

## Bergson

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# BERGSON

Jan Patočka

Bergson Henri (18 October 1859, Paris —), French philosopher. The starting point of *B*'s philosophy is a critique of contemporary noetics and psychology. The latter has proclaimed the incommensurability of mental and material activity in principle, but retained the rule that there exists a law-like determination of mental phenomena. In particular, despite various critiques (Tannery, Brentano), thinkers held in high esteem the Weber-Fechner law, which asserted a mathematically expressible correspondence between the intensities of stimuli and sensations. *B.* criticizes the notion of the intensity of mental states itself and finds that it consists either in the idea that our “deep” sensations penetrate a larger or smaller number of our individual states and impressions, or in the multiplicity of peripheral impressions, especially muscular ones, which follow acts of will, together with the impression of a qualitative change of our sensation. The intensity of sensations, therefore, is the result of a transfer from the movements that accompany them or from other accompanying quantitative phenomena. We cannot quantify our impressions, and the entire psychological law which assumes that the impressions themselves are sums is a consequence of a terminological confusion. This confusion is innate to our practical intelligence but necessarily stands in the way of philosophical clarity, which demands that quality be strictly separated from quantity. Quantity presupposes space; space is where we localize things, i.e., complete beings, separated into units and sums. On the contrary, that which is not given in space, like the afore-mentioned “deep,” e.g., affective, mental states, cannot be quantified, cannot be counted. The idea of such counting presupposes that mental phenomena are placed in homogeneous and measurable time,

which is nothing other than space. By contrast, mental phenomena are by their nature in qualitative time, and the more they are “deep,” subjective, personal, the less they are “practical.” Time itself, which *B.* calls duration (*durée*) is the exact opposite of space and quantity; it is a dynamic totality, which is represented, for example, by the unity of a melody, where the whole is contained in every part and the parts may not be isolated from the whole. Time is purely qualitative change that retains the past. There is no succession of individual states here; but “ensuing” is here also a quality, a spontaneous growth of ever-new qualitative moments. This way, *B.* introduces a dualism of quality and time—quantity and space. Time, however, is more fundamental for us: we can only count in time. Original time is character and creation. Philosophers’ failure to understand this has given rise to problems such as the question of freedom: duration is by its nature quality, creation of novelty, unforeseeability, indetermination, but it is fallacious to imagine freedom as the liberty to decide between motives that would be equally close or distant to one’s character. A free act is one that expresses our personality as a whole.

The idea of qualitative duration and its relation to the spatial world of quantities and generalities (a general term also presupposes space) dominates the whole of *B.*’s philosophy. From here he was led to his conception of different levels of spiritual life from pure innerness, which dissolves into dream, to action, which concentrates all the possibilities of the mind into reality. The level on which we stand depends on our “attention to life,” and the organ of this attention to life is the body, especially the nervous system with its firmly installed set-up of connections between sensory and motor paths. Damage to the nervous system results in a loss or abnormality of attention to life. That is how *B.* explains the symptoms of aphasia. His understanding of the psychophysical relation obviously differs just as profoundly from the epiphenomenalist or parallelistic understanding common at the time than it does from ordinary spiritualism, which assumes a complete dissimilarity between the mental and the physical substance and cannot explain their mutual influence. By contrast, *B.* admits a duality of the physical and the mental, if matter is originally extended in space, but he claims that movement is something temporal and hence qualitative, i.e., close to the mental. However, the “tension” or “concentration” of material duration, i.e., the amount of history contained in an individual experience, is altogether different from human duration. The idea of different tensions of duration leads *B.* to an interpretation of

the entire universe. In *B.*, the world is appended to a single, original act of divine creativity that “exteriorizes” itself, diffuses itself into matter; but at the same time, there remains enough of the original impetus through which the world was “created” so that the creative energy can, at various stages, resist the material universe, prevailing over it by developing, always almost exclusively, one of the vital capabilities (sustenance, instinct, intelligence) in various domains of organization (plant, animal, man), while letting the others atrophy. The ultimate end of “creative evolution,” if one may even talk about an end, as *B.* rejects all external teleology, is life itself and its victory over matter, over death. The final stage of creative evolution is realized in the human being, and that which, in the overall directions of life, has become separate with the aim of fighting for survival—namely, instinct, knowledge which is adequate but unconscious, and intelligence, knowledge which is relative but conscious—reunites in “intuition,” in instinctively-intelligent knowledge, in conscious instinct. Intuition is simple like instinct but inexhaustible. Human history, especially the history of morality and religion, is a continuation of natural creative evolution. Here, too, the flows of life divide to be eventually united. *B.* distinguishes static or “closed” morality and religion from “open” morality and religion, i.e., from those which are creative and always open to new creative impulses.

*B.*'s philosophy is the first thoroughly elaborated attempt at a historical understanding of the world since German idealism.

Works. *Quid Aristoteles de loco senserit* (What Aristotle thought about place) (small doctoral thesis), 1889. — *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience* (On the immediate data of consciousness) (large thesis), 1889. — *Matière et Mémoire* (Matter and Memory). Essai sur la relation du corps à l'esprit, 1897 (new introduction in 1900). — *Le Rire*. Essai sur la signification du comique (Laughter), 1900. — *Évolution créatrice* (Creative Evolution), 1907. Translated into Czech by F. Pelikán and F. Žákavec, Prague. — *Energie spirituelle* (Spiritual Energy), Essais et conférences, 1919. — *Durée et simultanéité* (Duration and Simultaneity). À propos de la théorie d'Einstein, 1922; 1923 [second edition] with three appendices. — *Les deux sources de la Morale et de la Religion* (The Two Sources of Morality and Religion), 1932. Translated into Czech by doc. Dr. Václav Černý, Prague. — *La Pensée et le Mouvant* (Thought and Movingness [*pohyblivo*]), Essais et conférences, 1934.

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