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Bergson's Genealogy of Consciousness

The percept is the landscape before man, in the absence of man. . . .
We are not in the world, we become with the world; we become
by contemplating it. Everything is vision, becoming. We become
universes. Becoming animal, plant, molecular, becoming zero.

—Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*

In *Time and Free Will*,¹ Bergson endeavors to demonstrate a traditionally overlooked yet radical difference between two kinds of multiplicities: an actual, quantitative, discrete, and homogenous multiplicity that coincides with space, on the one hand, and a virtual, qualitative, heterogeneous, yet continuous multiplicity that corresponds to psychological duration, on the other. Against Kant, Bergson contends that it is in fact heterogeneity that constitutes the ground of experience (2001a, 72/2001, 97). When, by making it an a priori form of sensibility, Kant provides space with an existence independent from its content (i.e., sensibility), he is in fact defining space as a homogenous milieu. This implies that he conceives sensations themselves, considered independently of the form of space, as nonextended and simply qualitative. Now, Bergson explains, “If space is to be defined as the homogenous, it seems that inversely every homogenous and indefinite milieu will be space. For homogeneity here consisting in the absence of any quality, it is hard to see how two forms of the

homogenous could be distinguished from one another” (2001a, 73/2001, 98, trans. modified). However, Bergson continues, it is customary to regard time as an indefinite medium, different from space yet homogenous as well. But when we make time a homogenous medium in which conscious states (or “inner sense”) unfold, we take it (time) to be given all at once, that is, simultaneously. This amounts to saying that we thereby abstract time from duration, or from the irreversibility of succession. Indeed, we are thereby really, though unconsciously, giving up time by making it a mere ghost of space. We then end up trying to spatialize our conscious states, to juxtapose them simultaneously as if they were well-defined, discrete, and mutually exclusive objects. Instead of thus reducing everything to space, Bergson demands that we begin to think in terms of time.

The Immediate Data of Consciousness

Duration (la durée) and the Two Multiplicities

Bergson’s seminal insight lies in the insistence, against all scientific and metaphysical approaches, that time not be confused with space. While space or matter consists in an actual, discrete, or quantitative multiplicity akin to unit and number, time or psychological duration can only be thought of as a virtual, continuous, or qualitative multiplicity. Lived duration is continuous and qualitative because it enfolds a confused plurality of interpenetrating terms. It is only by means of an intellectual abstraction from this incessant flow that we can even begin to speak of discrete “states” and well-defined discontinuous objects. Our ordinary conception of time as a homogenous medium in which our conscious states are placed alongside one another as in space thus fails to take into account the essential heterogeneity of duration. The difficulty and novelty of Bergson’s approach here lies in his connection of the continuous with the heterogeneous (duration), on the one hand, and of the discontinuous with the homogenous (space), on the other. In their comprehensive and penetrating introduction to *Bergson: Key Writings*, Keith Ansell-Pearson and John Mullarkey (2002) note that although the use of the term *multiplicity* refers to Riemannian geometry, Bergson wants to show that time—that is, life or change—is psychical in essence; as such, it is not of a mathematical or logical order.

In a somewhat counterintuitive way, it now appears that duration is heterogeneous *because* it is continuous. As a virtual multiplicity of interpenetrating states, it is essentially indivisible, which means that as soon as we try to divide it—or break the continuity—it changes in kind—hence the qualitative heterogeneity. In contrast, space is discontinuous *because* it is homogenous. Each discrete element or unit is simply a different degree of the same inert underlying milieu.

As Gilles Deleuze saw, what is at stake in Bergson's distinction between the actual and the virtual multiplicities is no less than a radical reevaluation of the metaphysics of the real and of the qualitative change that essentially informs it. The radicality of Bergson's philosophy becomes even clearer in his subsequent works, as his notion of duration evolves so as to become, by his 1907 *Creative Evolution*, the nexus of a full-blown ontology of self-alteration. As Ansell-Pearson and Mullarkey note, this involves breaking down the form-matter opposition that structures his account in *Time and Free Will*. But this must not overshadow the fact that the method of intuition he elaborates, alone capable of coinciding with this change, is one of perhaps unequaled precision and rigor. One crucial outcome of Bergson's overcoming of sterile dualisms on the basis of duration lies in a metaphysics and an epistemology capable of shaking to their foundations Kant's critique and the phenomenological approaches of his inheritors. Duration is no longer restricted to the realm of consciousness and instead coincides with the movement of life itself—that is, external things do endure in their own way, *independently* of our psychological experience (contra subjectivism) and duration is shown to be *immanent* to the universe.

Thus it turns out that the transcendental forms applicable to things cannot be entirely our own work: if we do give much to matter, then we probably receive something from it as well. In short, *the very meaning of the transcendental is transformed* for, as a residual product of the evolution of life, consciousness is only a determined case of duration. As such, it can neither encompass the open whole nor condition it; rather, consciousness' very existence (and not only its possibility), as well as that of its conceptual categories, is conditioned by it. This, in turn, means that psychological duration—that is, consciousness and memory (or the unconscious)—constitutes the point of contact and the immanent opening onto ontological duration. Because we have memory, it is possible to reintegrate all closed systems (be they individuals, species, or political societies) into that ever-evolving whole. From the disinterested point of view of duration, they turn out to be products of only one of the two tendencies of the real: evolution's own tendency to slow down and arrest its forward movement within extensity (space or materiality). Indeed, the intelligence and the categories of the understanding follow a similar tendency.

Although this forming, materializing, and measuring activity is a natural and necessary tendency from the point of view of practical interest, it is really a mere habit of the mind. For Bergson, this habit is essentially what accounts for the kind of science and metaphysics we know; but it can be overcome. In a word, the kind of phenomenological experience that has defined the conditions and the limits of our possible knowledge may capture one aspect of the real, but this is only one particular line of access. By methodically “turning intelligence against itself” to follow the other, durational tendency, through the kind of intellectual effort that Bergson's writings force us into, we can integrate a different kind of experience (namely, Bergsonian intuition) and rejoin “the

source of experience,” the point at which the mind becomes continuous with creative duration. For Bergson, this means that against Kant, knowledge does not have to be relative: it can be absolute (that is, coincide with the real), though necessarily incomplete—as the coincidence can only ever be partial, and the real is the moving, variable essence of things. For Bergson, then, truth will have to be defined as the stable (though not immutable) accord between the real and intuition.²

The Split Self

In *Time and Free Will*, Bergson shows that these two tendencies or multiplicities coincide with the two sides of the self. On the one hand, lived duration (that is, the heterogeneous qualitative multiplicity) corresponds to the fundamental self, considered independently of its symbolic representation. In *Matter and Memory*, this deep self will be called the unconscious. On the other hand, the homogenous, quantitative multiplicity informing spatial representation corresponds to the superficial or social self. Although these two sides ought not to be confused, Bergson acknowledges that we arrive naturally at such confused representation. This is because in a series of identical terms, each term assumes a twofold aspect for our consciousness: one that is always identical to itself—since we are then projecting onto it the identity of the external object—and another that is specific and singular, since the addition of this term brings about a new organization for the whole (2001a, 92/2001, 124).

In a word, our self is split up; it is dual. Insofar as it comes into contact with the external world at its surface, its successive sensations, although dissolving into one another, retain something of the mutual externality of their objective causes; this is why our superficial psychological life unfolds in a homogenous milieu without this symbolical representation requiring any effort from us. But as we advance farther into the depths of consciousness, the deep-seated self that senses and loves, deliberates and decides, is encountered as a force whose states and modifications permeate one another and undergo a deep alteration as soon as we separate them from one another in order to set them out in space, that is, in order to actualize and communicate them (2001a, 93/2001, 125). This is a crucial aspect of Bergson’s new metaphysics: the virtual necessarily transforms itself in the process of its actualization.³

Nevertheless, given that it is the refracted ego that best lends itself to the exigencies of social life and language, consciousness tends to hold onto it and to forget about the fundamental self. In order to recover this fundamental self such as it would present itself to an immediate consciousness, a vigorous effort of introspection and analysis is necessary; by means of this effort of the will, we may isolate the living psychological facts from their refracted and solidified double. Once again, Bergson concludes that all of our perceptions, sensations, emotions, and ideas present themselves under a twofold aspect: the one clear

and precise, but impersonal because reified, and the other indistinct, infinitely mobile, and inexpressible because profoundly subjective (2001a, 96/2001, 129). Ultimately, however, both of these opposite tendencies of the ego are rooted in the same one, natural phenomenon called intelligence.

As the “center of indetermination” inserting duration into a refractory and simultaneous matter, the brain embodies the fundamental psychological duplicity just described, thereby allowing for hesitation and choice. But I insist that hesitation, or deliberation, must not be identified too quickly with choice, or decision. They are two very distinct moments in a person’s psychological life, in the sense that their respective qualitative “what it’s likeness” takes on a very different tone. Just think of what it feels like to be stuck in an apparently insoluble dilemma, as opposed to what it feels like to finally make a decision and/or act on it. If we are duration essentially, if our deep psychological states penetrate one another constantly, then (1) at what point can we say that we actually made a decision, and (2) to what extent can this decision be said to constitute a free choice? Put otherwise, the new problem that the analysis of the twofold nature of consciousness conjures up is one of free will and determinism.

The Two Causalities: Determinism and the Free Act

According to Bergson, the problem of freedom is a false problem: it deals with a badly stated question, because it relies on the confusion between the two multiplicities, duration and simultaneity. What is the question “Are we free?” really asking? Most generally, and as Kant himself understands it, it is asking whether any given psychological state can be said to be determined on the basis of certain laws, that by establishing a causal connection between past and present facts, claim to be able to calculate, that is, to predict the future. It thus relies on the illusion that psychic duration is measurable, when we have already shown that such measurement would imply reducing it to the discrete multiplicity of number, to which it is de jure irreducible. Bergson contends that such a mechanistic approach to the issue of freedom falls prey to the Eleatic confusion between movement (duration) and inertia (space). In fact, it is significant that his discussion of Zeno’s paradoxes returns virtually untouched in every one of his major texts, from *Time and Free Will* to the *Two Sources*, through *Matter and Memory*, *Creative Evolution*, and the “Introduction to Metaphysics.”

Like Zeno of Elea, the determinist attempts to explain motion in terms of resting points. If we abstract each one of Achilles’ strides from the simplicity of the act of running in the process of being performed, then we can easily divide them into shorter and shorter intervals, and do so ad infinitum. This is to say, with arithmetic, that we can divide any given motion into an infinite number of fixed points, or positions. But in order to do this, Bergson points out, we would have to be positioned at the static end of each one of those intervals and look back, after the fact, at the distance that has been covered. We may then try

to reconstruct the movement by means of positions; but since these positions are mere suppositions—Achilles was never really in any one of these points; at best, he passed them—we may multiply the number of points as much as we want: we will never create motion out of immobility. From the dynamic point of view of immediate consciousness, then, this approach does not make any sense. Each of us has the *immediate feeling* of her or his own spontaneity, without the *idea* of inertia having anything to do with it. In fact, while the idea of inertia can only be understood and defined by means of—if only in contrast with—the idea spontaneity, spontaneity itself is self-sufficient (2001a, 106/2001, 142). As Bergson sees it, it is therefore only from the static and retrospective point of view of the mechanist that the idea of freedom can be put into question, for it is necessarily first, and simpler, than the notion of inertia. With regard to immediate reality, the point of view of the determinist is an illusion. This mechanistic approach consists in overlooking the irreducible difference in kind between the two series, an error that ultimately results in an equivocal notion of causality.

Leaving aside the case of physical determinism—which, Bergson argues, simply assumes the universality of the mechanic law of the conservation of energy, thereby dismissing a priori the possibility of novelty and spontaneity—we can turn to the theory of psychological determinism and prove that it relies on the same fundamental illusion, which overlooks the potentiality inherent in time. Psychological determinism implies an associationist conception of the mind according to which the present state of consciousness would be necessitated by the states that precede it. However, with Bergson we want to ask, what kind of necessity are we here talking about? As we showed that there exists between the successive states of consciousness a qualitative difference, we will always fail to deduce one state from the other a priori. Therefore, a strong conception of causality cannot account for the transition. One is then tempted to turn to experience, with the object of showing that the passage from one state to the next can always be explained by some simple reason, the second obeying as it were to the call of the first—a bit like the spark provoking the explosion of the stick of dynamite. Indeed, experience does show such a relation. Yet Bergson asks, “Is this relation, which *explains* the transition, the *cause* of it?” (2001a, 117/2001, 156, emphasis added).⁴

For instance, Bergson examines the case of a subject who carries out at the appointed time the suggestion received in a hypnotic state; the act that this subject performs is brought about, according to her, by the preceding series of her conscious states. However, Bergson points out, these states are really effects, not causes. It was necessary that the act should take place; it also was necessary that the patient should explain it to herself; but it is the *future* act, not the *past* series, that determines, by a kind of attraction, the whole series of psychic states of which it is to be the natural consequence. Now, Bergson warns us, the determinists will seize on this argument to prove that we in effect are sometimes

irresistibly influenced by another's will. Yet Bergson asks, does it not show us as well that in the first place our own will is capable of willing for willing's sake (spontaneity) and secondly of leaving the act that has been performed to be explained by antecedents of which it (i.e., the act) has really been the cause?⁵ Indeed, we all know that we sometimes weigh motives and deliberate over them when we have already made up our mind (2001a, 118–19/2001, 157–58). But, I want to add, is willing for willing's sake identical to willing freely?

Before I address this question, let me sum up by insisting that according to Bergson if there is such a thing as psychological determinism, then it is the *future*, rather than the past, that determines not only the present but the past as well: any new event reorganizes the whole. Now although it eventually constitutes an integral part of the ever-changing rhythm of the heterogeneous multiplicity of duration, this future is always novel and unpredictable, since it necessarily introduces qualitative difference in the series. In fact, because associationist psychology assumes a mechanistic rather than a dynamic approach to psychic processes, it confuses the fact itself with its retrospective explanation. In a word, associationism implies a defective, abstract, intellectualized conception of the self by overlooking its twofold nature, which in turn implies a faulty, impersonal, and reified conception of the multiplicity of its conscious states. But once again, as mistaken as this approach may be, it can be explained naturally. Due to the simple fact that we use language (that is, by definition, general impersonal terms that we share with a community), we tend to overlook the specifically personal impressions that define our feelings, and to associate ideas with one another; we thereby juxtapose these ideas instead of letting them permeate one another. We thus fail to translate entirely into language what our soul senses: thought remains incommensurable with language, since the latter necessarily cuts up the durational real in accordance with social utility.⁶

In light of the purely qualitative nature of the multiplicity that consciousness is, it appears that the act of thinking itself—as distinguished from its static explanation—is none other than a feeling (*sentiment*) of the soul. Now, Bergson claims, as long as those feelings have reached a sufficient depth (i.e., the deep-seated self), each one represents the whole of the soul; because feelings are essentially heterogeneous and permeate one another, the whole content of the soul is reflected in each. So to say, as the coarsest psychology does (and here, Bergson has in mind such English psychologists as J. S. Mill), that the soul is determined under the influence of any one of those feelings (e.g., sympathy, hate, aversion) is in fact to admit that *the soul determines itself*. In other words, rather than reducing the self to an impersonal aggregate, we can take psychic states with the specific coloration they have in any determinate person—a specific and determinate nuance that comes to them as a reflection of all other states; then we do not need to associate several facts of consciousness in order to reconstruct the person; she is entirely in any single one. Finally, Bergson

writes, “The external manifestation of this internal state will precisely be what one calls a free act, since the self alone will have been the author of it, and since it will express the whole of the self” in one simple act (2001a, 124–25/2001, 165–66). For Bergson, then, what defines freedom is consciousness’ unification with itself, a unification that can only occur as the result of a violent effort of the intellect to revert its natural tendency. This effort is at once *of* the will and spontaneous.

In this sense, freedom is not absolute, but it admits gradations. As we just saw, because the self is twofold as well as one, it is not the case that all conscious states necessarily blend with one another. Insofar as it perceives homogenous space, the superficial self also is the ground for conscious states that can remain independent of the heterogeneous mass of the fundamental self. For example, this would be the fate of a suggestion received under hypnosis or, similarly, of some repressed anger suddenly springing forth for no apparent reason. But precisely, says Bergson,

thereby endowed with a life of its own, it will usurp the whole personality when its time comes. And alongside these independent elements, there may be found more complex series, the terms of which do permeate one another, but never succeed in blending perfectly with the whole mass of the self. Such is the system of feelings and ideas which are the result of an education not properly assimilated—the kind of education which appeals to memory rather than judgment. (2001a, 125/2001, 166)

This distinction is mirrored in the *Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, where Bergson differentiates between dressage and asceticism: while the first has to do with the formation of a parasitic self within the fundamental self, the second allows for the true creative integration of the twofold self. While one is an obstacle to freedom, the other is its very source.

When a decision emanates from the dynamic series to which the free act belongs, this decision will be said to arise from the whole soul. The self modifies itself, as well as the feelings that animate it, at each moment of the deliberation. In this dynamic series, the states reinforce one another and lead by a natural evolution to a free act. Only from the mistaken point of view of the deterministic approach can we distinguish states and forces from one another and represent a mechanistic self as hesitating between two feelings, passing from one to the other and finally deciding in favor of one of them. For in this case Bergson asks, “If it is always the same self which deliberates, and if the two opposite feelings by which it is moved do not change, how, in virtue of this very principle of causality which determinism appeals to, will the self ever come to a decision?” (2001a, 129/2001, 171). The truth is that even the coarsest determinist would have to assume some kind of internal, continuous, and vital impulse underneath the static representation of its discrete states.

From a Bergsonian point of view, then, the will—informed as it is by its past experience and capable of projecting itself into the future—does not exclude spontaneity. On the contrary, the living self evolves naturally from deliberation to decision, since its two opposite tendencies are mere symbolical representations of one single self that “lives and develops by the very effect of its hesitations, until the free act drops from it like an over-ripe fruit” (2001a, 132/2001, 176). The very notion of psychological conflict turns out to be a false problem too, stemming from the confusion between duration and simultaneity, and its consequent unjustified extension of the useful yet fictional tool of abstraction.⁷

In *Time and Free Will*, consciousness is thus defined as the juncture of the two sides of the self on the basis of real duration as its most primordial ground. So far, however, this account fails to capture the process of the emergence of consciousness. Bergson's rendering of the phenomenon of consciousness in *Time and Free Will* remains limited to its psychological manifestation.⁸ This means that it does not, as yet, provide a necessary ontological grounding for this phenomenon, traditionally held by phenomenology to be *the* condition of all thought, all experience, all knowledge: the first condition for the possibility of any phenomenological inquiry. Let us turn to the first chapter of *Matter and Memory* for what I take to be Bergson's genealogical account of the phenomenon of consciousness.

The Role of the Body

Preliminary Remarks: Science and Philosophy

As its title clearly indicates, *Matter and Memory* aims primarily at tackling the problem of dualism. Furthermore, Bergson suggests that such metaphysical antinomies as those that both plague the Kantian critique and made it necessary must be brought back to the wider issue of the relationship between science and philosophy.⁹ In fact, this is one of the many aspects of Bergsonism that makes it particularly relevant today. In a world of increasing technological complexity, in our everyday life as much as in our philosophical attempts and spiritual endeavors, we come to rely more and more on science for a new promise for eternal life and absolute knowledge. This tendency toward the unification of all knowledge and strivings under the heading of science and technology is diagnosed by Bergson as relying on a profound confusion between science and philosophy—a confusion that leads, ultimately, to the reduction of metaphysics to physics, and of thought to logic, just as the confusion between spatialized time and duration leads to the reduction of freedom to mechanistic determinism. For Bergson, it is not a question of some nostalgic return to an imaginary “state of nature.” His self-declared “optimism” is clearly directed at the future;¹⁰ he situates his greatest hopes for the actual progress of humanity

toward universal peace in the combination of mystical aspiration and technological progress (1997b, 310/1935, 291). Such remarks as those we find in the *Two Sources* only reinforce the work he performed in *Creative Evolution*, when he proposed a method based in the necessity of the *convergence* between the respective efforts of philosophy and the sciences (1998, 85/1998, 94).

One central aim of *Matter and Memory* thus consists in identifying the original illusion that allowed for metaphysics to be sacrificed to physics, and the consequent impasse that the philosophies speculating about the relationship between body and mind, or matter and memory, find themselves in. As is typical of his larger effort—the striving for the liberation of spirit for a new philosophy capable of sympathizing with the flowing real so as to introduce real change in the world—Bergson’s critical work is both rooted in a positive philosophy based in experience and observation and directed at generating potentialities for creating new avenues of thought and activity.¹¹ Now if science and philosophy must complement one another, then it also means that they must be irreducible to one another. But for Bergson, this irreducibility is no more based in the diversity of their objects than in the diversity of their methods *per se*; these differences may be an effect, but they cannot be the cause of their necessary distinction, since ultimately the object of both science and philosophy is (at least in principle) reality itself.

According to Bergson, the difference between science and philosophy lies in their respective functions. On the one hand, the goal of science is to make possible and increase one’s material and intellectual grasp onto the world, so one can manipulate to one’s advantage, calculate, predict, and utilize its resources. This natural, vital, yet purely pragmatic need requires that the ever-changing real be arrested, fixed, and symbolized. In a word, science naturally tends to eliminate concrete duration from its field of operation; henceforth, it is generally, though unconsciously, left dealing with discrete multiplicities alone. In Bergson’s view, this teleological attitude becomes deeply problematic when it is extended unlimitedly, and ultimately conjures up the belief that its own methods and conclusions apply equally to the real itself, in all of its aspects, including the metaphysical. On the other hand, Bergson writes, “Philosophy . . . is not constrained to the precision of science, since it does not aim at any application” (1998, 85/1998, 94, trans. modified). Because philosophy is essentially speculative and does not aim at any practical application, it does not have to restrain itself to working with discrete multiplicities, and it can extend its vision to the qualitative tendencies that fundamentally constitute the real as a whole, in its duration. In a word, while for Bergson the teleological approach of science (and, by extension, of all traditional metaphysics) can only account for the residual part of the real that remains relative to the limited powers of the intelligence, true philosophy has the potential to access the real absolutely, if only incompletely. This conviction underlies one of the main complaints that Bergson has against Kant’s claim concerning the relativity of knowledge.

If philosophy is to escape Kantianism, then, it must expand the critical project to include the very conclusions of science that Kant himself was only trying to ground, without being able or desirous to put them into question (1998, 358/1998, 390). Since the issue at hand is that of the genesis of consciousness, a novel reflection on matter, or on the function of the body, must lie at the heart of Bergson's dualistic project for a "new philosophy." This is the focus of the first chapter of *Matter and Memory*, which culminates with Bergson's theory of pure perception. I read Bergson's theory of pure perception as constituting a provisional yet highly significant account of the genesis of consciousness; in order that we may nevertheless keep an eye to the nonprovisional conclusions of the book, let me recall the closing words of *Matter and Memory*: "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" (1997a, 280/1991, 249, emphasis added).

The World of Images

In his attempt at "lessen[ing] greatly the theoretical difficulties which have always beset dualism," Bergson proposes a new philosophy of matter based in the notion of the image. Contending that idealism and realism are both excessive theses—the one reducing matter to a subjective representation, the other to an objective thing that would mysteriously produce representations in us—he proposes to conceive matter as an *ensemble* of images. "And by 'image,' we mean a certain existence which is more than what the idealist calls a representation, but less than what the realist calls a thing—an *existence* placed half-way between the 'thing' and the 'representation'" (1997a, 1/1991, 9, emphasis added, trans. modified).

To decipher the process by which conscious representations come about, we will need to momentarily place ourselves, with Bergson, at the standpoint of common sense, which only perceives images, or phenomena. When my eyes are open, images appear to me; when my eyes are closed, images disappear. Insofar as I perceive them, then, objects and their qualities are images, but images that exist in themselves (1997a, 2/1991, 10): I do not expect my desk to be gone when I close my eyes. That images exist in themselves means that they constitute a neutral positive reality, which is neither subjective nor objective; it also means that those images act and react on one another. They are not merely a basis for action and reaction, but the images themselves, in all of their parts, are indeed action and reaction in accordance with constant laws of nature. This in turn means that the knowledge of those laws would allow for predicting what will happen to each and any one of those images, or "that the future of the images must be contained in their present and will add nothing new to it" (1997a, 11/1991, 17, trans. modified). At this point, we are in a world of images in which duration has no efficacy; we are in the realm of pure perception, exclusive of memory.

Yet, Bergson continues, there is one particular image that progressively stands out in the midst of all others. If all images act and react constantly on one another in all of their parts, then it means that there is no center, no one organizing principle coordinating their henceforth indeterminate positions¹²—not until, that is, one particular image stands out, around which all other images organize themselves concentrically. This image is the one I call my body. It becomes a center in that I do not merely know its external surface by means of perception, but that I also know it from within, through affections. Affections are those particular images that interpose themselves between the movement-images I receive from without, and those movement-images I am going to execute.¹³ It looks, then, “as though [affections] had some undefined influence on the final issue” (1997a, 12/1991, 18). They have some influence on the outcome insofar as each appears as “an invitation to act”; yet this influence also is undefined insofar as it contains an “authorization to wait” (ibid.). In other words, affections are “movements begun, but not executed, the indication of a more or less useful decision, but not that constraint which precludes choice” (ibid.). For Bergson, then, sensibility appears to the same extent as does the ability to move. The living body is its cradle. In *Creative Evolution*, he writes:

Between mobility and consciousness, there is an obvious relationship. No doubt, the consciousness of the higher organisms seems bound up with certain cerebral arrangements (*dispositifs*). The more the nervous system develops the more numerous and more precise become the movements among which it can choose; the more illuminating, also, is the consciousness that accompanies them. (1998, 111/1998, 122, trans. modified)

Consciousness is thus primarily the consciousness of movements received in the shape of perceptions, and of potential movements to be executed in the shape of actions. Consciousness appears as a feeling or a sensation at every step at which I have to take an initiative, and it disappears as soon as my activity, by becoming automatic, does not need its assistance any longer (1997a, 12/1991, 18). In the language of *Time and Free Will*, we could say that at the level of pure presence, the origin of the phenomenon of consciousness, whose site is the body, is none other than the feeling of spontaneity. As a feeling (*sentiment*), it coincides with sensibility itself.

Between input and output the body, or the brain, thus consists in a “zone of indetermination,” a distance or delay (*écart*) between centrifugal and centripetal movements, between perception and action. It is in this sense that Bergson (in)famously claims that the brain is none other than a “central telephonic switchboard,” whose role is to allow for communication or to delay it (ibid., 26/30). What happens in this delay that distinguishes my brain-image from all other images, allowing me to choose between diverse courses of action?

The idealist tells us that this particular image that Bergson calls cerebral vibration (*ébranlement cérébral*, *ibid.*, 13/19, trans. modified) *generates* external images, or representations. But this would imply that this molecular movement-image (the brain) really did contain, in some mysterious way, the representation of the whole material universe. As Bergson points out, “To state this proposition is enough to show its absurdity. The brain is part of the material world; the material world is not part of the brain. Eliminate the image which bears the name material world, and you destroy at the same time the brain and the cerebral [vibration] which are parts of it” (*ibid.*).¹⁴ Against both idealism and realism, this also means that nerve centers cannot condition the image of the universe (*ibid.*, 14/19). In fact—and I believe this is the full significance of the metaphor of the central telephonic exchange—Bergson simply wants to insist that the brain does not add anything to what it receives (*ibid.*, 26/30), although as a delay rerouting movement toward more or less complex sensory-motor avenues it embodies choice.

We established as a fact that my body can act on the world of images, which means that it can efficiently affect the universe. But precisely—and here Bergson tackles what he considers the fundamental illusion common to both idealism and realism—this is all my body can do: as a center of action destined to move other objects, it cannot give birth to a representation (*ibid.*, 16/20). In fact, this is one of Bergson's central theses in *Matter and Memory*, the point of departure of his theory of knowledge which, in stark contrast to traditional epistemology, affirms that perception is entirely directed toward action, *not* speculation. We also established that the cerebral matter consists in the ability to choose between several possible courses of action, or images, themselves suggested in accordance with their greater or lesser utility for my body. As Bergson points out, then, “These images *must* display in some way, upon the aspect which they present to my body, the profit which my body can gain from them” (*ibid.*, 15/20, emphasis added). But we know that this display is not what the idealist calls a representation.

Now, How do we get from the sheer presence of images, or phenomena, to representation? If, according to Bergson, matter is an ensemble of images, and if the perception of matter consists in those *same* images referred to the possible actions of one particular image, namely, my body (*ibid.*, 17/22), then no doubt my perception is a function of molecular movements; it depends on them. But the true problem for Bergson is *how?* How does my perception depend on centripetal and centrifugal nerves (*ibid.*)?

To appeal to the vague notion of “translation” would be to fall back into the sterile dualism that postulates a radical difference between matter and representation, which ends up conceiving matter as devoid of form and thought, and representation as devoid of matter—a dualism that henceforth must appeal to some mysterious, philosophically ungrounded force, to account for the passage from presence to representation. We showed that with Bergsonism, on the contrary, this transition can only be a matter of movement-images, of mobility among

the whole of the world of images. Bergson asks, what are those movement-images, and what particular role do they play in the representation of the whole? He claims that “the answer is obvious: they are, within my body, the movements intended to prepare, while beginning it, the reaction of my body to the action of external objects” (ibid., 18/23). They may be a very small part of the material world, but they “are of capital importance for that part of representation which I call my body, since they foreshadow at each successive moment its virtual acts” (ibid.).

Granted, here we are using the term *representation* in a fairly loose sense; as may be expected, it will only acquire the kind of subjective richness and complexity that phenomenology ascribes to it when we reintroduce memory into the picture. But for now the crucial point that Bergson wants to make against both idealism and materialism is the following: *There can only be a difference in degree, and not a difference in kind, between matter and perception* (ibid., 19/24). This is the central claim of Bergson’s theory of pure perception, from which everything else unfolds.

Pure Perception and Beyond

If it is the case that there is only a difference of complication of movement between the perceptive faculty of the brain and the reflex functions of the spinal cord, then we can specify a bit further the kind of relation we have established between perception and molecular movements. Not only do our perceptions *depend* on the molecular movements of the gray matter, but they also *vary* with them; and since those movements are indissolubly linked to the rest of the material universe (ibid., 20/25), we can see that the psychological problem of perception becomes a metaphysical issue. The problem regarding the passage from presence to representation stated earlier may now be restated in the following terms:

How is it that the same images can belong to two different systems: one in which each image varies for itself and in the well-defined measure that it undergoes the action of the surrounding images; another in which all images vary for a single image, and in the varying measure that they reflect the possible action of this privileged image? (1997a, 20–21/1991, 25, trans. modified)

As Bergson indicates, the first system is that of *science*, wherein each image is related only to itself, thereby acquiring an absolute value. The second system is that of consciousness (*con-science*), in which all images are referred to a central image, our body, whose slightest variations they follow (21/26). We can finally see more clearly why Bergson deems it necessary to address the problem of dualism left hanging between idealism and realism in terms of images. And

once again, it appears that the reason both idealism and realism must appeal to a *deus ex machina* (be it in the form of a mysterious force or a preestablished harmony between the faculties) is that they both address the metaphysical problem at stake through the postulate that perception has a speculative interest rather than, as Bergson would have it, a pragmatic interest.

When it affirms that there is a mere difference in degree between matter and perception, the theory of pure perception also suggests that there is a mere difference in complication, or degree, between the pure automatism of, say, the activity of the lamp ray and the voluntary activity of higher vertebrates. Once again, it seems that spontaneity, for Bergson, is not the monopoly of humanity. Yet we did see that this difference between matter and perception consists in the distance (*écart*) between incoming and outgoing movements. Now as the French term suggests, this distance also is a delay; it is not only a spatial interval, it is a little slice of time between two movements as well. And this delay, ultimately, is going to be the fulcrum we need to account for the richness of human thought and creative abilities, a creative richness immeasurably greater than that of the other living beings. As we will see when we turn to the next section, this delay (the brain) is the point at which memory inserts itself into matter.

But before we turn to an examination of the second and third chapters of *Matter and Memory*, which deal specifically with Bergson's conception of memory and the role it plays in the generation of thought, let us return to the issue at hand—namely, that of the material genesis of consciousness. For Bergson, the true distinction that needs to be accounted for is not simply that between body and mind. His rooting of consciousness within matter testifies to that. I will argue that the true significance of his use of the terms *matter* and *memory* rather than *body* and *mind*, or *receptivity* and *intentionality* lies in the fundamental displacement of *the* problem of philosophy—that of establishing a ground for itself, hence for thought and experience—onto the terrain of the relationships between “consciousness” and “the unconscious.” In *Creative Evolution*, Bergson writes:

Here again, however, we must beware of radical distinctions. “Unconscious” and “conscious” are not two labels which can be mechanically fastened, the one on every vegetable cell, the other on all animals. While consciousness sleeps in the animal which has degenerated into a motionless parasite, it probably awakens in just the degree to which the vegetable has regained liberty of movement, and awakens in just the degree to which the vegetable has reconquered this liberty. (1998, 113/1998, 124)

From Presence to Representation: Discernment

We have seen that the degree of consciousness varies in accordance with the living being's freedom of movement. Now going farther down the genealogical path of the birth of consciousness, we want to ask, what is it that makes a

perception conscious in the first place? But once again, Bergson warns us, this is not the right question to ask. As soon as we give ourselves the least parcel of matter—such as, for instance, the brain—then we have also thereby given ourselves the totality of images, the whole universe, since each image is inscribed in a continuum of action and reaction, in a system of total mutual reflection. *What needs to be explained is not how conscious perception is born, but how it limits itself.* Bergson showed that in principle conscious perception should be the image of the whole, but in fact it is limited to what interests my body. We already know the reason for this limitation; as a point of contact between perception and affection, my body becomes the varying center of a world of images (or of the simple image of the whole) that would otherwise remain indefinite because absolutely continuous, hence prior to any determination or indetermination.

To define consciousness in terms of freedom of movement, or of the zone of indetermination generated by my body qua sensibility is also to provide it with the power of determination that comes with choice, or selection. My body introduces both indetermination and determination into the world on the basis of the discontinuity of its needs. Against both idealism and realism, it turns out that what primarily defines consciousness for Bergson is not anything *added* onto inert matter but the *diminution* of the pure image of the whole. In Bergson's words, "Our representation of things would thus arise from the fact that they are thrown back and refracted by our freedom" (1997a, 34/1991, 37).

But, he adds, there also is something positive in this *necessary paucity* of our representation that already announces spirit; this is *discernment* (*ibid.*, 35/38), or the work of intelligence par excellence, which consists, literally, in cutting up the real. What happens in the *écart* between pure presence and conscious representation, between the images' being and their being consciously perceived, is the elimination of that which does not interest us. Bergson sums it up as follows: "Our 'zones of indetermination' play in some sort the part of the screen [upon which the image could be projected behind the "photographic" plate]. They add nothing to what is there; they effect merely this: that the real action passes through, the virtual action remains" (*ibid.*, 36/39). An image among other images, the brain is a mere yet crucial screen.¹⁵ Since it does not preexist perception, the brain is not the cause of perception. But it is its occasion. The rigorous correspondence, or reciprocal dependence between representation (or conscious perception) and cerebral variations, thus turns out to be "a function of a third term, which is the indetermination of the will" (*ibid.*, 39/41)—or freedom of choice.

To recapitulate, here are the most significant implications of Bergson's theory of pure perception. First, the image is perceived exactly where it is; it is not *in* my brain, it is *in* the world: it coincides with a neutral and veridical domain of reality. As Bergson puts it, "By [pure perception] I mean a perception that exists in principle rather than in fact, and would be possessed by a being placed where I am, living as I live, but absorbed in the present, and which is capable, through the elimination of memory in all its forms, of obtaining a vision of

matter both immediate and instantaneous" (ibid., 185/34). And since the brain has been defined as delay, it cannot be where this instantaneous vision of matter takes place. Second, there is only a difference in degree and not a difference in kind between matter and perception, or between being and being perceived (ibid., 187/37). Third, representation starts out by being impersonal. It adopts our body progressively, to become *our* representation through a phenomenon of frustrated refraction against that particular image I call my body, which introduces indetermination in matter. I conclude that the Kantian unity of apperception does not have to be assumed; we can show its genealogy by tracing it back to the sensory-motor system qua small part of the universe.

In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant must postulate the unity of apperception as the ultimate ground of his phenomenological critique. But subjectivity itself thereby remains groundless; its metaphysical necessity is reduced to an epistemological, or a logical necessity—unless one appeals to God, which in a post-Nietzschean world cannot but seem philosophically naive. Furthermore, while the Kantian unity in which subjectivity is rooted only arises from the abstract, hence arbitrary work of the intellect,¹⁶ Bergson provides it with a concrete foundation in the Being of the Sensible itself—or that which, in *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze will call the *Sentiendum*. With Bergson, then, the body and sensibility acquire the kind of privilege, in the constitution of subjectivity, which Merleau-Ponty will attempt to give it.¹⁷ My personality acquires a concrete, physical, and spatial absoluteness that idealism (be it transcendental or Platonic) could only derive from an abstract posit, thereby making it relative to the work of the intellect. It is in this sense that Renaud Barbaras could write that “[perception] hence does not go toward exteriority, it proceeds from it.”¹⁸

Beyond Pure Perception (1): Affection

Several corrections must be brought to the theory of pure perception once we reintroduce affectivity. Bergson ascribes a privilege to the body, insofar as my body is the only image I perceive both from within and from without. It is this relation—that Merleau-Ponty calls “touching-touched,” or “the Chiasm” in his 1947 *The Visible and the Invisible*—that constitutes the site of affection. This means, Bergson points out, that we eventually must take into account the fact that the body qua actualization of consciousness “is not a mere mathematical point in space” (1997a, 59/1991, 58). Its virtual actions—suggested by the sensory-motor system that, as we showed, coincides exactly with pure presence—are complicated and impregnated with actual actions that take place in duration. Says Bergson, “There is no perception without affection. Affection is that which, from within our body, we mix with the image of external bodies” (ibid.). Affection, then, “is not the primary matter of which perception is made; it is the impurity with which perception is alloyed” (ibid., 60/58). Against psychologists (e.g., Hume) who see a mere difference in degree between perception and affection,

Bergson thus establishes a radical difference in kind between the two. It can only be a mistake to consider perception as an aggregate of inextensive sensations, for the qualitative difference between the two prevents such an a priori deduction. Nevertheless, we just showed that perceptions, being the qualities of external objects, must be extended from the outset. Similarly, each affection must itself be extended, or localized immediately (even though its self-conscious localization may require some education) in the shape of its own proper, hence objective, tone (*ibid.*, 61/60). How else would it ever gain the extensity that, for instance, a localized pain has?

According to Bergson, the famous objection that could be opposed to his theory of the extensity of affections—namely, the phenomenon of the phantom limb—only attests to the fact that the necessary education of the senses subsists once it has been acquired (*ibid.*). In other words, it only attests to the role that memory plays within the mechanism of consciousness. After having restored its depth to the body by reinstating its affections, we may finally reintroduce memory into the picture.

Beyond Pure Perception (2): Memory

With the theory of pure perception, Bergson has been able to isolate an objective material order of absolute exteriority, independent of us and of sensation. By reinstating the central role of affection, he has complicated the role the body plays in the phenomenon of consciousness, in the shape of the twofold experience that this body possesses, of both performing actions and undergoing affections (1997a, 62–63/1991, 61). Now, “If we went no further, the role of consciousness in perception would . . . be confined to threading on the continuous string of memory an uninterrupted series of instantaneous visions, which would be a part of things rather than ourselves” (*ibid.*, 67/65). But if, as we have demonstrated, consciousness is choice—hence the introduction of indetermination into matter—then it remains to be explained why this choice cannot be pure whim, why this indetermination does not proceed from mere chance. For Bergson, if the indetermination of the will coincides with freedom, then it must be that the choice among the diverse possible reactions, or virtual actions of the body, is inspired by past experience; it requires the conservation of past images (*ibid.*). With Bergson, then, we will want to ask, what is the mode of this survival of the past in the present? In other words, what do the mechanism and the function of memory consist in?

Although it was necessary to isolate the function of perception in its pure, virtual form, it is clear that it is never encountered as such in its actual activities. In fact, “Past images . . . will constantly mingle with our perception of the present and may even take its place” (*ibid.*, 68/66, trans. modified). Bergson’s self-declared dualism is therefore to be understood as a very nuanced, original form of the metaphysical polarities he is engaging. His conclusions concerning

the role of consciousness, or the body, with regard to knowledge, or self-consciousness, then insist on the necessity of reintegrating temporality into the picture. For on the one hand, if our action-oriented consciousness is to have any efficacy (i.e., if it is to be able to introduce voluntary change into the world), then we must recognize that its fundamental characteristic, qua action, is to be an encroachment onto the future. Bergson explains:

We have no grasp onto the future without an equal and corresponding perspective onto the past . . . and memory is thus the repercussion, in the sphere of knowledge (*connaissance*), of the indetermination of our will. But the action of memory goes further and deeper than this superficial glance would suggest. (1997a, 67/1991, 65, trans. modified)

Most generally defined as the survival of past images, memory also displaces present perception. Again, perception is essentially directed toward action, hence informed by utility. But precisely there are going to be cases where analogous prior images may turn out to be more useful, capable of throwing a better light on our decision than the present intuitions—for, says Bergson, those past images are themselves bound up in our memory with the whole series of subsequent events (1997a, 68/1991, 66). As both “The Memory of the Present”¹⁹ and the theory of memory in *Matter and Memory* show, the role of actual perception (in contradistinction to pure perception) may then merely consist in “call[ing] up the recollection, giv[ing] it a body, render[ing] it active and thereby actual” (ibid., 67/65). Our practical interests, the imminence of a real or an imaginary danger, *will therefore be capable of displacing reality for the sake of utility*.²⁰ In other words—and this will be the central thesis of my argument—*consciousness, or the power to act, is necessarily and positively informed by the unconscious, or nonpower, impotence (impuissance)*.

For Bergson, this implies that the coincidence that the theory of pure perception established between perception and the object perceived (i.e., the absolute objectivity of knowledge) exists in principle rather than in fact (ibid., 68/66). This does not mean, however, that idealism is justified. If it is true that our complete perception is impregnated with images that belong to us personally, it does not follow that perception is entirely subjective. Bergson is careful to remind us to not forget the impersonal ground that always subsists as exteriority itself (what Blanchot, Foucault, or Deleuze would call the “Outside”), where perception coincides with the object perceived (ibid., 69/67). But given that in its very absoluteness, exteriority preexists the distinction between exterior and interior, it cannot be *experienced* as such any longer once the interior, or self-consciousness, has been generated.²¹

The persistence and consistence of the Outside allow us to understand more clearly the reproach that Bergson addresses to both psychologists and metaphysicians who see a mere difference in degree instead of a qualitative difference in

kind between pure perception and memory. Bergson is particularly interested in demonstrating that there is a constant phenomenon of endosmosis at work between perception and memory, but it is precisely on the basis of the substantial difference of nature between the two that he enforces this argument. Indeed, Bergson adds, the failure to see this distinction condemns us to ignore either of the two phenomena, which is to say to misunderstand the essential difference between past and present (*ibid.*). This psychological error thus has immense metaphysical implications. This error also condemns us to “abandon all hope of understanding the phenomena of recognition and, more generally, the mechanism of the unconscious” (*ibid.*, 70/67).²² In my view, this suggests that “the mechanism of the unconscious,” for Bergson, does not only refer to the role of memory but also to the original act constitutive of pure perception through which we place ourselves among things *immediately*.²³ Consciousness would thus merely consist in the mediation between those two extremes (i.e., pure perception and pure memory, matter and spirit). While its examination must be primary when it comes to epistemological issues, it will turn out to be secondary when we turn to metaphysical matters.

In short, I want to add, the fundamental error that consists in overlooking the difference in kind between perception and memory cannot but vitiate all philosophies of experience. Indeed, phenomenology and existentialism themselves do not escape this fate. Despite their attempts at elaborating a theory of experience based in temporality, they fall prey to Bergson’s pitiless condemnation. For it is not enough to take “time” into account; we also need to understand the fundamental difference between the time of the philosophers, which remains relative to space and movement, and concrete duration, which makes time into an absolute, independent of simultaneity. I argued that duration coincides with succession, with the irreversibility of the arrow of time. This means that the future must be open, unpredictable, since past and present (where present also is an encroachment onto the future) are qualitatively heterogeneous.

On the one hand, the present is essentially that which acts; it is power (*puissance*). The past, on the other hand, is that which does not act any longer; it is nonpower (*impuissance*). But precisely, Deleuze points out, it does not mean that it has ceased to be; “useless and inactive, impassible, it IS in the full sense of the word: It is identical with being itself” (1998a, 50/1988, 55, trans. modified, emphasis in original [in capitals]).²⁴ Ultimately, then, for Bergson, if this primordial difference is overlooked, then “no difference but that of mere degree will remain between perception and memory and *neither from the one nor from the other will the subject rise outside of herself*” (1997a, 71/1991, 69, trans. modified, emphasis added); I argue that Bergson is here claiming that there can be no transcendence, no ground for subjectivity, unless one establishes a true difference in kind between past and present. For him, it is to mistaken epistemologies founded on a fundamental error about the function of perception that we must ascribe the failure to account for the birth of subjectivity.

Subjectivity and Memory

We are now in a position to clarify the aforementioned claim that Bergson's work may be characterized as capable of thinking both continuity and discontinuity. While the theory of pure perception allowed him to isolate an order of objective reality constituted by discontinuous successive vibrations,²⁵ his theory of memory accounts for an order of continuity that memory, qua condensation, is able to realize. In order to really understand the basis for those affirmations, we need to keep in mind that although Bergson sees a mere difference in degree between matter and conscious perception, he establishes a difference in kind between perception and memory—even though, practically, perception and memory are inseparable. This nevertheless means that matter and spirit are two orders of reality independent from one another. Against Kant, then, it is clear that our intuition of matter cannot be a mere rational construction; rather, it is necessarily immediate, hence objective. And just as we were able to establish the absoluteness of matter by means of the theory of pure perception, Bergson adds that “if, then, spirit is a reality, it is here, in the phenomenon of memory, that we may come in touch with it experimentally” (1997a, 77/1991, 73). The full sense of Bergsonian dualism can now come into focus.

To conclude this inquiry into Bergson's account of the nature of consciousness, let me just indicate yet another consequence of his insistence on the qualitative difference between matter and memory. All questions concerning the mode of the survival of the past will dismiss from the outset any psychological theory trying to locate recollections within the cerebral matter of the brain. To say, with Bergson, that the brain is a mere “central telephonic switchboard” transmitting movements is also “to say [that] it is in vain to attribute to the cerebral substance the property of engendering representations” (ibid.). In fact the final conclusions of *Matter and Memory* run as follows: “*Questions relating to subject and object, to their distinction and their union, must be put in terms of time rather than of space*” (ibid., 74/71, emphasis in original). As Frédéric Worms insightfully points out, we are here witnessing a crucial *reversal* of the relationship between the body and memory. Whereas from a practical point of view, the body is occupying the foreground in the theory of perception, it gets relegated to the background in the theory of memory. Similarly, while memory remains secondary from a practical point of view, it returns as primary with the reintroduction of time, which is to say, of becoming. Worms writes, “At bottom, the stakes are the following: the body, whose existence had been posed as an absolute in the first chapter, *now depends on memory for its conservation in time!*”²⁶ This is the key to the Virtual informing the Bergsonian unconscious.