes, and discrete positions along those axes, that can be precisely identified by coordinates.

Now this particular understanding of space is going to have some ramifications when philosophy or physics comes to try to understand motion, or movement. And indeed, we know this sort of thing happens: the practical is transplanted into the theoretical. And so the spatial juxtaposition is used to conceive things which may have nothing to DO with space.

So we shall now move on to a consideration of Bergson’s understanding of motion and duration, and how we go wrong in our conception of it.

##### Contra Eleaticism

Bergson produces four separate theses on this topic, in Ch. 4, all of which are something like battle cries in his war with the Eleatics, which we are slowly approaching now:

1. Every movement, inasmuch as it is a passage from rest to rest, is absolutely

indivisible.

1. There are *real* movements.
2. All division of matter into independent bodies with absolutely determined outlines is an artificial division.
3. Real movement is rather the transference of a state than of a thing.

Let’s deal with the first today and the rest in coming weeks (if we have time). It is here, under

this first heading that Zeno makes his appearance in *Matter and Memory.*

##### Contra Zeno: the indivisibility of the whole of motion

So let us examine this slogan: 1. Every movement, inasmuch as it is a passage from rest to rest, is absolutely indivisible.

Bergson tries to lead us by the hand into the correct thinking of motion. In other words, he tries to lead us back upstream, back up the stream of experience to a point BEFORE that ‘turn’ that he adverted to earlier, the human turn, when the continuity of the real is divided up by the *human* intellect in ways that allow the real to meet our various needs.

Bergson, in other words, tries to lead us back to our pure intuition, before the understanding has got involved and transformed everything temporal into something spatial.

##### Introspecting a continuous movement, movement from within

Now, the way he starts to lead us in that direction is by asking us to introspect. I don’t think this is the full meaning or the only meaning of intuition, but it seems to be part of it.

Introspection.

So he asks us to consider a certain movement: a movement that we make with our own bodies. Now it is important that the movement should be with our own bodies because this type of movement has an aspect that the movement of an external body would not: we can experience it not just from *without* but from within.

So B speaks of us moving our hand between two states of rest, so from position A to position B. His first approximation of what is going on here, is that when we view a motion from *outside*, we think of it in a spatial way, and that means — this is crucial — we think of the movement as akin to a *line*. A line drawn between two points. The points are rather important here, dots, stations, ends. The movement is finite.

But the main point about the line is that it is in fact a very poor representation of what a movement actually IS: the line is something that is there all at once, and each of its parts exists simultaneously with every other. That’s what movement COULD look like if we viewed it from without. From a STATIONARY point, in a synoptic way, and indeed AFTER the movement has already taken place.

Now from within, so with a movement that we are actually undergoing, we are in the MIDST of it, in the thick of it. We are forced to experience this movement IN THE MARKING.

And what we see of a movement when we view it from within is that it is much harder to think of the movement as a fully formed line, describing a trajectory in space: so in other words it is much harder, when viewing a movement from within, to spatialise it. And in fact, what we feel when we experience such a movement, is that movement as it happens IN TIME. And, although making sense of this will need us to expend more effort, we can say that we experience the movement not as comprised of parts, or points, stopping points, stations, halts, but as ONE *indivisible whole*.

Here are some nice lines of Bergson describing movement in this way: and two things happen here, one is that he redescribes this distinction between movement as perceived from without and movement perceived from within as the distinction between the TRAJECTORY (or line, or path) that a movement follows, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the actual

movement. And at the same time he begins to put the problem in terms that bring him into a debate with the Eleatics, and with Zeno in particular:

Movements are ‘indivisibles which occupy duration’. 202

‘movement is an undivided fact, or a series of undivided facts, whereas the trajectory is infinitely divisible’ 192.

It’s this notion of *divisibility* that is the topic of the disagreement between Bergson and Zeno.

##### Zeno’s Paradoxes

Zeno’s arguments in favour of Parmenides often took the form of an RAA:

The way a *reductio* works is as follows: we assume that motion IS possible, and then we show how this presupposition leads to a contradiction. The contradiction then ‘reduces the premise to absurdity, i.e. to a non-sense’, and the archetypal or the most extreme form of non-

sense is a contradiction (P and not P, a circle that is a square), because it is something that could not POSSIBLY make sense, it could not possibly be true.

So Zeno begins by looking at various possible movements, of different types, or different understandings OF motion, and shows how they lead to various absurd results.

Bergson seems to take his account of Zeno from Aristotle’s *Physics* (239–40)*,* a book he knew well. Aristotle here identifies just 4 of the many arguments Zeno generated.[[ But he identifies those that are concerned precisely, not so much with the One and the many, which the Eleatics were also concerned with, but he selects those which are to do with motion, and its absurdity and hence impossibility.]]

* 1. Dichotomy. nothing moves because everything must first reach the half-way point of the motion before it reaches the end (dichotomy = cutting in two: dicho-tomy, temnein, to cut). And this dichotomy goes on forever, every bit of remaining distance can also be cut in two, and so on to infinite; that means that one has to cover an infinite number of steps before one ever covers the distance.
  2. Achilles (and the tortoise). The slowest thing will never be caught by the fastest.

Why? Because the pursuer must always reach the point from which the pursued set out; and that will mean he will have to traverse the same distance as his prey, but he will also, in order to catch up with the tortoise, need to cover more units of distance in the same length of time.

The reason that is impossible will become clearer in later paradoxes, particularly the stadium paradox I think, but the idea seems to be that if space is infinitively divisible, then although Achilles (‘fleet of foot’) can narrow the distance between himself and the tortoise infinitesimally, he can never quite catch up, because the distance that separates them can always be subdivided again, and so there will always be an infinite number of steps still to cover, however small, before Achilles can catch up with the tortoise.

This argument is in some way similar to the Dichotomy. The important point about both of these arguments is that they have to do with dividing space. I.e. it’s about presupposing that the trajectory of a movement can be divided, and indeed divided INFINITELY. And no-one can cover an infinite distance, or an infinite number of steps… The first two arguments therefore presuppose the *infinite* divisibility of space. The second two we shall see consider what would happen to motion if we consider space as only finitely divisible, and that means as atomic.

* 1. arrow.

Perhaps the most useful of Zeno’s paradoxes to us (though Bergson thinks it is the stadium paradox) … but perhaps the most intuitive, and the simplest to grasp, is that of the arrow, the arrow that never moves even though it is in flight. ‘The still arrow’.

Aristotle puts it like this: ‘if, he says, everything is always at rest when it is in a space equal to itself, and if what is travelling is always in such a space at any instant, then the travelling arrow is motionless’. ‘the travelling arrow stands still.’

Aristotle, we should say, is not convinced by Zeno’s paradoxes and rightly, from B’s point of view points out the presupposition that underlies this paradox and the next: ‘this ‘depends on the assumption that time is composed of instants’. i.e. indivisible atoms

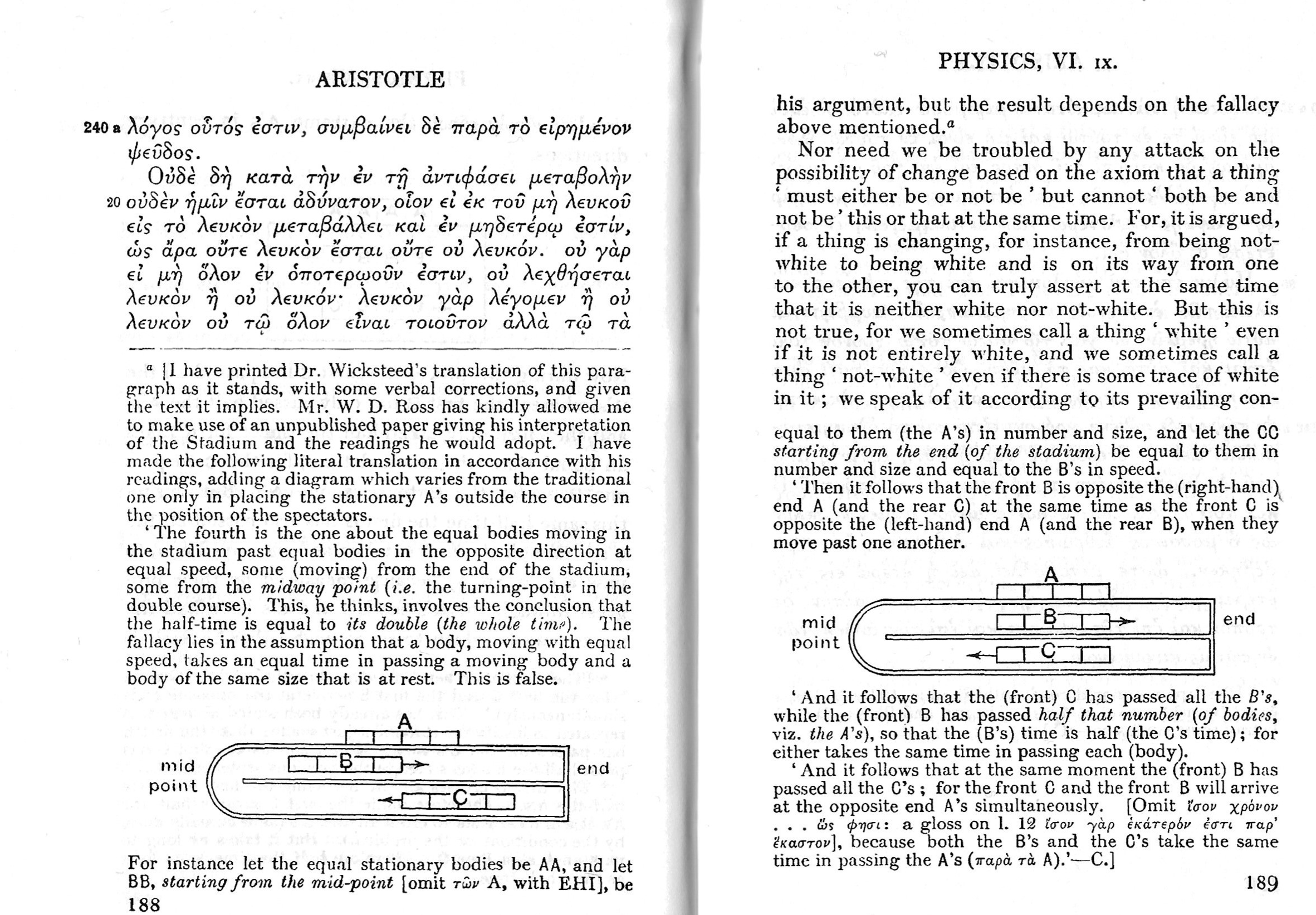
* 1. Stadium. Two bodies of marching soldiers approach one another from opposite directions.

They are passing some stationery object, like a flag or something. That stands originally between them (though this seems to be Aristotle’s addition).

They are marching past a stationery object, and they are marching past each other, and the ranks of soldiers are moving. Now, we take this for granted, but it’s something that struck Zeno as puzzling: let’s not speak of a flag but of a stationary battalion. In the centre of the stadium. With two other battallions marching past it in opposite directions. Zeno was puzzled

by the fact that the moving battalions pass twice as many rows of the moving rank of soldiers as they do of the stationary rank.

Things become clearer from a nice diagram from the Loeb edition.



Here the matter becomes clearer: in the self same motion, the soldiers march past one unit of the stationary object and two units of the moving unit. This was problematic for Zeno because it means the moving soldiers are effectively carrying out two motions in the same instant, one being twice the size of the other. So that moment of time, that atom, seems itself to be divisible, to be both a single thing and to be divisible in two.

As I said at the transition between the two groups of paradoxes, it looks like the first two dilemmas suppose infinite divisibility and the latter two finite divisibility, and are meant to show that motion is impossible on either count.

Let me use this as an occasion to ward off a misunderstanding that I struggled with on reading Bergson’s text this time round: there are two uses of the word ‘indivisible’: the only one Bergson advocates for is the one where indivisibility is applied to motion, in its totality, its wholeness; there is another sense that very occasionally comes up where he speaks of an indivisible *moment* or something like an atom. And that is NOT something he advocates. So note that, in case it helps, you know he’s against atomism as a theory, and a-tom, *a-temnein* means ‘uncuttable’, undividable, indivisible. You can’t divide it into any smaller units. That’s also a possibility that Zeno entertains: and Bergson really wants to get away from either of the possibilities Zeno entertains: infinite divisibility or finite divisibility leading to an indivisible remainder (as we used to say in mathematics), an atom. So matter is to be neither infinitely nor finitely divisible for Bergson. But motion in no way depends on its being that: so much, against his own apparent intentions, Zeno proved for Bergson.

##### Bergson’s answer to Zeno

B’s answer: What we must get beyond is thinking of motion as comprised of a multiplicity of instants, or stations, at which the movement may be said to halt, even if we understand these instants to be nothing but one-dimensional POINTS.

If we think of movement as indivisible, we will not be able to divide it into even these imaginary halts: [[‘it seems to me, then, when I reconstitute the total movement, that the moving body has stayed an infinitely short time at every point of its trajectory. But we must not confound the data of the senses, which perceive the movement, with the artifice of the mind, which recomposes it. The senses, left to themselves, present to us the real movement, between two real halts, as a solid and undivided whole’. ]]

He presents us with a beautiful image for this way of looking at motion: consider a storm: the whole mobile world is lit up momentarily and appears static and frozen:

[[Imagination immobilises,]] ‘like the instantaneous flash which illuminates a stormy landscape by night’ 189. Or like an arrow immobilised in flight.

The line, the spatialised form of movement is divisible; the movement, real movement is not. Space IS infinitely divisible. But the illusion is that the movement ‘along the line’ is one with the line and so *also* divisible.

The illusion is caused by the following fact: ‘these points [on the line, stations] have no reality except in a line drawn, that is to say, motionless’ 189. Representing movement as occupying these points, ‘you necessarily arrest it in each of them’ 190. ‘You substitute the

path for the journey, and because the journey is subtended by the path, you think that the two coincide. But how should a *progress* coincide with a *thing*, a movement with an immobility?’ 190

And it is at this moment in the text, very late, that Bergson makes his explicit allusion to Zeno:

‘The arguments of Zeno of Elea have no other origin than this illusion. They all consist in making time and movement coincide with the line which underlies them, in attributing to them the same subdivisions as to the line, in short, in treating them like that line’ 191.

Let us conclude like this. Bergson tells us that with the paradox of dichotomy, ‘he [Zeno] merely proves that it is impossible to construct, a priori, movement with immobilities, a thing no man ever doubted’ 192.

So if motion cannot be understood as a trajectory, as a line, as spatial in the last instance, as constructed from a series of immobilities, then what is it?

Here things get quite trippy.

Bergson speaks of movement as involving not a change in the parts, or a movement of the parts of the material universe, but a change in the whole, a holistic change:

‘[[on the contrary hypothesis,]] the question would no longer be how, in given *parts* of matter are changes of position produced, but how, in the *whole*, is a change of aspect effected — a change of which we should then have to ascertain the nature’ 196.

Bergson speaks of this change as something akin to the experience of the turning of a kaleidoscope. That’s the psychadelic moment!

→ third proposition

1. *All division of matter into independent bodies with absolutely determined outlines is an artificial division*

The question Bergson raises here is WHY do we DIVIDE at all. If the question of Zeno and of movement is divisibility, and if the real, in its mobility, in its duration is indivisible, indivisibly whole, WHY do we divide it up at all?

This division contradicts both natural science and the immediate givens of consciousness, or intuition (B’s method). So why do we do it? The answer is *life*: the needs of life, which is to say acting. The primarily duality that we set up in the real is that between a need (which life experiences) and the object which satisfies that need.

‘as with the turning of a kaleidoscope’.

We have thought too much of movement as locomotion, as change of space. And that means change within time and space understood as a medium that is homogeneous. Nothing really

changes. But a motion is always something like a creation for Bergson (this is getting

speculative!), a creation of novelty.

**ACCOMPANYING SHEET**

# PHI2202 & PHI3202 Texts in Contemporary Philosophy:

**Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory***

**Semester II**

2023–24

**Class 8**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **~~Timetable Week Teaching Week W/b Reading~~** | | | | |
| ~~22~~ | ~~1~~ | ~~29/1/202~~  4 | | ~~Henri Bergson,~~ *~~Matter and Memory,~~* ~~Introduction (i.e. pp. 9–~~  ~~16)~~ |
|  |  |
| ~~23~~ | ~~2~~ | ~~5/2/24~~ | | ~~Ch. 2. Of the Recognition of Images (pp. 77–98 [to just before~~ ~~the start of sub-section III])~~ |
| ~~24~~ | ~~3~~ | ~~12/2/24~~ | | ~~Ch. 2 (99–131 [end of chapter])~~ |
| ~~25~~ | ~~4~~ | ~~19/2/24~~ | | ~~Ch. 3. Of the Survival of Images (pp. 133– 58) [moved to the~~ ~~following week due to illness]~~ |
| ~~26~~ | ~~5~~ | ~~26/2/24~~ | | ~~Ch. 3. Of the Survival of Images (pp. 133– 58)~~ |
| ~~27~~ | ~~6~~ | ~~4/3/24~~ | | ~~Ch.3 (pp. 158–77 [end of Ch. 3])~~ |
| ~~28~~ | ~~7~~ | ~~11/3/24~~ | | ~~Ch. 4 (pp. 179–188 [to just before the subheading, ‘1. Every~~ ~~movement….’~~ |
| 29 | 8 | 18/3/24 | | Ch. 4. pp.188–223 [end of chapter] |
| 30 –  33 |  | 25/3/24 | | *Easter Vacation – four weeks* |
| 34 | 9 | 22/4/24 | | Summary and Conclusion (pp.225–49 [end of book]) |
| 35 | 10 | 29/4/24 | | [*Note the different time and place:*] Wednesday 1st May 2024, 3pm-5pm, HDB 9.2: talk on Bergson by Mark Sinclair |
| 36 | 11 | 6/5/24 | | Overflow and/or Essay Advice – in my office, unless otherwise advertised |

##### Four points in the outline of a theory of matter

1. Every movement, inasmuch as it is a passage from rest to rest, is absolutely indivisible.
2. There are *real* movements.
3. All division of matter into independent bodies with absolutely determined outlines is an artificial division.
4. Real movement is rather the transference (or transport) of a state than of a thing.

##### Matter, movement, space and the difficulty of matter-spirit interaction The traditional view of Matter and Spirit:

* 1. **matter** is taken to be extended WITHIN this spatial container, to ‘take up’ space, to be extended WITHIN space, and matter is characterised by a *quantity*, by mass, by something that can be measured and calculated;
  2. → and this leads philosophy to understand **spirit** as having the opposite nature: spirit or mind is taken to be utterly different from matter:
  3. → *un*extended and having *qualities*, sensible qualities.
  4. Bergson’s theory = ‘dualist’.

##### Battle cries against the Eleatics/the theory of matter

* 1. Every movement, inasmuch as it is a passage from rest to rest, is absolutely indivisible.
  2. There are *real* movements.
  3. All division of matter into independent bodies with absolutely determined outlines is an artificial division.
  4. Real movement is rather the transference (or transport) of a state than of a thing.

1. ***There are* real *movements***

Psychedelic kaleidoscopes

## All division of matter into independent bodies with absolutely determined outlines is an artificial division

* 1. why do we believe this alternative view, and think the real is divided up into parts, finite or infinite?

→ The answer is *life*: the needs of life, which is to say acting.

* 1. The primary duality that we set up (or ‘posit’) in the real is that between a need (which life or the living organism experiences) and the object which satisfies that need.
  2. the very first discrete body that our perception identifies is our OWN body.
  3. All needs ultimately cluster around the need for food, since their object is ‘the conservation of the individual or of the species’ (198).
  4. And these needs lead us to distinguish first of all our own body from other bodies which might supply that need for alimentation (since we cannot eat ourselves…)
  5. the very incursion of *life* upon the real — the emergence of the organism within the universe — immediately opens up the *necessity* for the perception of discreteness. Life does not survive without that discreteness being manifested within perception.

## Real movement is rather the transference of a state than of a thing

* 1. ‘transference’ = ‘*le transport*’
  2. The distinction between **quality** and **quantity**, and *the unextended* and *the extended*

##### Quality/quantity, non-extension/extension

* 1. ‘But this is just the question: do real movements present merely differences of quantity, or are they not quality itself, vibrating, so to speak, internally, and beating time for its own existence through an often incalculable number of moments?’ 202.

##### Bergsonian vibrations and the colour red

* 1. when we perceive, say, a colour, red, we are perceiving red *light*.
  2. light may be understood as a wave, and that a wave has a certain wave*length*, a certain amplitude, and this wave-LENGTH is precisely quantifiable.
  3. a certain *quantity* of VIBRATIONs, or WAVES, a certain RHYTHM giving rise to a difference in QUALITY (red as opposed to blue, for example).

##### How long is a moment?

* 1. red light, is made up of 400 billion vibrations a second.
  2. We don’t and can’t see 400 billion separate movements or undulations.
  3. an instant, or the present moment, the now, is *measurable*. It has a certain length: ‘the smallest interval of empty time which we can detect equals, according to [a certain] Exner, 0.002 seconds’ (205).
  4. ‘In our duration — the duration which our consciousness perceives — a given interval can only contain a limited number of phenomena of which we are aware’ (206).
  5. So when we perceive a phenomenon that involves red light, we simply couldn’t see every one of the waves that comprise it
  6. we would have to spread the wave out over an unimaginable length of time: ‘the sensation of red light, experienced by us in the course of a second, corresponds in itself to a succession of phenomena which, separately distinguished in our duration with the greatest possible economy of time, would occupy more than 250 centuries of our history’ (206).
  7. The multiplicity of movements blends into one particular *quality*: the quality, red.
  8. ‘we are dimly aware of successions in nature much more rapid than those of our internal states. How are we to conceive them, and what is this duration of which the capacity goes beyond all our imagination?’ (207)
  9. ‘to perceive consists in condensing enormous periods of an infinitely diluted existence into a few more differentiated moments of an intenser life, and in thus summing up a very long history. To perceive means to immobilise’ (208).
  10. To transform quantity, a quantity of vibrations, into a relatively stable quality, like red.
  11. ‘But, if you abolish my consciousness, the material universe subsists exactly as it was; only, since you have removed that particular rhythm of duration which was the condition of my action upon things, these things draw back into themselves, mark as many moments in their own existence as science distinguishes in it; and sensible qualities, without vanishing, are spread and diluted in an incomparably more divided duration’ (208).

##### Were life (and so perception) to be wiped from the universe

* 1. how Bergson describes the effect that the eradication of a *living* perception would have on matter: matter resolves itself into ‘numberless vibrations, all linked together in uninterrupted continuity, all bound up with each other, and travelling in every direction like shivers through an immense body’ (208).
  2. a reworking of his earlier image of matter as comprised of innumerable *images* all transmitting movement to one another, and receiving it back.

= unconscious *perception*.

* 1. ‘Having assimilated movements to space, we find these movements homogeneous like space; and since we no longer see in them anything but calculable differences of direction and velocity, all relation between movement and quality is for us destroyed’ (218).
  2. But if we actually use intuition, and face ‘immediate reality’, ‘we find that there is no impassable barrier, no essential difference, no real distinction even, between perception and the thing perceived, between quality and movement’ (218).
  3. a return to Ch 1 of *Matter and Memory*.
  4. In Ch. 1, Bergson showed how perception is IN THINGS, in matter, ‘without us rather than within’ (218). Perception in matter, pure perception, is perhaps nothing but those shivers that run through the universal body, through matter.
  5. But this perception that coincides with its object exist only in theory, ‘it could only happen if we were shut up within the present moment’; in fact, memory intervenes in perception, ‘and the subjectivity of sensible qualities is due precisely to the fact that our consc, which begins by being only memory, prolongs a plurality of moments into each other, contracting them into a single intuition’ (219).

##### The clarifying, concluding pages of the main body

* 1. ‘Consciousness and matter, body and soul, were thus seen to meet each other in perception [so the problem of the union seemed solved; but…]. But, in one aspect, this idea remained for us obscure because our perception and consequently, also our consciousness seemed thus to share in the divisibility which is attributed to matter. If, on the dualistic hypothesis, we naturally shrink from accepting the partial coincidence of the perceived object and the perceiving subject, it is because we are conscious of the undivided unity of our perception, whereas the object appears to us to be, in essence, infinitely divisible’ (219).
  2. ‘The difficulties of ordinary dualism come, not from the distinction between the two terms, but from the impossibility of seeing how the one is grafted upon the other. Now, as we have shown, pure perception, which is the lowest degree of mind — mind without memory — is really part of matter’ (222).
  3. ‘perception and matter, approach each other in the measure that we divest ourselves of what may be called the prejudices of action: sensation recovers extensity [The French gives *extension* here but we should think, as the English translation suggests, perhaps even correcting the original, *étendue:* ‘extensity’], the concrete extended [*l’étendue concrète*] recovers its natural continuity and indivisibility. And homogeneous space, which stood between the two terms like an insurmountable barrier, is then seen to have no other reality than that of a diagram or a symbol. It interests the behaviour of a being which acts upon matter, but not the work of a mind which speculates on its essence’ (219–20/247 in the original).

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# PHI2202 & PHI3202 Texts in Contemporary Philosophy: Henri Bergson, *Matter and*

***Memory***

**Semester II**

2023–24

##### Class 8

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **~~Timetable Week Teaching Week W/b Reading~~** | | | | |
| ~~22~~ | ~~1~~ | 29/1/202 | | ~~Henri Bergson,~~ *~~Matter and Memory,~~* ~~Introduction (i.e. pp. 9–~~ |
| 4 | | ~~16)~~ |
|  |  |
| ~~23~~ | ~~2~~ | ~~5/2/24~~ | | ~~Ch. 2. Of the Recognition of Images (pp. 77–98 [to just before~~ ~~the start of sub-section III])~~ |
| ~~24~~ | ~~3~~ | ~~12/2/24~~ | | ~~Ch. 2 (99–131 [end of chapter])~~ |
| ~~25~~ | ~~4~~ | ~~19/2/24~~ | | ~~Ch. 3. Of the Survival of Images (pp. 133– 58) [moved to the~~ ~~following week due to illness]~~ |
| ~~26~~ | ~~5~~ | ~~26/2/24~~ | | ~~Ch. 3. Of the Survival of Images (pp. 133– 58)~~ |
| ~~27~~ | ~~6~~ | ~~4/3/24~~ | | ~~Ch.3 (pp. 158–77 [end of Ch. 3])~~ |
| ~~28~~ | ~~7~~ | ~~11/3/24~~ | | ~~Ch. 4 (pp. 179–188 [to just before the subheading, ‘1. Every~~ ~~movement….’~~ |
| 29 | 8 | 18/3/24 | | Ch. 4. pp.188–223 [end of chapter] |
| 30 – 33 |  | 25/3/24 | | *Easter Vacation – four weeks* |
| 34 | 9 | 22/4/24 | | Summary and Conclusion (pp.225–49 [end of book]) |
| 35 | 10 | 29/4/24 | | [*Note the different time and place:*] Wednesday 1st May 2024, 3pm-5pm, HDB 9.2: talk on Bergson by Mark Sinclair |
| 36 | 11 | 6/5/24 | | Overflow and/or Essay Advice – in my office, unless otherwise  advertised |

##### Recapitulation

Last week, we broached the debate between Bergson and the Eleatics. So we spoke about motion. The ultimate heart of the debate was divisibility, and the divisibility of motion, space and time (for movement had been understood as locomotion: speed remember = distance over

time: so space covered divided by time elapsed). Zeno tried to show that if one does think of motion, space, and time as divisible, either finitely divisible (with an indivisible remainder or atom) or infinitely divisible, motion is impossible. Or it is just a semblance. It belongs in the world of *appearance* and not the world of *reality*, the world for us and not the world as it is in itself. The world in itself, for the Eleatics was static and unified. One and not many, still and substantial, not subject to becoming.

*Bergson* wants to show that motion *is* a part of the world as it is in itself, the real, which is to say the thing in itself. It is not just a semblance. And he diagnoses the problem that afflicts Zeno’s approach: if you think of motion, space and time as divisible, you are going to make motion impossible. Not least this is because you are thinking of motion and time in terms (purely) of SPACE. You are thinking not of the movement but of the trajectory, the line or path that the mobile entity traverses. You are thinking of the unfurled roll of millions of feet of film, with its freeze frames, its still photographs, juxtaposed and simultaneous with each other. Motion will only ever be a moving *picture* then, movement will be the mere illusion of movement that the zoetrope or the flick book, or the ‘flicks’ (the films, the movies) give us.

In other words, philosophy has from the very outset spatialised time: *Zeno* spatialised time, and that means he used his understanding or intellect, and not his *intuition* to think about motion and time. (He confused a practical necessity, that applies to action, with a metaphysical characteristic, which only theory can give us access to.)

Intuition is Bergson’s method, the method by means of which he does metaphysics, and by that means he can demonstrate how movement IS a part of the real. But movement has to be understood in the way that intuition shows us it is, and that is as an INdivisible whole, as a continuity.

Movements are ‘indivisibles which occupy duration’. 202

##### Four points in the outline of a theory of matter

Bergson makes four points about this real, metaphysical motion: and he tells us that this amounts to the outline of a theory of MATTER. Why is it necessary to sketch such a theory? Because in this final chapter (Ch. 4) B is clearing up what he considers to be an ‘obscurity’ within his conception of matter and mind, matter and spirit, matter and memory, or perception and memory.

He considers that it will prove difficult to accept that there IS interaction between these two terms, and he has to expose the reason for that, and the reason for that lies in a mistaken theory of matter, or in his own failure as yet to clarify how HIS theory of matter differs from the traditional theory. Since matter is that through which movement moves, this risks leading us back into a mistaken theory of movement, or simply to a refusal to accept B’s theory of movement [[— a theory of matter which philosophers at least spontaneously reach for (though not perhaps common sense OR natural science).]]

##### Matter, movement, space and the difficulty of matter-spirit interaction

[[So that is why we are dealing with the nature of movement, and why Bergson describes it as a theory of MATTER.]] The problem in understanding this transition from movement to matter is perhaps that we have three closely related terms: matter, movement, and space, and they are all misunderstood precisely on the basis of a very fundamental misunderstanding of the last term. *Space*. Space has been taken to be homogeneous, as lacking in quality, and lacking in qualitative difference, as a mere medium through which things move, without having any effect on that space. Space is just like a three dimension set of axes that allows us to plot coordinates. It is a mere container, devoid of quality, unaffected by what moves through it, and not capable of seriously affecting what moves through it.

And this containing homogeneous space is precisely considered by philosophers to be divisible into finite atoms, or infinitely divisible, without remainder.

Further, this understanding of space leads to a misunderstanding of matter: matter is taken to be extended WITHIN this spatial container, to ‘take up’ space, to be extended WITHIN space, and matter is characterised by a *quantity*, by mass, by something that can be measured and calculated; and this leads philosophy then to understand *spirit* — by contrast

— as having the opposite nature: spirit or mind is taken to be utterly different from matter:

*un*extended and having *qualities*, sensible qualities.

This is the common theory of matter and spirit. And the extremely difficult question then arises of how the two of them can interact? How can we mediate this relation?

In truth, this question proves to be impossible to answer in the way it is usually posed.

And this presents an insurmountable barrier to the acceptance of Bergson’s theory, which you’ll remember from the very first week does describe itself as ‘dualist’. So he takes it upon himself in this fourth chapter to clarify the ‘obscurity’ of the connection between matter and spirit. And to clarify *that* he has to show how we should *rethink matter* [[and to rethink it on the basis of time rather than in terms of space]].

Perhaps we can say that what the bulk of the preceding chapters, the ones that we have read, 2 to 4, have devoted themselves to clarifying SPIRIT; so now we need to return to the beginning, and to clarify MATTER, on the basis of this new theory of spirit and on the basis of what we have discovered. This is perhaps why B describes Ch. 4 as returning to, revisiting, Ch. 1, where matter and the theory of matter as an aggregate of images was first broached.

So let us run through Bergson’s outline of a theory of matter this week, as far as we have time for, and then we’ll rest. And I’ll go to the café.

The new Bergsonian theory of matter is summarised in these four slogans, the battle cries against the Eleatic theory of movement that we mentioned last week:

1. Every movement, inasmuch as it is a passage from rest to rest, is absolutely

indivisible.

1. There are *real* movements.
2. All division of matter into independent bodies with absolutely determined outlines is an artificial division.
3. Real movement is rather the transference (or transport) of a state than of a thing.

We have dealt with the first of Bergson’s four points, the one about motion and its indivisibility: and in order to *show* that motions should be understood as indivisible, as continuous, as whole, the *Eleatic* conception of being needed to be vanquished: [[‘we will content ourselves with observing that motion, as given to spontaneous perception, is a fact which is quite clear, and that the difficulties and contradictions pointed out by the Eleatic school concern far less the living movement itself than a dead and artificial reorganisation of movement by the mind’.]]

And this leads precisely to the second point: movement is not illusory, it is REAL.

**II. *There are* real *movements***

[[Absolute motion: [not really Bergson’s position]→ stop regarding movement as just a

change of place? (this after discussion of Descartes).]]

Real movement vs. relative movement qua change of place? 195

1. ***There are* real *movements***

One of the things we can say about this second section

is that Bergson wants us to alter our conception of motion in a fundamental way. How should we go about doing this?

What Bergson wants us to do is to use our ‘intuition’ and to dive into real movement as it appears to us *immediately*, and not to perform this mathematical or geometrical reconstruction that the *Understanding* uses to construct totalities out of *parts* — an analysis, a breaking down, followed by a synthesis: you’ll never restore life to the whole in that Frankenstein fashion. We need as ever to envisage (intuitively) a LIVING whole, rather than a LIFELESS whole, reconstructed synthetically and artificially after the fact. We need to go BEFORE understanding (and its conceptual divisions), to bypass Understanding, and we need to work our way into Intuition, and we need to approach movement by way of intuition.

##### Psychedelic kaleidoscopes

So if motion cannot be understood as a trajectory, as a line, as spatial in the last instance, as constructed from a series of immobilities, then what is it?

Here things get quite trippy.

Bergson speaks of movement as involving not a change in the parts, or a movement of the parts of the material universe, but a change in the *whole*, a holistic change of the entire universe, as if every ‘part’ of the fabric of the universe shifted ever so slightly in its nature, in its *quality*, perhaps; thanks to however small a change in another part: like a kaleidoscope shifting. That’s the psychedelic moment! (*psyche, delos*, a revelation of the psyche in all its insanity!). For some reason I think of fractals here, but I’m not sure why.

We have thought too much of movement as locomotion, as change of space. And that means change within time and space understood as a medium that is homogeneous. Nothing really changes on that conception: there is no *qualitative* change. For Bergson, a motion, change, becoming, is always something like a creation, a creation of novelty, a new configuration of the whole which, however infinitesimal the difference between this state and the last, has literally never been seen before.

And this leads us straight onto the third of Bergson’s propositions in the outline of a theory of matter, which reads as follows:

###### All division of matter into independent bodies with absolutely determined outlines is an artificial division

The question Bergson raises here is WHY we DIVIDE the material world into parts at all. If the question of Zeno and of movement is divisibility, and if the real, in its mobility, in its duration is indivisible, indivisibly whole, WHY do we divide it up at all?

Now we already know something of this, so we don’t need to tarry with it too much

here, but Bergson must have a reason for recurring to it at this precise point.

Bergson tells us something new at least, which is that this division of the world into objects and parts is actually a ‘minority’ view, let’s say, in those fascist terms. In fact, Bergson musters to his defence, to support his own view of matter as a continuum, both natural science *and* the immediate givens of consciousness, or intuition (B’s method).

Bergson seems to be saying that with all this evidence in favour of his theory of movement and of matter, something very persuasive must be working behind the scenes to make the traditional view so very hard to shift.

So why do we believe this alternative view, and think the real is divided up into parts, finite or infinite? The answer is *life*: the needs of life, which is to say acting. The primary duality that we set up (or ‘posit’) in the real is that between a need (which life or the living organism experiences) and the object which satisfies that need.

Here Bergson goes a bit further than I perhaps suggested last week: he says that the very first discrete body that our perception identifies is our OWN body.

All needs ultimately cluster around the need for food, since their object is ‘the conservation of the individual or of the species’ 198. And these needs lead us to distinguish first of all our own body from other bodies which might supply that need for alimentation (since we cannot eat ourselves…), and then these needs lead us to make distinctions AMONG these other bodies: so as to *distinguish* among these other bodies those which we

must seek and those which we must avoid, and in what *way* must we seek them? — are they to be eaten or to be mated with, for instance?

So, *need* is ultimately responsible for discontinuity. The needs of *life*. Once again, there is very little else one could describe this as than Bergson’s ‘naturalism’. Or his life- philosophy.

Establishing a *relation* between our own body and these objects of need *is* living, B tells us.

In this sense, Bergson shows that the very incursion of *life* upon the real — the emergence of the organism within the universe — immediately opens up the *necessity* for the perception of discreteness. Life does not survive without that discreteness being manifested within perception.

###### Real movement is rather the transference of a state than of a thing.

This leads us to the fourth point in the theory of matter.

The problem with philosophy in the past has been precisely that this naturalistic perspective, the perspective of life, has been allowed to infiltrate our metaphysical theorisation without philosophy’s explicitly acknowledging that this has happened. Hence a hypostatisation takes place, with philosophers concluding that the real in itself, space, matter, movement, is comprised of parts, discrete objects. And that these parts *precede* the whole. [[The real in itself, as both natural science and intuition attest, is continuous, not discrete.]]

At this point, Bergson moves onto his fourth thesis on matter, which is less obvious as to its meaning, at first glance: IV. *Real movement is rather the transference of a state than of a thing*. I think it’s the word ‘transference’ that trips us up here. The French word is ‘*le transport*’, and this simply means something like locomotion, a bearing (*porter*) of a thing from one place to another. So I’m not sure it’s really the right word to apply to *states*…

Here I think, Bergson is simply attempting to specify the idea that we broached a moment ago when we spoke of the kaleidoscope, and of movement as a change in the aspect of the WHOLE. Here Bergson describes that turn of the kaleidoscope more specifically as a change of STATE (*état*).

And it seems that this change of state amounts to a change of quality.

And here we get to the heart of Ch. 4. The distinction between quality and quantity, and between the unextended and the extended, that Bergson wants to undo, or to complicate.

##### Quality/quantity, non-extension/extension

Bergson has been telling us throughout the text that we have to make two kinds of distinction, one that can only be made in theory, which is usually a difference in kind, and one which describes the way in which that theoretical distinction works itself out in fact, a difference in degree, a continuum, often as not.

So we have often found ourselves engaged in diminishing the distance between two terms that we had grown accustomed to opposing to one another: so here let us consider the opposition or difference in kind between qualities and movements, and the opposition between the unextended and the extended: which is to say spirit and matter as they are usually conceived. Usually qualities are understood to be heterogeneous, and movements are understood to be homogeneous. [[Mysterious communication between motion in space and

consciousness with sensations]] 202. Qualities belong to the unextended mind, and movements take place in extended matter.

But as B points out, whether you’re an idealist or a realist, this leaves you with an insurmountable gulf between matter and spirit, and that opens up a serious problem in the philosophy of mind/perception: how can a change in matter induce a change in the QUALITy of our perception? This is just the problem that Chapter 4 sets itself to raise and solve.

B: ‘But this is just the question: do real movements present merely differences of quantity, or are they not quality itself, vibrating, so to speak, internally, and beating time for its own existence through an often incalculable number of moments?’ 202. This difficult sentence is one which we are about to try and interpret.

[[Movements are ‘indivisibles which occupy duration’. 202]]

##### Bergsonian Vibrations and the colour red

On this new picture, this is how Bergson describes movement or change: we have to think of movement and matter NOT as opposed to spirit or consciousness, but as sharing in their properties somehow. [[movements link together successive moments by ‘a thread of variable quality which cannot be without some likeness to the continuity of our own consciousness’ 202–3.]]

The ultimate point of this difficult section may be reduced to something quite simple: when we perceive, say, a colour, red, we are perceiving red *light*. And we know that light may be understood as a wave, and that a wave has a certain wave*length*, a certain amplitude, and this wave-LENGTH is precisely quantifiable. So we can see here a certain *quantity* of VIBRATIONs, or WAVES, a certain RHYTHM giving rise to a difference in QUALITY (red as opposed to blue, for example).

##### How long is a moment?

Now, red light, as the scientist sees it, with his clever measuring instruments, that can see far more than we can, is made up of 400 billion vibrations a second.

But what do we actually SEE when we see this red light? We don’t and can’t see 400 billion separate movements or undulations.

I don’t know if it’s ever occurred to you, but this thing called an instant, or the present moment, the now, is *measurable*. It has a certain length: ‘the smallest interval of empty time which we can detect equals, according to [a certain] Exner, 0.002 seconds’ (205).

And I don’t know if this next point is a direct inference from that, but it is certainly related: ‘In our duration — the duration which our consciousness perceives — a given interval can only contain a limited number of phenomena of which we are aware’ (206). And that is by no means as many as 400 billion.

So when we perceive a phenomenon that involves red light, we simply couldn’t see every one of the waves that comprise it: so, *reductio ad absurdum*, to reduce this possibility to the absurdity that it is, Bergson puts the point like this: imagine what we would have to do in order to *actually see* every vibration of the light wave: we would have to spread the wave out over an unimaginable length of time: ‘the sensation of red light, experienced by us in the course of a second, corresponds in itself to a succession of phenomena which, separately

distinguished in our duration with the greatest possible economy of time, would occupy more than 250 centuries of our history’ 206.

But of course, we can’t do that, — without scientific instrumentation, we can’t slow down time, and we can’t even live that long. We cannot perceive these waves in their individuality, in any sense at all; and so we perceive something else. The multiplicity of movements blends into one particular *quality*: the quality, red.

Bergson puts the point like this: ‘we are dimly aware of successions in nature much more rapid than those of our internal states. How are we to conceive them, and what is this duration of which the capacity goes beyond all our imagination?’ 207.

In this context, this is how Bergson describes perception: ‘to perceive consists in condensing enormous periods of an infinitely diluted existence into a few more differentiated

moments of an intenser life, and in thus summing up a very long history. To perceive means to immobilise’ 208. — To transform quantity, a quantity of vibrations, into a relatively stable quality, like red.

##### Were life (and so perception) to be wiped from the universe

And then Bergson imagines what would happen if we were to *subtract* this perception from the universe, and in an extreme form we could imagine what would happen to the universe if all life were to be eradicated from it (philosophers fantasise about this type of apocalyptic situation, this extinction, more often than we imagine).

First of all, on a traditional account, like that of say Locke or perhaps Berkeley, if we believed in the difference between primary and secondary qualities, extension and the various sensible qualities, we would say that — if all perception, all organic life were to be extinguished — all QUALITIES (or at least all secondary sensible qualities) would be eradicated from the universe. We would be left with pure extension.

But this is precisely NOT what Bergson thinks: even if perception is got rid of, quality remains. This is how Bergson describes the effect that the eradication of a *living* perception would have on matter: matter resolves itself into ‘numberless vibrations, all linked together in uninterrupted continuity, all bound up with each other, and travelling in every direction like shivers through an immense body’ 208. That’s his marvellous vision of a universe without life. I think it’s a reworking of his earlier image of matter as comprised of innumerable *images* all transmitting movement to one another, and receiving it back. And this transmission and reception being conceived of as some sort of unconscious *perception*.

So the question that Bergson is trying to answer here is that of relation between MOVEMENT (and matter) and quality. And movement, like the space it is considered to move through, has come to be understood as a *lack of quality*, since it has been assimilated to a homogeneous space, i.e. one which is qualitatively invariant:

‘Having assimilated movements to space, we find these movements homogeneous like space; and since we no longer see in them anything but calculable differences of direction and velocity, all relation between movement and quality is for us destroyed’ (218).

But if we actually use intuition, and face ‘immediate reality’, ‘we find that there is no impassable barrier, no essential difference, no real distinction even, between perception and

the thing perceived, between quality and movement’ (218).

And to conclude this chapter, Bergson openly says that this notion of a shivering body (or a kaleidoscope, since you have to shake that, remember) transmitting waves of motion across its surface, and being *aware* of that process of movement,… this is a return to Ch 1 of

MM. In Ch. 1, Bergson showed how perception is IN THINGS, in matter, ‘without us rather

than within’ (218). Perception in matter, pure perception, is perhaps nothing but those shivers that run through the universal body, through matter.

##### The clarifying, concluding pages of the main body

Let’s end by summarising the problem and the solution that Ch. 4 has been addressing, for these are in the end, the problem and solution given by the book itself, in its entirety. But we shall perhaps say the same thing more adequately in the first week of next term, in the very last lecture.

In the very final pages of Chapter 4, things are finally altogether cleared up, as to what problem was actually being solved in this chapter — and this can act as a useful summary for us, today: ‘Consciousness and matter, body and soul, were thus seen to meet each other in perception [so the problem of the union seemed solved; but…]. But, in one aspect, this idea remained for us obscure because our perception and consequently, also our consciousness seemed thus to share in the divisibility which is attributed to matter. If, on the dualistic hypothesis, we naturally shrink from accepting the partial coincidence of the perceived object and the perceiving subject, it is because we are conscious of the undivided unity of our perception, whereas the object appears to us to be, in essence, infinitely divisible’ (219).

We can see everything come together. As we saw last week, we needed to rethink movement as *in*divisible, and we needed to do that in order, as we now see, to render acceptable the union of perception and matter: perception as undivided and qualitative; matter and its movement, which we took to be something that was lacking in quality and divisible; or at least, that was how we conceived the space through which we understood movement to move — space in its homogeneity.

Now we have rectified that conception of matter, there is no obstacle to this union of consc and matter, body and soul…

Here’s a nice passage, showing also how ch. 4 loops back to ch. 1: ‘The difficulties of ordinary dualism come, not from the distinction between the two terms, but from the impossibility of seeing how the one is grafted upon the other. Now, as we have shown, pure

perception, which is the lowest degree of mind — mind without memory — is really part of

matter’ (222).

Perhaps we can end the term with this quotation: ‘perception and matter, approach each other in the measure that we divest ourselves of what may be called the prejudices of action: sensation recovers extensity [The French gives *extension* here but we should think, as the English translation suggests, perhaps even correcting the original, *étendue:* ‘extensity’], the concrete extended [*l’étendue concrète*] recovers its natural continuity and indivisibility. And homogeneous space, which stood between the two terms like an insurmountable barrier, is then seen to have no other reality than that of a diagram or a symbol. It interests the behaviour of a being which acts upon matter, but not the work of a mind which speculates on its essence’ (219–20/247 in the original).

# PHI2202 & PHI3202 Texts in Contemporary Philosophy:

**Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory***

**Semester II**

2023–24

##### Class 9

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **~~Timetable Week Teaching Week W/b Reading~~** | | | | |
| ~~22~~ | ~~1~~ | ~~29/1/202~~  4 | | ~~Henri Bergson,~~ *~~Matter and Memory,~~* ~~Introduction (i.e. pp. 9–~~  ~~16)~~ |
|  |  |
| ~~23~~ | ~~2~~ | ~~5/2/24~~ | | ~~Ch. 2. Of the Recognition of Images (pp. 77–98 [to just before~~ ~~the start of sub-section III])~~ |
| ~~24~~ | ~~3~~ | ~~12/2/24~~ | | ~~Ch. 2 (99–131 [end of chapter])~~ |
| ~~25~~ | ~~4~~ | ~~19/2/24~~ | | ~~Ch. 3. Of the Survival of Images (pp. 133– 58) [moved to the~~ ~~following week due to illness]~~ |
| ~~26~~ | ~~5~~ | ~~26/2/24~~ | | ~~Ch. 3. Of the Survival of Images (pp. 133– 58)~~ |
| ~~27~~ | ~~6~~ | ~~4/3/24~~ | | ~~Ch.3 (pp. 158–77 [end of Ch. 3])~~ |
| ~~28~~ | ~~7~~ | ~~11/3/24~~ | | ~~Ch. 4 (pp. 179–188 [to just before the subheading, ‘1. Every~~ ~~movement….’~~ |
| ~~29~~ | ~~8~~ | ~~18/3/24~~ | | ~~Ch. 4. pp.188–223 [end of chapter]~~ |
| ~~30~~ ~~–~~ ~~33~~ |  | ~~25/3/24~~ | | *~~Easter Vacation – four weeks~~* |
| 34 | 9 | 22/4/24 | | Summary and Conclusion (pp.225–49 [end of book]) |
| 35 | 10 | 29/4/24 | | [*Note the different time and place:*] Wednesday 1st May 2024, 3pm-5pm, HDB 9.2: talk on Bergson by Mark Sinclair |
| 36 | 11 | 6/5/24 | | Overflow and/or Essay Advice – in my office, unless otherwise advertised |

**Recapitulation**

What I want to do is very briefly to follow the summary that Bergson gives of MM in the concluding pages of the book, and then to say something relatively loose and speculative about the relation that *Matter and Memory* bears to Bergson’s other two great works, *Time and Free Will* and *Creative Evolution*. This will give you a slightly broader sense of Bergson’s development as a thinker, and the potential range of his ideas.

For that comparison, for want of time, I’ve allowed myself to be heavily dependent on Mark Sinclair’s account, Sinclair who has kindly agreed to come and talk to us next week, at the slightly different time of Wednesday at 3 on floor 9 of the Henry Daysh. Lots of adverts up around about that with all the details. I announced it on Canvas, of course.

Hopefully this summary at least, perhaps Mark’s talk as well, will bring Bergson’s work alive to you again, as a whole, in its general contours, and this will help illuminate the background of whatever essays you’ll choose to do, or perhaps it will help you to decide which question to attempt. In any case, I hope this general look back through Bergson’s work will help in some way.

(I’ve not been able to make every part of this talk gel as well as I would have liked, and there are moments where the material hasn’t been present enough to me for me to give an altogether satisfying explanation of what Bergson says in each and every case… but hopefully you can see things in what I say that I can’t. One never knows what is going to strike someone else, and hopefully there is treasure concealed in what I say that I’m not aware of but that nevertheless glints out at you.)

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION (OF MM) pp.225ff

Bergson’s goal in MM is to pursue the only possible respectable form of dualism — this is the dualism that might be said to exist between matter and mind; he pushes dualism, the dualism of body and spirit, matter and spirit, to its greatest extreme, so as to limit the options available for joining them back together — indeed he wants to restrict our thinking in the end to the *only* channel possible. As ever with Bergson, what matters with the real (the sum total

of whatever is, whether it is virtual or actual, mind or body)… what matters is to differentiate things in the right way, in order to make sure that they may then be *conjoined* correctly, securely, at the right point. Differences of kind are shown to be differences of degree, spectra, only then to be carved up again in a different way, to re-establish differences of KIND.

It is in the guise of perception and memory, present and past, that we have seen this differentiation and this joining to take place. And it is precisely the way that this differentiation and integration took place that allowed us to see WHY Bergson follows this procedure, why it is necessary to conceive of both a DD and a DK between things.

So let’s follow Bergson in the way he gradually conceives and reconceives perception and memory.

He begins with the traditional picture: he admonishes us: Conceive perception and memory wrongly and they will lead you to believe that the difference in kind between matter and spirit actually lies in the distinction between that substance which doesn’t perceive, and that substance which does (a res extensa and a res cogitans). That seems fairly conclusive as a distinction, so how does Bergson overcome it? — He does it by the remarkable expedient of asking us to entertain the possibility that unconscious non-sentient matter actually perceives, or may be said to perceive. If that is so, then the distinction between matter and spirit, or body and spirit cannot be made in terms of the presence or absence of perception — for *everything* perceives! Perception, or its forebears, characterises the entirety of the real.

In other words, Bergson, at least strategically, as a matter of strategy, adopts what I was tempted to describe as a naturalism, a naturalistic account of the emergence of conscious perception, an account which sees it gradually emerging, by degrees from unconscious matter

— an unconscious matter, which must contain *some* inchoate form of perception, if it is to be the evolutionary origin of it. Well, that’s one way of solving the ‘hard’ problem of consciousness, after all!

This quasi-naturalistic account of perception is a naturalism in that it assesses the capacities of the spirit as far as possible in terms of their *use*, their function: the way in which they aid in the survival and reproduction of a living organism. In this sense, Bergson is at least posing strategically as a *life-philosopher* (and I think later on he becomes more and more genuinely a life philosopher). What this in any case involves… what this leads Bergson to do is to *begin* from a purely pragmatic conception of perception: one which understands it in terms of the sensory-motor system of the organism and its body: You can see from that hyphen that joins together sensation and movement, the motor, the motoric, that this amounts to thinking about perception as if it were inherently related to ACTION. Perception exists in the *present*, and it is intimately related to the body’s *action,* its activity, what it needs as an organism to achieve at this present moment: what needs must be fulfilled *now*.

So this is Bergson’s new conception of CONSCIOUS perception, the perception that characterises organic life: We perceive only, or predominantly, what we *need* to perceive in order to be able to act, to satisfy the needs towards which our acting is directed. Perception has evolved to be *useful*, in other words: so Bergson’s is a *utilitarian* conception of perception in this sense.

Now, this means quite a radical overhauling of the way in which perception has tended to be understood by philosophers in the past. For this conception implies that we only perceive what we NEED to perceive; and this means that we do not perceive EVERYTHING. And it also means that when we perceive, we do not get a TRUE picture of the world, at least if ‘true’ means ‘*altogether* adequate’.

Philosophers have a tendency to see man as *homo philosophicus*, as living what might be described as most fundamentally a *vita contemplativa*: but this has led them to misunderstand perception, and even, as it turns out, to misunderstand *contemplation!*

Perception they think of in general as a *complete* representation of the real, a representation that lacks nothing, at least in the case of human beings — they think of perception as if it were a scientist’s gaze, the look of *theoria*; but on Bergson’s more naturalistic, pragmatic, active account of the human being, the human being is rather a *homo faber*, an active man, and on this account, his perception will not be complete; it will be *subtractive*: it sees of the real only what it needs to see in order to act upon it. The environment is organised so as to match the instincts of the animal, with the instincts being the directed urges which the organism is endowed with so as to pursue its various particular needs.

And here memory comes into the picture. And we should perhaps go slower here, and go through B’s deconstruction of the empiricist (or ’British Idealist’) conception of perception and memory, according to which memory is a faded version of a perception. An idea a mere copy of an impression. Once again, just like with perception, with memory, Bergson begins with a traditional conception, and shows how it undermines itself, how it fails to achieve what it promises. Thinking moves, concepts alter themselves, having undermined themselves. Thought itself is a process, a restless movement of *re*thinking.

We know that there are different levels of memory, and we’ll come back to that. But let’s examine the most extreme, the one furthest away from perception, the body, matter, and the present. Here we reach the level of an absolutely impractical, use*less,* personal, singular

memory, and only here do we have anything like a complete representation of the real [[(if ‘representation’ is the right word: let’s say an image that doesn’t subtract anything? Or have anything subtracted from it?)]].

We reach contemplation, Theoria, by THIS means, not by perceptual means. And yet it is only by beginning with what seems to be an entirely practical representation of the human that we can gain an appropriate vantage point upon the *theoretical* side of man, even eventually the metaphysical side of man, the philosophical side and not just the scientific. [[And so upon what seems to exceed the natural, the physical, the naturalistic altogether.]] It is only by properly understanding PERCEPTION, and the difference in degree that separates the unconscious and the conscious according to THIS criterion, that we can properly understand contemplation, theory, and where — within what faculty of the human mind — *spirit* comes into play.

Once again, in Bergson, a difference between two things may be collapsed, but this is only so as to open it up again at the right way in the right place (just as, vice versa, sometimes a difference is opened up, only then to be shown to form something more like a spectrum, or a difference of degree later on). Above all: perhaps the first is more important, since it is so important NOT to reify, not to think of two different things as two different SUBSTANCES.

##### Intellect and intuition

Perhaps we can say that in general, though, contemplation is not in good odour with Bergson. Or at least, the *intellect* is not. The understanding. Just as Hegel said, the history of metaphysics is a history of the understanding, and its way of thinking.

In general, the problem with the philosophical approach to all of the questions MM addresses is that philosophy has tended to address them by way of the *intellect*, and not the intuition. Intellect’s sin is the same as that of propositional language: it analyses, and it

freezes. Hegel had the same thought, contra Kant and most of his philosophical predecessors. This is so even though Bergson, at least on Gilles Deleuze’s account, is anti-Hegelian. Maybe so, but only up to a certain point.

For Hegel too, the understanding, or the intellect, the *Verstand*, sorts out entities into categories. So it puts a singular subject in a generic category: it synthesises the singular deliverances of intuition with the general categories of the understanding. It combines the manifold or multiplicity of the real into the unity of a stable identity. This synthetic act is called judgement. And indeed, since language takes upon itself the structure of the judgement, the propositional structure, at least in the West, this perhaps explains the analogy that Bergson draws between his two nemeses: understanding and language. These are both ‘symbolic’ ways of understanding the real; ‘analytic’ ways of cutting it up, rather artificially. And then, this ‘synthesis’ that Kant was so fond of with his synthetic a priori judgements is just as artificial. Akin to Frankenstein’s monster, in comparison to a real organic human being. It does not REALLY live.

For Bergson, though, perhaps it is not so much the proposition as the word itself that is the problem, for words, just like the understanding, always risk reifying what they speak of. So the word always risks suggesting identity where there is differentiation and process, Being where there is in truth Becoming; partiality where there should be (organic) totality.

And this will perhaps help us to explain why Bergson rarely rests content, rarely lets his thinking cease from *moving*; so, for instance, he has arrived at a difference in kind between perception and memory. Why not stop there? Because to do so would be to risk allowing these two capacities of the mind to congeal into substances, into stable faculties. To stop there, to allow thought to stop moving, is always going to risk letting in the dark forces of reification. The capacities of the mind, the movements of thought will then ossify, become fossilised, and slip back into substantiality. They will become ‘things’.

We must always remember that the mental processes, and indeed in the end perhaps everything real, unfolds in *time*, in *duration*. Everything becomes, everything flows. Thought must attempt to match up to this flow, and never think in a static way. This is why *intuition* rather than the intellect, is said to be Bergson’s method when he does philosophy.

**Differences of degree *in process***

So let us say this: often, the reason why a difference in kind can also be thought of as collapsing into a difference in degree, is precisely because the difference needs to be thought of as working itself out in time, or in duration, in movement through time.

So, in this context, instead of just being content to think of a difference in kind between perception and memory, Bergson introduces his diagram of the cone, which attempts to think a continuity between two forms of memory, one end further away from perception, the other pressing right into it.

So at these extremes we find two types of memory, habit memory and dream memory, the impersonal and the personal, the practical and the contemplative, the purely functional, stripped-down memories of habitual actions, on the one hand; and the useless Proustian proliferation of details on the other: the latter being the state that we approach in our dreams and in our literature, our inspired, artistic, phantasmatic states.

We know this difference was represented by the diagram of the cone and the plane into which it presses, the past and the present: the plane, the present, was being urged into the future by the movement approaching it from the past, we might say. This past, these memories, were also represented by the diagram of the ever broadening loops.

The loops, and the ever widening cone, represented memories, but they pressed their way into the present, into the body, into perception, into action, usually at the behest of the organism’s needs. The cone was intended to represent a movement. It was comprised of

multiple planes, which corresponded to the ever broadening loops in the other diagram: in each case, more detail, more useless, personal detail was encompassed by the memory, and was expressed explicitly within it.

These planes, as B puts it in the Conclusion to MM, are not to be thought of as *actual*, which I think might be as much as to say ‘reified’, as things; so it is not as if the cone were really divided up into floors, like a grand hotel, or the palace of destinies in Leibniz’s *Theodicy,* with its many and various possible worlds working itself out on each of the floors, and in each of its rooms.

The planes of memory are to be understood as virtual, virtually present within our memory. I think that if they were thought of as actual, that would amount to thinking of memory as a storehouse, with each memory stowed away in a very particular room, or a very particular determinate location in the *brain*, as reified little items. And that vision of memory in relation to the brain, that vision of memory as a treasury or storehouse of ideas, was precisely what Bergson found it necessary to overcome.

So these planes of memory, with their varying levels of detail are to be understood as virtual. This perhaps partly means that they can be constructed, according to our need and desire, according to the chance of the moment, and even very occasionally thanks to our will, though these more personal and detailed memories are for the most part ‘involuntary’, chancey: they come to us as THEY will, not as WE will.

Also, to speak of this dividing up of memory as a whole as having a *virtual* character, also implies that these planes of memory, these divisions, are caught up in a *process*, they are always becoming, and that means being undone and redone, moving up and down the cone, which perhaps means, to use a metaphor that has helped me to understand philosophy a good deal: these memories come into and out of focus, as if they sometimes move towards us as if

out of a bank of fog, only to drift away again into indistinction, forgotten once again, like a dream or a spectre flitting at daybreak.

But in the end, I’m not sure that metaphor is adequate, because in fact what these memories do as they slip down the cone and compose themselves with other memories, when they crystallise themselves,… what is happening there is that these memories are moving closer and closer to the plane of the present, which is that of the body, and that of ACTION. And it is here that memories become less personal, less detailed, and in their way less conscious. More habitual.

I suppose what I am describing in *my* spectral metaphor is the process of the more contemplative, Proustian memories coming towards us: in the case in which we are artists. In this respect, contemplative memory is different in kind from perception, use*less* in contrast to the useful.

That said, we know that when these detailed, personal memories DO by chance infiltrate our present perception, it can amount to mental illness.

But in their more stripped down form, and this is the form that concerns Bergson the most, these memories infiltrate perception in the form of HABIT memories.

So how does this work? What does this infiltration tell us about perception, and in general about the reasons why we might want to collapse the difference in kind between perception and memory?

Memories are continuously infiltrating our perception, moving down the cone to fit in with the perceptions that our body’s sensory-motor system is currently receiving or producing.

One insight we came to here was this: perception is not complete of itself, not in human beings and organic life at least — maybe it *is* in matter, purely present, without

memory, ideal, like the pacific ocean, always returning the impetus it receives from other parts of matter, and never stopping to think, and to memorise, or never having to consult its memories in order to decide how to act: matter, parts of matter, simply and IMMEDIATELY return to an action that is impacting upon them an equal and opposite REaction.

Matter thus, although it perceives, never becomes *subjective*. It does not have a complex nervous system to *delay* that reaction, like organisms do. [[Matter and *Memory*, remember, Matter and *Memory*. ]]

In organic life, perception has to be made up not just of actual images but of virtual images, and that means habits, habit memories,[[ muscle memories we hazarded as a perhaps unwisely concrete and determinate rendition]]. We see virtual pathways, affordances, possibilities manifesting themselves upon the surface of the real, and in its interstices: these will be the possible actions we can carry out and the potential *consequences* of those actions: we perceive these, though they are really just *memories* of *past* perceptions. In this way too, we tried to say, a perception, and perception as such should *not* be thought of as a thing, for it is incomplete, it is not unified, not one thing: not fully actual or fully actualised. To think otherwise is to *reify* perception.

So all of this is meant to help us to understand what it means to collapse the difference in kind between perception and memory into a difference of degree, and this difference of degree is understood in terms of two KINDS of memory: contemplative and habitual. This is why we should resist the inevitable tendency to reify capacities or powers of the MIND.

##### A passing note on affection

One of the things I wanted to talk about, because I felt that I left it out in my main exposition was affection, affectivity. Because it seems like Bergson carries his theory of the relation between perception and action very far, and interesting things happen when one carries an idea to its extreme.

Affection is self-relation, and self-perception. So it effectively amounts to the body’s acting upon itself and passively receiving itself. And here we found the very interesting example of pain, and the very unusual theory of pain that Bergson is compelled by his theory to propose, which is that, when we perceive something painful, something acting on our bodily surface in such a way that a perception becomes too intense to be easily bearable, or at least too intense for us to remain indifferent to it, and it is experienced as pain.

Pain, Bergson says amounts to an attempt to ACT, a body’s ever thwarted attempt to somehow mend the damage that has been inflicted upon it, when it *cannot* do that.

The theoretically important point about pain as an extreme kind of perception, is that when we perceive, we see virtual pathways for action; and if objects are distant from us, if the objects on which we can act are far away, then we have time to think, to consider multiple virtual actions: so the perception retains a measure of virtuality: as Bergson puts it, the action as such remains virtual: there is time before we have to actually do it.

But as the objects we perceive draw nearer and nearer to the body, the urgency of action becomes more and more pressing, possibilities are squeezed out, as we are urged more and more to act. Now when this distance is reduced to absolute zero, and the object we are perceiving intersects with our flesh, or impacts upon our body, perception no longer has time to sketch out possible virtual actions; perception here must sketch out only a real action. This is perhaps why a certain extremity of pain can block out everything but the present, and the need to alleviate these pangs absorbs the entirety of our consciousness. But it is also too late. There is no more virtuality there is only real action, and somehow this manifests itself as pain. I think in a similar vein, Sartre would advert to tears here, to crying. The only action we have left in an utterly passivated situation.

Perhaps the lesson that we are supposed to draw from this account of pain is that it is another of empiricism’s common mistakes to *begin* thinking about perception, experience as a whole, by starting FROM individual sensations. Maybe a pain is meant to be an example of this kind of senseless non-objective sensation. And so perhaps the example of affection can be used to show that this ‘bottom up’, piecemeal conception of experience is doomed to misunderstand experience. It will certainly leave out all of the virtual elements of perception, and so it will misunderstand how memory, in the form of habit, intersects with perception.

(Bergson also suggests that thinking of perceptual experience as a whole on the basis of atomic sensations, like pain, actually encourages another problem in the traditional way in which subjective sensory exp has been understood: and that is to do with sensation being understood to be unextended, pure quality. This is because he describes affective sensation as ‘but vaguely localised’. This is a little more tricky to understand since my examples have suggested that these pains we’re feeling are in very precise location on our body; but clearly Bergson has some other, vaguer feeling in mind.

But you’ll remember, and we’ll shortly come back to it, the two or three oppositions that Bergson wants to undercut in thinking mind and body together: one of them is quality and quantity, the other the unextended and the extended. … unextended sensations or perceptions are not in the end an option.)

##### Recognition

Apart from affection, one of the other deficits I wanted to remedy, one of the things I was tempted to leave out of this recapitulation, and which I don’t know that I spent much time on in the lectures, is recognition. The bringing together of general ideas and particular ideas.

These all come up again in Bergson’s own summary so he must deem them important. Therefore so should we.

We have spoken about subsumption, about the traditional conception of knowledge as subsuming singular things under a general category. Well, Bergson describes this subsumption as the moment of ‘recognition’. Aha! I know what that is! I can identify that.

Well, this process of recognition seems to be something we should understand as a movement. And indeed, this is precisely one of the ways in which B *specifies* this movement of memory images down the cone towards the present, where they meet up with the present, and ‘aha! We’ve met somewhere before (in the past), and I know you! (now, in the present)’

There are two ways to recognise something or someone: passive and active: in the passive way, we are speaking about habit, and habitual responses. The body reacts almost automatically to a perception, since it has had one that resembles it before. Then there is the active kind, in which memories ‘go out to meet’ the perception.

In those diseases of recognition, such as aphasia, the incapacity to recognise words, but in general in pathological and subpathological instances of forgetfulness, it is one of these mechanisms of recognition that has become damaged by a brain lesion; it is not that a localised memory has been destroyed along with the part of the brain that housed it.

Now, we know well that this theory of the localisation of memory in the brain is supported by the empiricist or atomic theory of the mind, which is one of Bergson’s most frequented bêtes noires.

##### Associationism

You’ll also remember our sojourn with associationism as a theory of how the atomic mind works. This relates to the foregoing material on recognition insofar as association is bound up with the Bergsonian theory of the birth of general ideas: remember that the empiricist explanation is that experience begins with atomic impressions, and the laws of association, similarity, contiguity, and causality (though we had some doubts about this last one, in the way of a petitio principii)… the laws of association were meant to explain why these singular impressions clustered together to form general or abstract ideas. Bergson has his own theory. To reach that theory, we might well begin with a look at associationism and its travails.

Here in the summary at the end of MM, Bergson says something that I don’t remember stressing in my earlier lectures: associationism fails to distinguish between the different *planes* of consciousness; and that means in general, it doesn’t really distinguish memory and perception, or at least it doesn’t distinguish them in KIND; but more generally,

associationism doesn’t distinguish between the different levels of *memory*, which are only different in degree. It makes NO distinctions in other words! Or at least none of the ones that matter to Bergson.

At the very least we can say this of associationism: it fails to see that some memories are more proximal to the present perceived state of things than others, closer to habits than they are dreams. This means that associationism, associationist psychology, cannot explain a number of things about our associative tendencies. For instance, it cannot explain why this particular representation out of the many many others that are also contiguous with or similar to the present perception is conjured up BY this perception. Without a Bergsonian theory of mind, we shall not understand association itself. The main problem with associationism, says Bergson, is that it can’t understand association!

Bergson speaks of an association of ideas, a cluster of ideas in the following way: he speaks of this cluster as a more *complete* representation; and he says that a more complete representation, a more integrated and detailed representation, is not reached by the mechanical juxtaposing that the empiricist theory of mind suggests; it is rather carried out by our mentally transporting ourselves to a plane of memory further away from the present, from activity. More complete, more dreamlike. Each plane is whole in itself, but is more or less complete, more or less detailed, more or less personal, more or less dreamlike. More or less virtual.

##### General Ideas

General ideas, Bergson tells us are produced in a movement between perception (where similarity and contiguity are close to one another, inseparable at the extreme limit — why? Because the contiguous habitual movements, the chain of movements that the perception calls forth are at exactly the same time, recalling an analogous, similar situation from the past, in the form of a habit memory that is conjured up.. Things are not so in the case of more inactive, useless, personal memories, for here similarity and contiguity come apart, and are not so immediately connected to one another. (though I’m struggling a bit with the explanation here to say why: Bergson speaks rather of a ‘degree of tension of memory’ , according to its proneness to insert itself into the present act or withdraw from it, and uses the musical metaphor of the plane of memory ‘transposing itself bodily from one key into another’.

##### Pure perception and the oppositions of the spirit/matter dualism

So where are we? We have attempted to demonstrate that the life of the mind, of the spirit, is a movement between the planes of action and inactivity, practice and contemplation, perception/action and memory/dream, the actual and the virtual: the actual qua the active and the virtual qua the inactive or ineffectual. Bergson suggests that by compressing perception and memory together in this fashion, what we are doing is channelling the problem of the exact relation between mind and body into the narrowest passage possible, and so concentrating the problem at a point. Here is how he approaches the problem:

He begins by speaking about the notional idea of a pure perception, one which would belong to matter and would be radically distinct from memory: this idea he suggests is what we have been gradually demolishing as a concrete reality in the preceding exposition:

The very idea of pure perception is one which would take place only in an instant, so in abstraction from the very movement of *time*. In truth, every perception involves the past, involves duration, and prolongs the past into the present, and that means that there is no perception, no concrete perception, without an admixture of memory. This, Bergson says amounts to compressing ‘within its narrowest limits the problem of the union of the soul and

body’, which is to say effectively the past and the present, memory and perception, spirit and matter. The resolution of this opposition is a matter of time — hence we have been trying to describe all of the usual mental processes with which psychology and philosophy deal, in terms of duration, as processes, as movements between planes: in a NON-mechanical way, in a non-substantial way. The mind is NOT a machine. It is not a dead substance. It is alive.

[[Now, we said that compressing matter and perception together such that the mind undulates between them amounts to compressing the problem of the mind and body relation into a very narrow point.]] Now, this compressing of the problem of the mind and the body seems to lead Bergson to say that the problems involved in this relation are thus rendered very starkly apparent. So he tells us that this opposition resolves itself into three further oppositions, and these oppositions have now become apparent both as obstacles, which have long been known about, but also as obstacles which Bergson’s new theory of mind will allow us to overcome.

But the form that these oppositions take in the SUMMARY is rather curious: the first two we met last time: unextended and extended, quality and quantity; but the third one came as a surprise for me: it’s the one dealt with in B’s first book: freedom and necessity.

**The last pages of *Matter and Memory* and the routes leading elsewhere in Bergson’s thought**

Let us simply read and paraphrase the last few pages of Bergson’s *Matter and Memory* since they seem to themselves almost openly speak of the preceding book, *Time and Free Will (Essay on the Immediate Givens of Consciousness)*, and to look ahead to *Creative Evolution*.

Bergson considers that the amelioration of the two oppositions of extension and unextended, quantity and quality, the details of which I will not subject you to again, put us in a better position to understand how in fact *freedom and necessity* are not so opposed to one another as all that (not so opposed as the determinists *or* the libertarians might have us

believe – the two ‘incompatibilist’ positions, or these positions on such an incompatibilist construal).

Now, in fact, you would be forgiven for getting the impression that there is a certain realm that is entirely *determined* in relation to what happens, according to the descriptions we have read in MM. It is the realm of matter. For every action there has an equal and opposite reaction. And indeed it is just the *speed* of this reaction that makes it *seem* as if the reaction is absolutely determined. And it is this speed of reaction that makes it possible to tell ourselves that matter has no memory. That it is not a ‘centre’. What is a centre? It is the thing that in organisms ends up taking the form of the central nervous system: it is that which precisely by long relays, and by the presence of a number of different memory images which could go to contribute to the formation of habits and the production of new reactions to stimuli, to perceptions… the ‘centre’ or ‘central nervous system’ is what opens up some freedom, some indeterminacy in response to an ‘action’ or a ‘perception’.

Now this appearance of determinacy and unfreedom in matter, Bergson comes to suggest, is just an appearance. It suggests that there is no past, no memory, EVEN in matter. We have allowed ourselves to believe that. But what B actually says in closing here is this: absolute necessity would be represented by a perfect equivalence of the successive moments of duration: this seems to be his way of speaking of the immediacy of action and reaction, and this notion that the reaction is altogether DETERMINED by the sum total of all previous actions.

[[That is why he goes on to ask whether, in the material universe, each moment can be mathematically deduced from the preceding one. ]]

And what he says then is very interesting: he says that we have only presupposed that this is so FOR CONVENIENCE, and presumably to make vivid the point about memory and

its existence in organic life in the form of habit, and eventually the dreamlike contemplative memory that seems mostly to characterise human beings.

This is what Bergson then says: in fact, this might be a perspective error. The reaction that parts of matter make to actions impacting upon them SEEMS to be immediate, it seems to involve *no duration*, but perhaps that is just because the duration is so short (this at least is how I read the following passage:) ‘such is, in fact, the distance between the rhythm of our duration and that of the flow of things, that the contingency of the course of nature

[…] must, for us, be practically equivalent to necessity’ 248.

Nature is not determined, it is contingent. But it is so close to being determined, and the delay in its reactions so short, that we barely imagine them to exist.

Freedom is not opposed to necessity, the free spirit is not opposed to the supposed necessity that characterises matter or ‘nature’: it is simply a ‘widening of the mesh’ (paraphrase) which is already infinitesimally open in the most stupid of inorganic matter: ‘Thus, whether we consider it in time or in space, freedom always seems to have its roots

deep in necessity and to be intimately organised with it. Spirit borrows from matter the perceptions on which it feeds and restores them to matter in the form of movements which it has stamped with its own freedom’ (248–9). These are the very last words of *Matter and Memory.*

And it is just this idea that Bergson will elaborate in his next text, *Creative Evolution*, from 1907. There is this duration, this creative spirit somehow at the very heart of nature. It is not just a psychological phenomenon.

##### Beyond MM

##### TIME AND FREE WILL

Now this was indeed what freedom and creativity was in Bergson’s FIRST major work, Time and Free will. Maybe we can briefly approach the relation between TFW and MM in the following way: a detour via which we shall ultimately return to the point just made, and then demonstrate how MM’s resolution to a certain problem in TFM works itself out most fully in CE.

In MM, we saw how Bergson criticised the associationist theory of the mind. This we associated with Hume. It was also an atomist theory. It conceived of the states of the mind as placed side by side with one another, distinct, juxtaposed, and each enjoying therefore a spatial location.

Now, in *Time and Free Will*, this conception of the mind is shown to lead to what might be deemed ‘psychological determinism’ (Sinclair puts it thus). Determinism is not only possible but unavoidable, *if* one conceives of psychological life in this spatial atomistic way, for then, one must conceive of action as initiated by one of these distinct states of mind, and

thus, absolutely determined by it. This is the ultimate fruit of the spatialisation of time, the materialisation of spirit.

Bergson’s own account attempts to do justice to the ‘immediate givens of consciousness’ (this was the original, French title of the book we know as Time and Free Will) and here we have a multiplicity of states that intertwine with one another, and that do not stand alone, independent, like the atoms or the billiard balls of the deterministic physical cosmos. In this context, we have a whole ‘character’, as B puts it in MM, we have a whole weight of habitual memory, but also perhaps of contemplative and image memory, which renders each moment of our experience new and different in relation to the last. A free act for Bergson is one which is allowed to follow from the entirety of this character, so one which builds upon the entire weight of this past and depends upon it. As Levinas will say, following Bergson in this, the present is a birth, a moment of creation.

So you can see already we are straying from in the first place the mistaken theory of the mind as spatial; to the mind as involving a multiplicity of things which coexist in a certain way; well, in what way? How are the states of mind allowed to interpenetrate in such a way? Well, thanks to time, thanks to duration. Bergson will have devoted his entire life’s work to refuting a conception of time which Heidegger, and perhaps Bergson himself, called clock- time, in which time is comprised of an identical series of instants, each of the same nature and extent as the last, as the clock’s second hand say ticks around in discrete motions. No, time is much closer to history for Bergson, it is cumulative. Each moment is not a forgetting of everything that went before; it is rather a memory of everything, however indistinct or distant that memory is, however foggily it manifests itself. Some spectres never flit.

Now, we might have thought that this means that there *is* no novelty in the present, since one can never escape the nightmare of the past; and we might have thought that real novelty was precisely what you find in clock time, with the slate wiped clean every time: no

memory, the pure urging of the arrow-head into the future. But for Bergson this is the ultimate temptation and the ultimate mistake; the only way to account for the true creation of novelty over the course of time is by means of his own account, and this novelty is comprised precisely by the fact that each moment carries the full weight of the past along with it. For each moment will accrue something that the previous moment did not have, and thus it will differ from it, however infinitesimally.

And it is this novelty, that, where it exists, allows a free act to come about.

Only on Bergson’s account, — this is his argument in TFW — can we make sense of such a thing as human freedom, or free will. But we need the concept of duration, and the qualitative change within an internally interpenetrating multiplicity, in order to do so.

Otherwise, the mind will be as much a billiard ball deterministic universe as the *external*

world is said to be.

So in B’s FIRST work, we do find an absolute opposition, it seems, between the external material world, and the internal world of the psyche. In other words, things are even worse in TFW than they will turn out to be in MM. But we have seen how MM TRIES, at least in its conclusion to try to ameliorate this opposition a little bit, by pointing out the very earliest glimmerings of freedom within the barely open ‘mesh’ of apparently necessary/determined nature.

I think it’s possible to read the trajectory of Bergson’s thought like this: in *Time and Free Will*, duration exists only in the human mind, along with freedom. [[where, as Kant taught us, there is no space, but only time.]]

*Matter and Memory* and *Creative Evolution* develop the idea that duration, novelty, and so freedom, can ALSO find a place in *things*, in matter. So Bergson is gradually

attempting to think in these two texts, the idea that time can intertwine with, or in some way find its place in the very heart of space, and spatial things.

##### CREATIVE EVOLUTION

(Just before I say something about CE, let me say, as a few tidbits of information: I found out very late in the day that a new translation came out a few years ago, with some marvellous discoveries appended to it, including some correspondence between Bergson and William James, and it turns out — this is for people who took Adam’s course last term — Bergson wrote a preface for the French translation of the very book you read, *Pragmatisme*, and James was in the middle of writing a preface for *Creative Evolution* in its English translation, when he died in 1910. Bergson’s preface has been translated, I think in the book known in English as *The Creative Mind*).

Now, in speaking, as we were a moment ago, of the world of matter as containing a hint of freedom, beyond its apparent determinacy, we were seeing Bergson looking ahead, dimly or clearly, who can say, to the world of *Creative Evolution.*

Mark Sinclair puts the matter in a helpfully concreate way. One of the limits that MM largely evinced in hindsight (although we think he was aware of this while he was composing the text, as the Conclusion of the book indicates) [(Sinclair picks this out as well, p.131)]] was that its conception of the material world, the world of images, all reacting one upon the other, as if a great body were shivering, were still effectively a *Newtonian* universe. One which was mechanistic, dead, purposeless, non-vital, not alive. (We have just aid, not free)

Now it is the move precisely beyond a mechanistic vision of the natural world that is perhaps most strongly associated with Bergson in our minds: he is the philosopher of the élan vital, i.e. the creative thrust of life. Of the specificity of life, the biological world, beyond the physical and the chemical.

The way the specificity of the biological is useually understood is in terms of finalism, the way in which biological nature involves final causality as opposed to the mere efficient causality of the inorganice world. Now Bergson doesn’t think so. But he does think there is something specific about life. It is not *purpose* though.

Bergson, when it comes to life is neither a mechanist nor a finalist; he is, it might be said, a vitalist. This is to say that he produces a theory of life which sees it as not being reducible to physical or chemical elements and properties. There is something special, something specific to life, but it is not that it posits ahead of itself a goal, and is in that way, as Kant said in the third critique incipiently free. No, nature’s freedom has another source. Such was the topic of *Creative Evolution* from 1907.

Nature is creative, nature itself is durative, and so matter is perhaps not quite so passive as the theory of matter as a collection of images, makes it seem. Perhaps nature is not like the ocean, but more human that that, or at least more like an organism itself. Perhaps the nature of that great shivering body trembling as perceptions or images passed through it needed to be taken more literally. Nature is an artist. It creates. Its genius is the elan vital.

The elan vital, the vital thrust or vital surge, the surge of life, is a ‘tendency’. And according to Sinclair, Bergson describes it that way because he is trying to avoid thinking of nature in two opposed ways: iether in the way of mechanism or in that of finalism, in the first case there being a push from behind, and in the second an attraction exterted by the end, so a tug from ahead.

Certainly the elan vital urges nature onwards, to differentiate itself and produce new species of thing, but it does not have any final goal in mind.

Above all, in a remarkable twist, B seems to try to overcome the reified opposition between matter and life, the inorganic and the organic, by suggesting that it is not so much that life, and freedom, is a relaxing an opening of the mesh that is so tightly woven in material things that it looks like there is no room for indeterminacy there at all; it is rather that there is one single substance, with two tendencies, a tendency to temporalise and a tendency to spatialise, to become matter. So matter and life are not two reified things but are to be understood as tendencies in one single substance.

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