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REVIEW OF *BERGSON* BY VLADIMIR JANKÉLÉVITCH

Jan Patočka

A work that Bergson himself finds beyond reproach as far as the understanding of the teaching is concerned; in a letter sent to the author and published as a foreword to the book, Bergson highlights [Jankélévitch's] meticulous preparation, his capturing of the genesis of [Bergson's] doctrine, the originality of the author's own speculations. It comes at a time that sees attempts at picking intellectualist moments out of Bergson or grafting them onto his doctrines (see for example Brunschvicg, *Le Progrès de la conscience*, p. 683 f.), at a time of a beginning reaction against metaphysics, as a work of a wholly Bergsonian thinker sincerely convinced that Bergsonism is currently the teaching closest to truth since it is the only one that does justice to the peculiarity of spiritual life. It has five chapters: 1. "Totalités organiques" (published in 1929 in the *Revue de Métaphysique* under the title "Prolegomènes au bergsonisme"), 2. "Liberté," 3. "L'Âme et le corps," 4. "La Vie," 5. "Le néant des concepts et le plein de l'esprit." The first chapter is an exposition of Bergsonism's fundamental question of how to capture organic wholes, i.e., of mental and vital reality. The law of organisms is the immanence of everything in everything; while material things have a distinctly delineated content, each of our experiences, being a member of an enduring series and a whole at the same time, has the inexhaustible richness of a spiritual horizon. The author could have characterized the *élan vital* in G. Simmel's terms as a continuity of individuals. Other phrases of his also resemble Simmel's: "Organisms are deep; they are, so to speak, outwith themselves; or rather,

they are what they are not, they are something far more than themselves.”¹ (compare to Simmel’s *Transzendenz des Lebens*). Further, the author rejects the intellectualist, recompository method of treating organisms, which he christens “retrospective illusion.” In it he sees a confusion between the primitive and the elementary; we turn elements, which are the product of intellectual analysis, into simple components from which an organic whole might be produced; what is in fact posterius, we consider to be prius; we look back, whereas we should have captured the original unity, the autarky of the organism. By contrast, philosophers will aim to place themselves in the totality itself; all their efforts will concentrate in intuition, which will infinitely transcend every complete expression, every complete work, every complete thing, every creation of life. It is impossible to produce spirit without covertly introducing it into one’s presuppositions. The world of an intuitive philosopher is therefore no more mysterious than the world of the materialist, for the only philosophy which does not further obfuscate a mystery is one that begins with it.

Here we in fact find posited the schema according to which the entire book is constructed (unless the reviewer himself falls prey to the retrospective illusion): to always—in the case of freedom, in the relationship between mind and body, in the problem of life—attain from the outset the standpoint of full spiritual reality, which infinitely transcends all attempts at intellectual reconstruction. A free act contains infinitely more than the choice of one part of an alternative; it cannot be reconstructed, it is an inspired act. Similarly, spirit cannot be copied by any material structures in an organism; it infinitely transcends every actual reaction. To think of physiological and psychic phenomena as parallel would amount to reconstructing the meaning of a sentence from sounds. After all, a mechanical evolution or a teleology of a previously given end cannot fathom the infinity of the ever-present impulse, which carries in itself natural creations almost as changing symbols of the whole. Finally, in the analysis of the concepts of disorder and nothingness, of non-being, he reveals to us the very key to Bergsonism. Existence is as necessary for Bergson as it is for Spinoza, but Bergson does not conceive of it as eternal substance, which is in itself and understands through itself, but dynamically, as the unity of an omnipresent élan, which has no

1. Schott’s translation goes as follows: “Organisms are deep. They are beyond themselves, so to speak, or, better: they are not what they are and are what they are not. They are something other than themselves, much more than themselves: they are becoming.” (Jankélévich 2015, 10).

other principle than to effectuate its variety, overcoming all obstacles that spontaneously place themselves in its way. “Freedom is nothing but the central destiny of a self imprisoned by its own riches.”² But it is precisely the obstacles to free creation that pose the biggest problem, one that philosophy can merely indicate but cannot resolve: spirit has to overcome both external and, more importantly – internal obstacles. In every instant, it risks death, especially when it triumphs by a free act. As if existence was forever burdened by the inevitable original sin, as if everything positive that constitutes the content of the world required redemption through stagnation, flattening, unconsciousness, exteriority. And so, Bergsonism, which begins with a problem for which intuitive philosophy suffices, leads to a problem where every philosophy and all human voices fall silent, since “whatever transcends philosophy, transcends us.”

Jankélévitch, then, emphasizes this last disharmony, which does not go silent even where Bergsonism tries to overcome the opposition between spirit and matter, pure perception and memory, organism and mechanism. The spirit absorbs oppositions only to find them again within itself in the form of an unrelenting strife of tendencies. However, the author thus emphasizes an element of Bergsonism that might be called ethical, if we consider ethics to be a teaching about the autarky of the inner being. The last word of Bergsonism is self-transcendence, the penetration of the spirit into its infinite potentialities, for the spirit is larger than the universe – on this point thinkers as opposed as Bergson and Brunschvicg would agree, and the same applies to uncompromising idealists in general. Bergsonism, therefore, amounts to a renewed conquest of the positions of absolute idealism, this time infinitely more supple than the German idealist systems, but governed by the same ethos and ruled by the same spiritual motive. Bergsonism is a self-confessed mysticism. The elementary feeling of the infinite richness and unity of experience, from which Jankélévitch proceeds to Bergsonism, is already mystical. Recall the descriptions which Delacroix dedicated to mystical states in the book “La religion et la foi” (esp. p. 259, 260 etc.); he speaks here about the mystic’s search for the indeterminate and yet complete, about the exaltation of sense in oneself, to the point of losing his own quality, about the constant background of confused and diffused feelings, in which all mood disappears as soon as we turn to ourselves instead of acting, as soon as we dream about ourselves. “Obscurité et pourtant révélation, donc révélation mystérieuse”, one

2. Jankélévitch (2015, 87).

could say about Bergsonism as about any mysticism, but the meaning that Bergsonism gives to mysticism is new, enriched by the entirety of his specific view of life; but in such a way, like every mysticism, it quenches thirst only to kindle more fire, to demonstrate in feeling a larger field than in the world of actualized forms. And just as is the case with some mystics, B. teaches us to see our lives *sub specie* of the conflict of absolute powers, of absolute tendencies; not anthropomorphically, but through being raised into a purely spiritual, absolute domain, from which he seeks to eradicate precisely what is relative to our specific, human form of being.

The interpretation of Bergsonism given by J. contradicts those which have been proposed in our context. For instance, an attempt has been made to understand Bergson as a realist, as a restorer of the stance of common sense. The philosophical problems Bergson addresses are said to have emerged from the analysis of perception, its content and scope. Bergson, as it were, “feels for” spirit on top of matter (J. Beneš, ČM 1930, p. 13).³ Such approach, in our view, is only partly justified. For even if this was the case, we still need to have at least some knowledge regarding what matter is or—and this is the case of Bergson—what spirit is, if we address the problem at hand. It is similarly impossible to completely agree with the exposition and critique offered in *Filosofie posledních let před válkou*.⁴ According to Prof. Krejčí, Bergson is not original; he is a French Schopenhauer. Jankélévitch traces the relationships between Bergsonian doctrines and Schopenhauer in detail and emphasizes sometimes surprising correspondences, in particular when it comes to approaching life and its “teleology without an end.” But Bergson reached his views via different routes than Schopenhauer, and there is a nuance between the overall views of both that is probably best captured by the words of G. Simmel: “In der Richtung der konkreten Erfüllung dieser Idee vom Leben liegen zweifellos Schopenhauers Wille zum Leben u. Nietzsches Wille zur Macht; wobei Schopenhauer mehr die grenzenfreie Kontinuität, Nietzsche mehr die Individualität in ihrer Formumschriebenheit als das Entscheidende fühlt. Dass dies Entscheidende, das Leben ausmachende, eben die absolute Einheit von beiden ist, ist ihnen vielleicht deshalb entgangen, weil sie die Selbst-Transcendenz des Lebens einseitig als willensmässig fassen.”⁵

3. A reference to Beneš (1930).

4. A reference to Krejčí (1918).

5. “Schopenhauer’s ‘will to life’ and Nietzsche’s ‘will to power’ doubtless lie in the direction of concrete fulfilment of this idea of life; although Schopenhauer feels boundless continuity to be more decisive, Nietzsche places more stress on individuality as

Following Jankélévitch's exposition, there can be no doubt that it was Bergson who first implemented the program Simmel outlines here.

The author is hardly fair to Lossky's doctrine, which he mentions several times, when he treats it as obscure metaphysics. He is hardly justified in doing so from a Bergsonian standpoint, which begins and ends with mystery.

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circumscribed by form. Perhaps because they understand life's transcendence one-sidedly as volitional, it has escaped them that what is decisive, what constitutes life, is the absolute *unity* of both aspects" (Simmel 2010, 13).

