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Winds of Doctrine

Studies in Contemporary Opinion

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III

THE PHILOSOPHY OF M. HENRI BERGSON

THE most representative and remarkable of living philosophers is M. Henri Bergson. Both the form and the substance of his works attract universal attention. His ideas are pleasing and bold, and at least in form wonderfully original; he is persuasive without argument and mystical without conventionality; he moves in the atmosphere of science and free thought, yet seems to transcend them and to be secretly religious. An undercurrent of zeal and even of prophecy seems to animate his subtle analyses and his surprising fancies. He is eloquent, and to a public rather sick of the half-education it has received and eager for some inspiring novelty he seems more eloquent than he is. He uses the French language (and little else is French about him) in the manner of the more recent artists in words, retaining the precision of phrase and the measured judgments which are traditional in French literature, yet managing to envelop everything in a penumbra of emotional suggestion. Each expression of an idea is complete in itself; yet these expressions are often varied and constantly metaphorical, so that we are led to feel that much in that idea has remained unexpressed and is indeed inexpressible.

Studied and insinuating as M. Bergson is in his style, he is no less elaborate in his learning. In the history of philosophy, in mathematics and physics, and especially in natural history he has taken great pains to survey the ground and to assimilate the views and spirit of the most recent scholars. He might be called outright an expert in all these subjects, were it not for a certain externality and want of radical sympathy in his way of conceiving them. A genuine historian of philosophy, for instance, would love to rehearse the views of great thinkers, would feel their eternal plausibility, and in interpreting them would think of himself as little as they ever thought of him. But M. Bergson evidently

regards Plato or Kant as persons who did or did not prepare the way for some Bergsonian insight. The theory of evolution, taken enthusiastically, is apt to exercise an evil influence on the moral estimation of things. First the evolutionist asserts that later things grow out of earlier, which is true of things in their causes and basis, but not in their values; as modern Greece proceeds out of ancient Greece materially but does not exactly crown it. The evolutionist, however, proceeds to assume that later things are necessarily better than what they have grown out of: and this is false altogether. This fallacy reinforces very unfortunately that inevitable esteem which people have for their own opinions, and which must always vitiate the history of philosophy when it is a philosopher that writes it. A false subordination comes to be established among systems, as if they moved in single file and all had the last, the author's system, for their secret goal. In Hegel, for instance, this conceit is conspicuous, in spite of his mastery in the dramatic presentation of points of view, for his way of reconstructing history was, on the surface, very sympathetic. He too, like M. Bergson, proceeded from learning to intuition, and feigned at every turn to identify himself with what he was describing, especially if this was a philosophical attitude or temper. Yet in reality his historical judgments were forced and brutal: Greece was but a stepping-stone to Prussia, Plato and Spinoza found their higher synthesis in himself, and (though he may not say so frankly) Jesus Christ and St. Francis realised their better selves in Luther. Actual spiritual life, the thoughts, affections, and pleasures of individuals, passed with Hegel for so much moonshine; the true spirit was "objective," it was simply the movement of those circumstances in which actual spirit arose. He was accordingly contemptuous of everything intrinsically good, and his idealism consisted in forcing the natural world into a formula of evolution and then worshipping it as the embodiment of the living God. But under the guise of optimism and belief in a cosmic reason this is mere idolatry of success—a malign superstition, by which all moral independence is crushed out and conscience enslaved to chronology; and it is no marvel if, somewhat to relieve this subjection, history in turn was expurgated, marshalled, and distorted, that it might pass muster for the work of the Holy Ghost.

In truth the value of spiritual life is intrinsic and centred at every point. It is never wholly recoverable. To recover it at all, an historian must have a certain detachment and ingenuousness; knowing the dig-

nity and simplicity of his own mind, he must courteously attribute the same dignity and simplicity to others, unless their avowed attitude prevents; this is to be an intelligent critic and to write history like a gentleman. The truth, which all philosophers alike are seeking, is eternal. It lies as near to one age as to another; the means of discovery alone change, and not always for the better. The course of evolution is no test of what is true or good; else nothing could be good intrinsically nor true simply and ultimately; on the contrary, it is the approach to truth and excellence anywhere, like the approach of tree tops to the sky, that tests the value of evolution, and determines whether it is moving upward or downward or in a circle.

M. Bergson accordingly misses fire when, for instance, in order utterly to damn a view which he has been criticising, and which may be open to objection on other grounds, he cries that those who hold it "*retardent sur Kant*"; as if a clock were the compass of the mind, and he who was one minute late was one point off the course. Kant was a hard honest thinker, more sinned against than sinning, from whom a great many people in the nineteenth century have taken their point of departure, departing as far as they chose; but if a straight line of progress could be traced at all through the labyrinth of philosophy, Kant would not lie in that line. His thought is essentially excentric and sophisticated, being largely based on two inherited blunders, which a truly progressive philosophy would have to begin by avoiding, thus leaving Kant on one side, and weathering his philosophy, as one might Scylla or Charybdis. The one blunder was that of the English malicious psychology which had maintained since the time of Locke that the ideas in the mind are the only objects of knowledge, instead of being the knowledge of objects. The other blunder was that of Protestantism that, in groping after that moral freedom which is so ineradicable a need of a pure spirit, thought to find it in a revision of revelation, tradition, and prejudice, so as to be able to cling to these a little longer. How should a system so local, so accidental, and so unstable as Kant's be prescribed as a sort of catechism for all humanity? The tree of knowledge has many branches, and all its fruits are not condemned to hang for ever from that one gnarled and contorted bough. M. Bergson himself "lags behind" Kant on those points on which his better insight requires it, as, for instance, on the reality of time; but with regard to his own philosophy I am afraid he thinks that all previous systems empty

into it, which is hardly true, and that all future systems must flow out of it, which is hardly necessary.

The embarrassment that qualifies M. Bergson's attainments in mathematics and physics has another and more personal source. He understands, but he trembles. Non-human immensities frighten him, as they did Pascal. He suffers from cosmic agoraphobia. We might think empty space an innocent harmless thing, a mere opportunity to move, which ought to be highly prized by all devotees of motion. But M. Bergson is instinctively a mystic, and his philosophy deliberately discredits the existence of anything except in immediacy, that is, as an experience of the heart. What he dreads in space is that the heart should be possessed by it, and transformed into it. He dreads that the imagination should be fascinated by the homogeneous and static, hypnotised by geometry, and actually lost in *Auseinandersein*. This would be a real death and petrification of consciousness, frozen into contemplation of a monotonous infinite void. What is warm and desirable is rather the sense of variety and succession, as if all visions radiated from the occupied focus or hearth of the self. The more concentration at this habitable point, with the more mental perspectives opening backwards and forwards through time, in a word, the more personal and historical the apparition, the better it would be. Things must be reduced again to what they seem; it is vain and terrible to take them for what we find they are. M. Bergson is at bottom an apologist for very old human prejudices, an apologist for animal illusion. His whole labour is a plea for some vague but comfortable faith which he dreads to have stolen from him by the progress of art and knowledge. There is a certain trepidation, a certain suppressed instinct to snap at and sting the hated oppressor, as if some desperate small being were at bay before a horrible monster. M. Bergson is afraid of space, of mathematics, of necessity, and of eternity; he is afraid of the intellect and the possible discoveries of science; he is afraid of nothingness and death. These fears may prevent him from being a philosopher in the old and noble sense of the word; but they sharpen his sense for many a psychological problem, and make him the spokesman of many an inarticulate soul. Animal timidity and animal illusion are deep in the heart of all of us. Practice may compel us to bow to the conventions of the intellect, as to those of polite society; but secretly, in our moments of immersion in ourselves, we may find them a great nuisance, even a vain nightmare. Could we only listen undisturbed to the beat of pro-

toplasm in our hearts, would not that oracle solve all the riddles of the universe, or at least avoid them?

To protect this inner conviction, however, it is necessary for the mystic to sally forth and attack the enemy on his own ground. If he refuted physics and mathematics simply out of his own faith, he might be accused of ignorance of the subject. He will therefore study it conscientiously, yet with a certain irritation and haste to be done with it, somewhat as a Jesuit might study Protestant theology. Such a student, however, is apt to lose his pains; for in retracing a free inquiry in his servile spirit, he remains deeply ignorant, not indeed of its form, but of its nature and value. Why, for instance, has M. Bergson such a horror of mechanical physics? He seems to think it a black art, dealing in unholy abstractions, and rather dangerous to salvation, and he keeps his metaphysical exorcisms and antidotes always at hand, to render it innocuous, at least to his own soul. But physical science never solicited of anybody that he should be wholly absorbed in the contemplation of atoms, and worship them; that we must worship and lose ourselves in reality, whatever reality may be, is a mystic aberration, which physical science does nothing to foster. Nor does any critical physicist suppose that what he describes is the whole of the object; he merely notes the occasions on which its sensible qualities appear, and calculates events. Because the calculable side of nature is his province, he does not deny that events have other aspects—the psychic and the moral, for instance—no less real in their way, in terms of which calculation would indeed be impossible. If he chances to call the calculable elements of nature her substance, as it is proper to do, that name is given without passion; he may perfectly well proclaim with Goethe that it is in the accidents, in the *farbiger Abglanz*, that we have our life. And if it be for his freedom that the mystic trembles, I imagine any man of science would be content with M. Bergson's assertion that true freedom is the *sense* of freedom, and that in any intelligible statement of the situation, even the most indeterministic, this freedom disappears; for it is an immediate experience, not any scheme of relation between events.

The horror of mechanical physics arises, then, from attributing to that science pretensions and extensions which it does not have; it arises from the habits of theology and metaphysics being imported inopportunistly into science. Similarly when M. Bergson mentions mathematics, he seems to be thinking of the supposed authority it exercises—one of Kant's confusions—over the empirical world, and

trying to limit and subordinate that authority, lest movement should somehow be removed from nature, and vagueness from human thought. But nature and human thought are what they are; they have enough affinity to mathematics, as it happens, to suggest that study to our minds, and to give those who go deep into it a great, though partial, mastery over things. Nevertheless a true mathematician is satisfied with the hypothetical and ideal cogency of his science, and puts its dignity in that. Moreover, M. Bergson has the too pragmatic notion that the use of mathematics is to keep our accounts straight in this business world; whereas its inherent use is emancipating and Platonic, in that it shows us the possibility of other worlds, less contingent and perturbed than this one. If he allows himself any excursus from his beloved immediacy, it is only in the interests of practice; he little knows the pleasures of a liberal mind, ranging over the congenial realm of internal accuracy and ideal truth, where it can possess itself of what treasures it likes in perfect security and freedom. An artist in his workmanship, M. Bergson is not an artist in his allegiance; he has no respect for what is merely ideal.

For this very reason, perhaps, he is more at home in natural history than in the exact sciences. He has the gift of observation, and can suggest vividly the actual appearance of natural processes, in contrast to the verbal paraphrase of these processes which is sometimes taken to explain them. He is content to stop at habit without formulating laws; he refuses to assume that the large obvious cycles of change in things can be reduced to mechanism, that is, to minute included cycles repeated *ad libitum*. He may sometimes defend this refusal by sophisticated arguments, as when he says that mechanism would require the last stage of the universe to be simultaneous with the first, forgetting that the unit of mechanism is not a mathematical equation but some observed typical event. The refusal itself, however, would be honest scepticism enough were it made with no *arrière pensée*, but simply in view of the immense complexity of the facts and the extreme simplicity of the mechanical hypothesis. In such a situation, to halt at appearances might seem the mark of a true naturalist and a true empiricist not misled by speculative haste and the human passion for system and simplification. At the first reading, M. Bergson's *Evolution Créatrice* may well dazzle the professional naturalist and seem to him an illuminating confession of the nature and limits of his science; yet a second reading, I have good authority for saying, may as easily reverse that

impression. M. Bergson never reviews his facts in order to understand them, but only if possible to discredit others who may have fancied they understood. He raises difficulties, he marks the problems that confront the naturalist, and the inadequacy of explanations that may have been suggested. Such criticism would be a valuable beginning if it were followed by the suggestion of some new solution; but the suggestion only is that no solution is possible, that the phenomena of life are simply miraculous, and that it is in the tendency or vocation of the animal, not in its body or its past, that we must see the ground of what goes on before us.

With such a philosophy of science, it is evident that all progress in the understanding of nature would cease, as it ceased after Aristotle. The attempt would again be abandoned to reduce gross and obvious cycles of change, such as generation, growth, and death, to minute latent cycles, so that natural history should offer a picturesque approach to universal physics. If for the magic power of types, invoked by Aristotle, we substituted with M. Bergson the magic power of the *élan vital*, that is, of evolution in general, we should be referring events not to finer, more familiar, more pervasive processes, but to one all-embracing process, unique and always incomplete. Our understanding would end in something far vaguer and looser than what our observation began with. Aristotle at least could refer particulars to their specific types, as medicine and social science are still glad enough to do, to help them in guessing and in making a learned show before the public. But if divination and eloquence—for science is out of the question—were to invoke nothing but a fluid tendency to grow, we should be left with a flat history of phenomena and no means of prediction or even classification. All knowledge would be reduced to gossip, infinitely diffuse, perhaps enlisting our dramatic feelings, but yielding no intellectual mastery of experience, no practical competence, and no moral lesson. The world would be a serial novel, to be continued for ever, and all men mere novel-readers.

Nothing is more familiar to philosophers nowadays than that criticism of knowledge by which we are thrown back upon the appearances from which science starts, upon what is known to children and savages, whilst all that which long experience and reason may infer from those appearances is set down as so much hypothesis; and indeed it is through hypothesis that latent being, if such there be, comes before the mind at all. Now such criticism of knowledge might

have been straightforward and ingenuous. It might have simply disclosed the fact, very salutary to meditate upon, that the whole frame of nature, with the minds that animate it, is disclosed to us by intelligence; that if we were not intelligent our sensations would exist for us without meaning anything, as they exist for idiots. The criticism of knowledge, however, has usually been taken maliciously, in the sense that it is the idiots only that are not deceived; for any interpretation of sensation is a mental figment, and while experience may have any extent it will it cannot possibly, they say, have expressive value; it cannot reveal anything going on beneath. Intelligence and science are accordingly declared to have no penetration, no power to disclose what is latent, for nothing latent exists; they can at best furnish symbols for past or future sensations and the order in which they arise; they can be seven-league boots for striding over the surface of sentience.

This negative dogmatism as to knowledge was rendered harmless and futile by the English philosophers, in that they maintained at the same time that everything happens exactly *as if* the intellect were a true instrument of discovery, and *as if* a material world underlay our experience and furnished all its occasions. Hume, Mill, and Huxley were scientific at heart, and full of the intelligence they dissected; they seemed to cry to nature: Though thou dost not exist, yet will I trust in thee. Their idealism was a theoretical scruple rather than a passionate superstition. Not so M. Bergson; he is not so simple as to invoke the malicious criticism of knowledge in order to go on thinking rationalistically. Reason and science make him deeply uncomfortable. His point accordingly is not merely that mechanism is a hypothesis, but that it is a wrong hypothesis. Events do not come as if mechanism brought them about; they come, at least in the organic world, as if a magic destiny, and inscrutable ungovernable effort, were driving them on.

Thus M. Bergson introduces metaphysics into natural history; he invokes, in what is supposed to be science, the agency of a power, called the *élan vital*, on a level with the "Will" of Schopenhauer or the "Unknowable Force" of Herbert Spencer. But there is a scientific vitalism also, which it is well to distinguish from the metaphysical sort. The point at issue between vitalism and mechanism in biology is whether the living processes in nature can be resolved into a combination of the material. The material processes will always remain vital, if we take this word in a descriptive and poetic sense; for they will contain

a movement having a certain idiosyncrasy and taking a certain time, like the fall of an apple. The movement of nature is never dialectical; the first part of any event does not logically imply the last part of it. Physics is descriptive, historical, reporting after the fact what are found to be the habits of matter. But if these habits are constant and calculable we call the vitality of them mechanical. Thus the larger processes of nature, no matter how vital they may be and whatever consciousness may accompany them, will always be mechanical if they can be calculated and predicted, being a combination of the more minute and widespread processes which they contain. The only question therefore is: Do processes such as nutrition and reproduction arise by a combination of such events as the fall of apples? Or are they irreducible events, and units of mechanism by themselves? That is the dilemma as it appears in science. Both possibilities will always remain open, because however far mechanical analysis may go, many phenomena, as human apprehension presents them, will always remain irreducible to any common denominator with the rest; and on the other hand, wherever the actual reduction of the habits of animals to those of matter may have stopped, we can never know that a further reduction is impossible.

The balance of reasonable presumption, however, is not even. The most inclusive movements known to us in nature, the astronomical, are calculable, and so are the most minute and pervasive processes, the chemical. These are also, if evolution is to be accepted, the earliest processes upon which all others have supervened and out of which, as it were, they have grown. Apart from miraculous intervention, therefore, the assumption seems to be inevitable that the intermediate processes are calculable too, and compounded out of the others. The appearance to the contrary presented in animal and social life is easily explicable on psychological grounds. We read inevitably in terms of our passions those things which affect them or are analogous to what involves passion in ourselves; and when the mechanism of them is hidden from us, as is that of our bodies, we suppose that these passions which we find on the surface in ourselves, or read into other creatures, are the substantial and only forces that carry on our part of the world. Penetrating this illusion, dispassionate observers in all ages have received the general impression that nature is one and mechanical. This was, and still remains, a general impression only; but I suspect no one who walks the earth with his eyes open would be concerned to

resist it, were it not for certain fond human conceits which such a view would rebuke and, if accepted, would tend to obliterate. The psychological illusion that our ideas and purposes are original facts and forces (instead of expressions in consciousness of facts and forces which are material) and the practical and optical illusion that everything wheels about us in this world—these are the primitive persuasions which the enemies of naturalism have always been concerned to protect.

One might indeed be a vitalist in biology, out of pure caution and conscientiousness, without sharing those prejudices; and many a speculative philosopher has been free from them who has been a vitalist in metaphysics. Schopenhauer, for instance, observed that the cannon-ball which, if self-conscious, would think it moved freely, would be quite right in thinking so. The “Will” was as evident to him in mechanism as in animal life. M. Bergson, in the more hidden reaches of his thought, seems to be a universal vitalist; apparently an *élan vital* must have existed once to deposit in inorganic matter the energy stored there, and to set mechanism going. But he relies on biology alone to prove the present existence of an independent effort to live; this is needed to do what mechanism, as he thinks, could never do; it is not needed to do, as in Schopenhauer, what mechanism does. M. Bergson thus introduces his metaphysical force as a peculiar requirement of biology; he breaks the continuity of nature; he loses the poetic justification of a metaphysical vitalism; he asks us to believe that life is not a natural expression of material being, but an alien and ghostly madness descending into it—I say a ghostly madness, for why should disembodied life wish that the body should live? This vitalism is not a kind of biology more prudent and literal than the mechanical kind (as a scientific vitalism would be), but far less legitimately speculative. Nor is it a frank and thorough mythology, such as the total spectacle of the universe might suggest to an imaginative genius. It is rather a popular animism, insisting on a sympathetic interpretation of nature where human sympathy is quick and easy, and turning this sympathy into a revelation of the absolute, but leaving the rest of nature cold, because to sympathise with its movement there is harder for anxious, self-centred mortals, and requires a disinterested mind. M. Bergson would have us believe that mankind is what nature has set her heart on and the best she can do, for whose sake she has been long making very special efforts. We are fortunate that at least her darling is all mankind and not merely Israel.

In spite, then, of M. Bergson's learning as a naturalist and his eye for the facts—things Aristotle also possessed—he is like Aristotle profoundly out of sympathy with nature. Aristotle was alienated from nature and any penetrating study of it by the fact that he was a disciple of Socrates, and therefore essentially a moralist and a logician. M. Bergson is alienated from nature by something quite different; he is the adept of a very modern, very subtle, and very arbitrary art, that of literary psychology. In this art the imagination is invited to conceive things as if they were all centres of passion and sensation. Literary psychology is not a science; it is practised by novelists and poets; yet if it is to be brilliantly executed it demands a minute and extended observation of life. Unless your psychological novelist had crammed his memory with pictures of the ways and aspects of men he would have no starting-point for his psychological fictions; he would not be able to render them circumstantial and convincing. Just so M. Bergson's achievements in psychological fiction, to be so brilliantly executed as they are, required all his learning. The history of philosophy, mathematics, and physics, and above all natural history, had to supply him first with suggestions; and if he is not really a master in any of those fields, that is not to be wondered at. His heart is elsewhere. To write a universal biological romance, such as he has sketched for us in his system, he would ideally have required all scientific knowledge, but only as Homer required the knowledge of seamanship, generalship, statecraft, augury, and charioteering, in order to turn the aspects of them into poetry, and not with that technical solidity which Plato unjustly blames him for not possessing. Just so M. Bergson's proper achievement begins where his science ends, and his philosophy lies entirely beyond the horizon of possible discoveries or empirical probabilities. In essence, it is myth or fable; but in the texture and degree of its fabulousness it differs notably from the performances of previous metaphysicians. Primitive poets, even ancient philosophers, were not psychologists; their fables were compacted out of elements found in practical life, and they reckoned in the units in which language and passion reckon—wooing, feasting, fighting, vice, virtue, happiness, justice. Above all, they talked about persons or about ideals; this man, this woman, this typical thought or sentiment was what fixed their attention and seemed to them the ultimate thing. Not so M. Bergson: he is a microscopic psychologist, and even in man what he studies by preference is not some integrated passion or idea, but something far

more recondite; the minute texture of sensation, memory, or impulse. Sharp analysis is required to distinguish or arrest these elements, yet these are the predestined elements of his fable; and so his anthropomorphism is far less obvious than that of most poets and theologians, though no less real.

This peculiarity in the terms of the myth carries with it a notable extension in its propriety. The social and moral phenomena of human life cannot be used in interpreting life elsewhere without a certain conscious humour. This makes the charm of avowed writers of fable; their playful travesty and dislocation of things human, which would be puerile if they meant to be naturalists, render them piquant moralists; for they are not really interpreting animals, but under the mask of animals maliciously painting men. Such fables are morally interesting and plausible just because they are psychologically false. If Æsop could have reported what lions and lambs, ants and donkeys, really feel and think, his poems would have been perfect riddles to the public; and they would have had no human value except that of illustrating, to the truly speculative philosopher, the irresponsible variety of animal consciousness and its incommensurable types. Now M. Bergson's psychological fictions, being drawn from what is rudimentary in man, have a better chance of being literally true beyond man. Indeed what he asks us to do, and wishes to do himself, is simply to absorb so completely the aspect and habit of things that the soul of them may take possession of us: that we may know by intuition the *élan vital* which the world expresses, just as Paolo, in Dante, knew by intuition the *élan vital* that the smile of Francesca expressed.

The correctness of such an intuition, however, rests on a circumstance which M. Bergson does not notice, because his psychology is literary and not scientific. It rests on the possibility of imitation. When the organism observed and that of the observer have a similar structure and can imitate one another, the idea produced in the observer by intent contemplation is like the experience present to the person contemplated. But where this contagion of attitude, and therefore of feeling, is impossible, our intuition of our neighbours' souls remains subjective and has no value as a revelation. Psychological novelists, when they describe people such as they themselves are or might have been, may describe them truly; but beyond that limit their personages are merely plausible, that is, such as might be conceived by an equally ignorant reader in the presence of the same external indications. So,

for instance, the judgment which a superficial traveller passes on foreign manners or religions is plausible to him and to his compatriots just because it represents the feeling that such manifestations awaken in strangers and does not attempt to convey the very different feeling really involved for the natives; had the latter been discovered and expressed the traveller's book would have found little understanding and no sale in his own country. This plausibility to the ignorant is present in all spontaneous myth. Nothing more need be demanded of irresponsible fiction, which makes no pretensions to be a human document, but is merely a human entertainment.

Now, a human psychology, even of the finest grain, when it is applied to the interpretation of the soul of matter, or of the soul of the whole universe, obviously yields a view of the irresponsible and subjective sort; for it is not based on any close similarity between the observed and the observer: man and the ether, man and cosmic evolution, cannot mimic one another, to discover mutually how they feel. But just because merely human, such an interpretation may remain always plausible to man; and it would be an admirable entertainment if there were no danger that it should be taken seriously. The idea Paul has of Peter, Spinoza observes, expresses the nature of Peter less than it betrays that of Paul; and so an idea framed by a man of the consciousness of things in general reveals the mind of that man rather than the mind of the universe; but the mind of the man too may be worth knowing, and the illusive hope of discovering everything may lead him truly to disclose himself. Such a disclosure of the lower depths of man by himself is M. Bergson's psychology; and the psychological romance, purporting to describe the inward nature of the universe, which he has built out of that introspection, is his metaphysics.

Many a point in this metaphysics may seem strange, fantastic, and obscure; and so it really is, when dislocated and projected metaphysically; but not one will be found to be arbitrary; not one but is based on attentive introspection and perception of the immediate. Take, for example, what is M. Bergson's starting-point, his somewhat dazzling doctrine that to be is to last, or rather to feel oneself endure. This is a hypostasis of "true" (*i.e.* immediately felt) duration. In a sensuous day-dream past feelings survive in the present, images of the long ago are shuffled together with present sensations, the roving imagination leaves a bright wake behind it like a comet, and pushes a rising wave before it, like the bow of a ship; all is fluidity, continuity without iden-

ity, novelty without surprise. Hence, too, the doctrine of freedom: the images that appear in such a day-dream are often congruous in character with those that preceded, and mere prolongations of them; but this prolongation itself modifies them, and what develops is in no way deducible or predictable out of what exists. This situation is perfectly explicable scientifically. The movement of consciousness will be self-congruous and sustained when it rests on continuous processes in the same tissues, and yet quite unpredictable from within, because the direct sensuous report of bodily processes (in nausea, for instance, or in hunger) contains no picture of their actual mechanism. Even wholly new features, due to little crises in bodily life, may appear in a dream to flow out of what already exists, yet freely develop it; because in dreams comparison, the attempt to be consistent, is wholly in abeyance, and also because the new feature will come imbedded in others which are not new, but have dramatic relevance in the story. So immediate consciousness yields the two factors of Bergsonian freedom, continuity and indetermination.

Again, take the somewhat disconcerting assertion that movement exists when there is nothing that moves, and no space that it moves through. In vision, perhaps, it is not easy to imagine a consciousness of motion without some presentation of a field, and of a distinguishable something in it; but if we descend to somatic feelings (and the more we descend, with M. Bergson, the closer we are to reality), in shooting pains or the sense of intestinal movements, the feeling of a change and of a motion is certainly given in the absence of all idea of a *mobile* or of distinct points (or even of a separate field) through which it moves; consciousness begins with the sense of change, and the terms of the felt process are only qualitative limits, bred out of the felt process itself. Even a more paradoxical tenet of our philosopher's finds its justification here. He says that the units of motion are indivisible, that they are acts; so that to solve the riddle about Achilles and the tortoise we need no mathematics of the infinitesimal, but only to ask Achilles how he accomplishes the feat. Achilles would reply that in so many strides he would do it; and we may be surprised to learn that these strides are indivisible, so that, apparently, Achilles could not have stumbled in the middle of one, and taken only half of it. Of course, in nature, in what non-Bergsonians call reality, he could: but not in his immediate feeling, for if he had stumbled, the real stride, that which he was aware of taking, would have been complete at the stumbling-

point. It is certain that consciousness comes in stretches, in breaths: all its data are æsthetic wholes, like visions or snatches of melody; and we should never be aware of anything were we not aware of something all at once.

When a man has taught himself—and it is a difficult art—to revert in this way to rudimentary consciousness and to watch himself live, he will be able, if he likes, to add a plausible chapter to speculative psychology. He has unearthed in himself the animal sensibility which has thickened, budded, and crystallised into his present somewhat intellectual image of the world. He has touched again the vegetative stupor, the multiple disconnected landscapes, the “blooming buzzing confusion” which his reason has partly set in order. May he not have in all this a key to the consciousness of other creatures? Animal psychology, and sympathy with the general life of nature, are vitiated both for naturalists and for poets by the human terms they must use, terms which presuppose distinctions which non-human beings probably have not made. These distinctions correct the illusions of immediate appearance in ways which only a long and special experience has imposed upon us, and they should not be imported into other souls. We are old men trying to sing the loves of children; we are wingless bipeds trying to understand the gods. But the data of the immediate are hardly human; it is probable that at that level all sentience is much alike. From that common ground our imagination can perhaps start safely, and follow such hints as observation furnishes, until we learn to live and feel as other living things do, or as nature may live and feel as a whole. Instinct, for instance, need not be, as our human prejudice suggests, a rudimentary intelligence; it may be a parallel sort of sensibility, an imageless awareness of the presence and character of other things, with a superhuman ability to change oneself so as to meet them. Do we not feel something of this sort ourselves in love, in art, in religion? M. Bergson is a most delicate and charming poet on this theme, and a plausible psychologist; his method of accumulating and varying his metaphors, and leaving our intuition to itself under that artful stimulus, is the only judicious and persuasive method he could have employed, and his knack at it is wonderful. We recover, as we read, the innocence of the mind. It seems no longer impossible that we might, like the wise men in the story-books, learn the language of birds; we share for the moment the siestas of plants; and we catch the quick consciousness of the waves of light, vibrating at inconceivable

rates, each throb forgotten as the next follows upon it; and we may be tempted to play on Shakespeare and say:

“Like as the waves make towards the pebbled shore,
So do *their spirits* hasten to their end.”

Some reader of M. Bergson might say to himself: All this is ingenious introspection and divination; grant that it is true, and how does that lead to a new theory of the universe? You have been studying surface appearances and the texture of primitive consciousness; that is a part of the internal rumble of this great engine of the world. How should it loosen or dissolve that engine, as your philosophy evidently professes that it must? That nature exists we perceive whenever we resume our intellectual and practical life, interrupted for a moment by this interesting reversion to the immediate. The consciousness which in introspection we treat as an object is, in operation, a cognitive activity: it demonstrates the world. You would never yourself have conceived the minds of ethereal vibrations, or of birds, or of ants, or of men suspending their intelligence, if you had known of no men, ants, birds, or ether. It is the material objects that suggest to you their souls, and teach you how to conceive them. How then should the souls be substituted for the bodies, and abolish them?

Poor guileless reader! If philosophers were straightforward men of science, adding each his mite to the general store of knowledge, they would all substantially agree, and while they might make interesting discoveries, they would not herald each his new transformation of the whole universe. But philosophers are either revolutionists or apologists, and some of them, like M. Bergson, are revolutionists in the interests of apologetics. Their art is to create some surprising inversion of things, some system of the universe contrary to common apprehension, or to defend some such inverted system, propounded by poets long ago, and perhaps consecrated by religion. It would not require a great man to say calmly: Men, birds, even ether-waves, if you will, feel after this and this fashion. The greatness and the excitement begin when he says: Your common sense, your practical intellect, your boasted science have entirely deceived you; see what the real truth is instead! So M. Bergson is bent on telling us that the immediate, as he describes it, is the sole reality; all else is unreal, artificial, and a more or less convenient symbol in discourse – discourse itself being taken, of

course, for a movement in immediate sensibility, which is what it is existentially, but never for an excursion into an independent logical realm, which is what it is spiritually and in intent. So we must revise all our psychological observations, and turn them into metaphysical dogmas. It would be nothing to say simply: *For immediate feeling* the past is contained in the present, movement is prior to that which moves, spaces are many, disconnected, and incommensurable, events are indivisible wholes, perception is in its object and identical with it, the future is unpredictable, the complex is bred out of the simple, and evolution is creative, its course being obedient to a general tendency or groping impulse, not to any exact law. No, we must say instead: *In the universe at large* the whole past is preserved bodily in the present; duration is real and space is only imagined; all is motion, and there is nothing substantial that moves; times are incommensurable; men, birds, and waves are nothing but the images of them (our perceptions, like their spirits, being some compendium of these images); chance intervenes in the flux, but evolution is due to an absolute Effort which exists *in vacuo* and is simplicity itself; and this Effort, without having an idea of what it pursues, nevertheless produces it out of nothing.

The accuracy or the hollowness of M. Bergson's doctrine, according as we take it for literary psychology or for natural philosophy, will appear clearly in the following instance. "Any one," he writes,¹ "who has ever practised literary composition knows very well that, after he has devoted long study to the subject, collected all the documents, and taken all his notes, one thing more is needful before he can actually embark on the work of composition; namely, an effort, often a very painful one, to plant himself all at once in the very heart of the subject, and to fetch from as profound a depth as possible the momentum by which he need simply let himself be borne along in the sequel. This momentum, as soon as it is acquired, carries the mind forward along a path where it recovers all the facts it had gathered together, and a thousand other details besides. The momentum develops and breaks up of itself into particulars that might be retailed *ad infinitum*. The more he advances the more he finds; he will never have exhausted the subject; and nevertheless if he turns round suddenly to face the momentum he feels at his back and see what it is, it eludes him; for it

¹ "Introduction à la Métaphysique." *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*, Janvier, 1903.

is not a thing but a direction of movement, and though capable of being extended indefinitely, it is simplicity itself."

This is evidently well observed: heighten the tone a little, and you might have a poem on those joyful pangs of gestation and parturition which are not denied to a male animal. It is a description of the *sensation* of literary composition, of the *immediate experience* of a writer as words and images rise into his mind. He cannot summon his memories explicitly, for he would first have to remember them to do so; his consciousness of inspiration, of literary creation, is nothing but a consciousness of pregnancy and of a certain "direction of movement," as if he were being wafted in a balloon; and just in its moments of highest tension his mind is filled with mere expectancy and mere excitement, without images, plans, or motives; and what guides it is inwardly, as M. Bergson says, simplicity itself. Yet excellent as such a description is psychologically, it is a literary confession rather than a piece of science; for scientific psychology is a part of natural history, and when in nature we come upon such a notable phenomenon as this, that some men write and write eloquently, we should at once study the antecedents and the conditions under which this occurs; we should try, by experiment if possible, to see what variations in the result follow upon variations in the situation. At once we should begin to perceive how casual and superficial are those data of introspection which M. Bergson's account reproduces. Does that painful effort, for instance, occur always? Is it the moral source, as he seems to suggest, of the good and miraculous fruits that follow? Not at all: such an effort is required only when the writer is overworked, or driven to express himself under pressure; in the spontaneous talker or singer, in the orator surpassing himself and overflowing with eloquence, there is no effort at all; only facility, and joyous undirected abundance. We should further ask whether *all* the facts previously gathered are recovered, and all correctly, and what relation the "thousand other details" have to them; and we should find that everything was controlled and supplied by the sensuous endowment of the literary man, his moral complexion, and his general circumstances. And we should perceive at the same time that the momentum which to introspection was so mysterious was in fact the discharge of many automatisms long imprinted on the system, a system (as growth and disease show) that has its internal vegetation and crises of maturity, to which facility and error in the recovery of the past, and creation also, are closely attached. Thus we

should utterly refuse to say that this momentum was capable of being extended indefinitely or was simplicity itself. It may be a good piece of literary psychology to say that simplicity precedes complexity, for it precedes complexity in consciousness. Consciousness dwindles and flares up most irresponsibly, so long as its own flow alone is regarded, and it continually arises out of nothing, which indeed is simplicity itself. But it does not arise without real conditions outside, which cannot be discovered by introspection, nor divined by that literary psychology which proceeds by imagining what introspection might yield in others.

There is a deeper mystification still in this passage, where a writer is said to "plant himself in the very heart of the subject." The general tenor of M. Bergson's philosophy warrants us in taking this quite literally to mean that the field from which inspiration draws its materials is not the man's present memory nor even his past experience, but the subject itself which that experience and this memory regard: in other words, what we write about and our latent knowledge are the same thing. When Shakespeare was composing his *Antony and Cleopatra*, for instance, he planted himself in the very heart of Rome and of Egypt, and in the very heart of the Queen of Egypt herself; what he had gathered from Plutarch and from elsewhere was, according to M. Bergson's view, a sort of glimpse of the remote reality itself, as if by telepathy he had been made to witness some part of it; or rather as if the scope of his consciousness had been suddenly extended in one direction, so as to embrace and contain bodily a bit of that outlying experience. Thus when the poet sifts his facts and sets his imagination to work at unifying and completing them, what he does is to pierce to Egypt, Rome, and the inner consciousness of Cleopatra, to fetch *thence* the profound momentum which is to guide him in composition; and it is there, not in the adventitious later parts of his own mind, that he should find the thousand other details which he may add to the picture.

Here again, in an exaggerated form, we have a transcript of the immediate, a piece of really wonderful introspection, spoiled by being projected into a theory of nature, which it spoils in its turn. Doubtless Shakespeare, in the heat of dramatic vision, lived his characters, transported himself to their environment, and felt the passion of each, as we do in a dream, dictating their unpremeditated words. But all this is in imagination; it is true only within the framework of our dream. In reality, of course, Shakespeare never pierced to Rome nor to Egypt;

his elaborations of his data are drawn from his own feelings and circumstances, not from those of Cleopatra. This transporting oneself into the heart of a subject is a loose metaphor: the best one can do is to transplant the subject into one's own heart and draw *from oneself* impulses as profound as possible with which to vivify tradition and make it over in one's own image. Yet I fear that to speak so is rationalism, and would be found to involve, to the horror of our philosopher, that life is cognitive and spiritual, but dependent, discontinuous, and unsubstantial. What he conceives instead is that consciousness is a stuff out of which things are made, and has all the attributes, even the most material, of its several objects; and that there is no possibility of knowing, save by becoming what one is trying to know. So perception, for him, lies where its object does, and is some part of it; memory is the past experience itself, somehow shining through into the present; and Shakespeare's Cleopatra, I should infer, would have to be some part of Cleopatra herself—in those moments when she spoke English.

It is hard to be a just critic of mysticism because mysticism can never do itself justice in words. To conceive of an external actual Cleopatra and an external actual mind of Shakespeare is to betray the cause of pure immediacy; and I suspect that if M. Bergson heard of such criticisms as I am making, he would brush them aside as utterly blind and scholastic. As the mystics have always said that God was not far from them, but dwelt in their hearts, meaning this pretty literally: so this mystical philosophy of the immediate, which talks sometimes so scientifically of things and with such intimacy of knowledge, feels that these things are not far from it, but dwell literally in its heart. The revelation and the sentiment of them, if it be thorough, is just what the things are. The total aspects to be discerned in a body *are* that body; and the movement of those aspects, when you enact it, *is* the spirit of that body, and at the same time a part of your own spirit. To suppose that a man's consciousness (either one's own or other people's) is a separate fact over and above the shuffling of the things he feels, or that these things are anything over and above the feeling of them which exists more or less everywhere in diffusion—that, for the mystic, is to be once for all hopelessly intellectual, dualistic, and diabolical. If you cannot shed the husk of those dead categories—space, matter, mind, truth, person—life is shut out of your heart. And the mystic, who always speaks out of experience, is certainly right in this, that a certain sort of life is shut out by reason, the sort that reason calls dreaming or

madness; but he forgets that reason too is a kind of life, and that of all the kinds—mystical, passionate, practical, æsthetic, intellectual—with their various degrees of light and heat, the life of reason is that which some people may prefer. I confess I am one of these, and I am not inclined, even if I were able, to reproduce M. Bergson's sentiments as he feels them. He is his own perfect expositor. All a critic can aim at is to understand these sentiments as existing facts, and to give them the place that belongs to them in the moral world. To understand, in most cases, is intimacy enough.

Herbert Spencer says somewhere that the yolk of an egg is homogeneous, the highly heterogeneous bird being differentiated in it by the law of evolution. I cannot think what assured Spencer of this homogeneity in the egg, except the fact that perhaps it all tasted alike, which might seem good proof to a pure empiricist. Leibnitz, on the contrary, maintained that the organisation of nature was infinitely deep, every part consisting of an endless number of discrete elements. Here we may observe the difference between good philosophy and bad. The idea of Leibnitz is speculative and far outruns the evidence, but it is speculative in a well-advised, penetrating, humble, and noble fashion; while the idea of Spencer is foolishly dogmatic, it is a piece of ignorant self-sufficiency, like that insular empiricism that would deny that Chinamen were real until it had actually seen them. Nature is richer than experience and wider than divination; and it is far rasher and more arrogant to declare that any part of nature is simple than to suggest the sort of complexity that perhaps it might have. M. Bergson, however, is on the side of Spencer. After studiously examining the egg on every side—for he would do more than taste it—and considering the source and destiny of it, he would summon his intuition to penetrate to the very heart of it, to its spirit, and then he would declare that this spirit was a vital momentum without parts and without ideas, and was simplicity itself. He would add that it was the free and original creator of the bird, because it is of the essence of spirit to bestow more than it possesses and to build better than it knows. Undoubtedly actual spirit is simple and does not know how it builds; but for that very reason actual spirit does not really create or build anything, but merely watches, now with sympathetic, now with shocked attention, what is being created and built for it. Doubtless new things are always arising, new islands, new persons, new philosophies; but that the real cause of them should be simpler than they, that their Creator, if I may

use this language, should be ignorant and give more than he has, who can stomach that?

Let us grant, however, since the thing is not abstractly inconceivable, that eggs really have no structure. To what, then, shall we attribute the formation of birds? Will it follow that evolution, or differentiation, or the law of the passage from the homogeneous to the heterogeneous, or the dialectic of the concept of pure being, or the impulse towards life, or the vocation of spirit is what actually hatches them? Alas, these words are but pedantic and rhetorical cloaks for our ignorance, and to project them behind the facts and regard them as presiding from thence over the course of nature is a piece of the most deplorable scholasticism. If eggs are really without structure, the true causes of the formation of birds are the last conditions, whatever they may be, that introduce that phenomenon and determine its character—the type of the parents, the act of fertilisation, the temperature, or whatever else observation might find regularly to precede and qualify that new birth in nature. These facts, if they were the ultimate and deepest facts in the case, would be the ultimate and only possible terms in which to explain it. They would constitute the mechanism of reproduction; and if nature were no finer than that in its structure, science could not go deeper than that in its discoveries. And although it is frivolous to suppose that nature ends in this way at the limits of our casual apprehension, and has no hidden roots, yet philosophically that would be as good a stopping place as any other. Ultimately we should have to be satisfied with some factual conjunction and method in events. If atoms and their collisions, by any chance, were the ultimate and inmost facts discoverable, they would supply the explanation of everything, in the only sense in which anything existent can be explained at all. If somebody then came to us enthusiastically and added that the Will of the atoms so to be and move was the true cause, or the Will of God that they should move so, he would not be reputed, I suppose, to have thrown a bright light on the subject.

Yet this is what M. Bergson does in his whole defence of metaphysical vitalism, and especially in the instance of the evolution of eyes by two different methods, which is his palmary argument. Since in some molluscs and in vertebrates organs that coincide in being organs of vision are reached by distinct paths, it cannot have been the propulsion of mechanism in each case, he says, that guided the developments, which, being divergent, would never have led to coincident

results, but the double development must have been guided by a common *tendency towards vision*. Suppose (what some young man in a laboratory may by this time have shown to be false) that M. Bergson's observations have sounded the facts to the bottom; it would then be of the ultimate nature of things that, given light and the other conditions, the two methods of development will end in eyes; just as, for a peasant, it is of the ultimate nature of things that puddles can be formed in two quite opposite ways, by rain falling from heaven and by springs issuing from the earth; but as the peasant would not have reached a profound insight into nature if he had proclaimed the presence in her of a *tendency to puddles*, to be formed in inexplicably different ways; so the philosopher attains to no profound insight when he proclaims in her a *tendency to vision*. If those words express more than ignorance, they express the love of it. Even if the vitalists were right in despairing of further scientific discoveries, they would be wrong in offering their verbiage as a substitute. Nature may possibly have only a very loose hazy constitution, to be watched and understood as sailors watch and understand the weather; but Neptune and Æolus are not thereby proved to be the authors of storms. Yet M. Bergson thinks if life could only be safely shown to arise unaccountably, that would prove the invisible efficacy of a mighty tendency to life. But would the ultimate contexture and miracle of things be made less arbitrary, and less a matter of brute fact, by the presence behind them of an actual and arbitrary effort that such should be their nature? If this word "effort" is not a mere figure of rhetoric, a name for a movement in things of which the end happens to interest us more than the beginning, if it is meant to be an effort actually and consciously existing, then we must proceed to ask: Why did this effort exist? Why did it choose that particular end to strive for? How did it reach the conception of that end, which had never been realised before, and which no existent nature demanded for its fulfilment? How did the effort, once made specific, select the particular matter it was to transform? Why did this matter respond to the disembodied effort that it should change its habits? Not one of these questions is easier to answer than the question why nature is living or animals have eyes. Yet without seeking to solve the only real problem, namely, how nature is actually constituted, this introduction of metaphysical powers raises all the others, artificially and without occasion. This side of M. Bergson's philosophy illustrates the worst and most familiar vices of metaphysics. It marvels

at some appearance, not to investigate it, but to give it an unctuous name. Then it turns this name into a power, that by its operation creates the appearance. This is simply verbal mythology or the hypostasis of words, and there would be some excuse for a rude person who should call it rubbish.

The metaphysical abuse of psychology is as extraordinary in modern Europe as that of fancy ever was in India or of rhetoric in Greece. We find, for instance, Mr. Bradley murmuring, as a matter almost too obvious to mention, that the existence of anything not sentience is unmeaning to him; or, if I may put this evident principle in other words, that nothing is able to exist unless something else is able to discover it. Yet even if discovered the poor candidate for existence would be foiled, for it would turn out to be nothing but a modification of the mind falsely said to discover it. Existence and discovery are conceptions which the malicious criticism of knowledge (which is the psychology of knowledge abused) pretends to have discarded and outgrown altogether; the conception of immediacy has taken their place. This malicious criticism of knowledge is based on the silent assumption that knowledge is impossible. Whenever you mention anything, it baffles you by talking instead about your idea of what you mention; and if ever you describe the origin of anything it substitutes, as a counter-theory, its theory of the origin of your description. This, however, would not be a counter-theory at all if the criticism of knowledge had not been corrupted into a negative dogma, maintaining that ideas of things are the only things possible and that therefore only ideas and not things can have an origin. Nothing could better illustrate how deep this cognitive impotence has got into people's bones than the manner in which, in the latest schools of philosophy, it is being disavowed; for unblushing idealism is distinctly out of fashion. M. Bergson tells us he has solved a difficulty that seemed hopeless by avoiding a fallacy common to idealism and realism. The difficulty was that if you started with self-existent matter you could never arrive at mind, and if you started with self-existent mind you could never arrive at matter. The fallacy was that both schools innocently supposed there was an existing world to discover, and each thought it possible that its view should describe that world as it really was. What now is M. Bergson's solution? That no articulated world, either material or psychological, exists at all, but only a tendency or enduring effort to evolve images of both sorts; or rather to evolve images which in their finer

texture and vibration are images of matter, but which grouped and foreshortened in various ways are images of minds. The idea of nature and the idea of consciousness are two apperceptions or syntheses of the same stuff of experience. The two worlds thus become substantially identical, continuous, and superposable; each can merge insensibly into the other. "To perceive all the influences of all the points of all bodies would be to sink to the condition of a material object."² To perceive some of these influences, by having created organs that shut out the others, is to be a mind.

This solution is obtained by substituting, as usual, the ideas of things for the things themselves and cheating the honest man who was talking about objects by answering him as if he were talking about himself. Certainly, if we could limit ourselves to feeling life flow and the whole world vibrate, we should not raise the question debated between realists and idealists; but not to raise a question is one thing and to have solved it is another. What has really been done is to offer us a history, *on the assumption of idealism*, of the idea of mind and the idea of matter. This history may be correct enough psychologically, and such as a student of the life of reason might possibly come to; but it is a mere evasion of the original question concerning the relation of this mental evolution to the world it occurs in. In truth, an enveloping world is assumed by these hereditary idealists not to exist; they rule it out *a priori*, and the life of reason is supposed by them to constitute the whole universe. To be sure, they say they transcend idealism no less than realism, because they mark the point where, by contrast or selection from other objects, the mind has come to be distinguished: but the subterfuge is vain, because by "mind" they mean simply the idea of mind, and they give no name, except perhaps experience, to the mind that forms that idea. Matter and mind, for these transcendentalists posing as realists, merge and flow so easily together only because both are images or groups of images in an original mind presupposed but never honestly posited. It is in this forgotten mind, also, as the professed idealists urge, that the relations of proximity and simultaneity between various lives can alone subsist, if to subsist is to be experienced.

There is, however, one point of real difference, at least initially, between the idealism of M. Bergson and that of his predecessors. The universal mind, for M. Bergson, is in process of actual transformation.

² *Matière et Mémoire*, p. 38.

It is not an omniscient God but a cosmic sensibility. In this sensibility matter, with all its vibrations felt in detail, forms one moving panorama together with all minds, which are patterns visible at will from various points of view in that same woof of matter; and so the great experiment crawls and shoots on, the dream of a giant without a body, mindful of the past, uncertain of the future, shuffling his images, and threading his painful way through a labyrinth of cross-purposes.

Such at least is the notion which the reader gathers from the prevailing character of M. Bergson's words; but I am not sure that it would be his ultimate conclusion. Perhaps it is to be out of sympathy with his spirit to speak of an ultimate conclusion at all; nothing comes to a conclusion and nothing is ultimate. Many dilemmas, however, are inevitable, and if the master does not make a choice himself, his pupils will divide and trace the alternative consequences for themselves in each direction. If they care most for a real fluidity, as William James did, they will stick to something like what I have just described; but if they care most for immediacy, as we may suspect that M. Bergson does, they will transform that view into something far more orthodox. For a real fluidity and an absolute immediacy are not compatible. To believe in real change you must put some trust in representation, and if you posit a real past and a real future you posit independent objects. In absolute immediacy, on the contrary, instead of change taken realistically, you can have only a feeling of change. The flux becomes an idea in the absolute, like the image of a moving spiral, always flowing outwards or inwards, but with its centre and its circumference always immovable. Duration, we must remember, is simply the sense of lasting; no time is real that is not lived through. Therefore various lives cannot be dated in a common time, but have no temporal relations to one another. Thus, if we insist on immediacy, the vaunted novelty of the future and the inestimable freedom of life threaten to become (like all else) the given *feeling* of novelty or freedom, in passing from a given image of the past to a given image of the future—all these terms being contained in the present; and we have reverted to the familiar conception of absolute immutability in absolute life. M. Bergson has studied Plotinus and Spinoza; I suspect he has not studied them in vain.

Nor is this the only point at which this philosophy, when we live a while with it, suddenly drops its mask of novelty and shows us a familiar face. It would seem, for instance, that beneath the drama of creative evolution there was a deeper nature of things. For apparently creative

evolution (apart from the obstacle of matter, which may be explained away idealistically) has to submit to the following conditions: first, to create in sequence, not all at once; second, to create some particular sequence only, not all possible sequences side by side; and third, to continue the one sequence chosen, since if the additions of every new moment were irrelevant to the past, no sequence, no vital persistence or progress would be secured, and all effort would be wasted. These are compulsions; but it may also, I suppose, be thought a *duty* on the part of the vital impulse to be true to its initial direction and not to halt, as it well might, like the self-reversing Will of Schopenhauer, on perceiving the result of its spontaneous efforts. Necessity would thus appear behind liberty and duty before it. This summons to life to go on, and these conditions imposed upon it, might then very plausibly be attributed to a Deity existing beyond the world, as is done in religious tradition; and such a doctrine, if M. Bergson should happen to be holding it in reserve, would perhaps help to explain some obscurities in his system, such, for instance, as the power of potentiality to actualise itself, of equipoise to become suddenly emphasis on one particular part, and of spirit to pursue an end chosen before it is conceived, and when there is no nature to predetermine it.

It has been said that M. Bergson's system precludes ethics: I cannot think that observation just. Apart from the moral inspiration which appears throughout his philosophy, which is indeed a passionate attempt to exalt (or debase) values into powers, it offers, I should say, two starting-points for ethics. In the first place, the *élan vital* ought not to falter, although it can do so: therefore to persevere, labour, experiment, propagate, must be duties, and the opposite must be sins. In the second place, freedom, in adding uncaused increments to life, ought to do so in continuation of the whole past, though it might do so frivolously: therefore it is a duty to be studious, consecutive, loyal; you may move in any direction but you must carry the whole past with you. I will not say this suggests a sound system of ethics, because it would be extracted from dogmas which are physical and incidentally incredible; nor would it represent a mature and disillusioned morality, because it would look to the future and not to the eternal; nevertheless it would be deeply ethical, expressing the feelings that have always inspired Hebraic morality.

A good way of testing the calibre of a philosophy is to ask what it thinks of death. Philosophy, said Plato, is a meditation on death, or

rather, if we would do justice to his thought, an aspiration to live disembodied; and Schopenhauer said that the spectacle of death was the first provocation to philosophy. M. Bergson has not yet treated of this subject; but we may perhaps perceive for ourselves the place that it might occupy in his system.³ Life, according to him, is the original and absolute force. In the beginning, however, it was only a potentiality or tendency. To become specific lives, life had to emphasise and bring exclusively to consciousness, here and there, special possibilities of living; and where these special lives have their chosen boundary (if this way of putting it is not too Fichtean) they posit or create a material environment. Matter is the view each life takes of what for it are rejected or abandoned possibilities of living. This might show how the absolute will to live, if it was to be carried out, would have to begin by evoking a sense of dead or material things about it; it would not show how death could ever overtake the will itself. If matter were merely the periphery which life has to draw round itself, in order to be a definite life, matter could never abolish any life; as the ring of a circus or the sand of the arena can never abolish the show for which they have been prepared. Life would then be fed and defined by matter, as an artist is served by the matter he needs to carry on his art.

Yet in actual life there is undeniably such a thing as danger and failure. M. Bergson even thinks that the facing of increased dangers is one proof that vital force is an absolute thing; for if life were an equilibrium, it would not displace itself and run new risks of death, by making itself more complex and ticklish, as it does in the higher organisms and the finer arts.⁴ Yet if life is the only substance, how is such a risk of death possible at all? I suppose the special life that arises about a given

³ M. Bergson has shown at considerable length that the idea of non-existence is more complex, psychologically, than the idea of existence, and posterior to it. He evidently thinks this disposes of the reality of non-existence also: for it is the reality that he wishes to exorcise by his words. If, however, non-existence and the idea of non-existence were identical, it would have been impossible for me not to exist before I was born: my non-existence then would be more complex than my existence now, and posterior to it. The initiated would not recoil from this consequence, but it might open the eyes of some catechumens. It is a good test of the malicious theory of knowledge.

⁴ This argument against mechanism is a good instance of the difficulties which mythological habits of mind import unnecessarily into science. An equilibrium would not displace itself! But an equilibrium is a natural result, not a magical entity. It is continually displaced, as its constituents are modified by internal movements or external agencies; and while many a time the equilibrium is thereby destroyed altogether, sometimes it is replaced by a more elaborate and perilous equilibrium; as glaciers carry many rocks down, but leave some, here and there, piled in the most unlikely pinnacles and pagodas.

nucleus of feeling, by emphasising some of the relations which that feeling has in the world, might be abolished if a greater emphasis were laid on another set of its relations, starting from some other nucleus. We must remember that these selections, according to M. Bergson, are not apperceptions merely. They are creative efforts. The future constitution of the flux will vary in response to them. Each mind sucks the world, so far as it can, into its own vortex. A cross apperception will then amount to a contrary force. Two souls will not be able to dominate the same matter in peace and friendship. Being forces, they will pull that matter in different ways. Each soul will tend to devour and to direct exclusively the movement influenced by the other soul. The one that succeeds in ruling that movement will live on; the other, I suppose, will die, although M. Bergson may not like that painful word. He says the lower organisms store energy for the higher organisms to use; but when a sheep appropriates the energy stored up in grass, or a man that stored up in mutton, it looks as if the grass and the sheep had perished. Their *élan vital* is no longer theirs, for in this rough world to live is to kill. Nothing arises in nature, Lucretius says, save helped by the death of some other thing. Of course, this is no defeat for the *élan vital* in general; for according to our philosopher the whole universe from the beginning has been making for just that supreme sort of consciousness which man, who eats the mutton, now possesses. The sheep and the grass were only things by the way and scaffolding for our precious humanity. But would it not be better if some being should arise nobler than man, not requiring abstract intellect nor artificial weapons, but endowed with instinct and intuition and, let us say, the power of killing by radiating electricity? And might not men then turn out to have been mere explosives, in which energy was stored for convenient digestion by that superior creature? A shocking thought, no doubt, like the thought of death, and more distressing to our vital feelings than is the pleasing assimilation of grass and mutton in our bellies. Yet I can see no ground, except a desire to flatter oneself, for not crediting the *élan vital* with some such digestive intention. M. Bergson's system would hardly be more speculative if it entertained this possibility, and it would seem more honest.

The vital impulse is certainly immortal; for if we take it in the naturalistic exoteric sense, for a force discovered in biology, it is an independent agent coming down into matter, organising it against its will, and stirring it like the angel the pool of Bethesda. Though the ripples

die down, the angel is not affected. He has merely flown away. And if we take the vital impulse mystically and esoterically, as the *only* primal force, creating matter in order to play with it, the immortality of life is even more obvious; for there is then nothing else in being that could possibly abolish it. But when we come to immortality for the individual, all grows obscure and ambiguous. The original tendency of life was certainly cosmic and not distinguished into persons: we are told it was like a wireless message sent at the creation which is being read off at last by the humanity of to-day. In the naturalistic view, the diversity of persons would seem to be due to the different material conditions under which one and the same spiritual purpose must fight its way towards realisation in different times and places. It is quite conceivable, however, that in the mystical view the very sense of the original message should comport this variety of interpretations, and that the purpose should always have been to produce diverse individuals.

The first view, as usual, is the one which M. Bergson has prevailingly in mind, and communicates most plausibly; while he holds to it he is still talking about the natural world, and so we still know what he is talking about. On this view, however, personal immortality would be impossible; it would be, if it were aimed at, a self-contradiction in the aim of life; for the diversity of persons would be due to impediments only, and souls would differ simply in so far as they mutilated the message which they were all alike trying to repeat. They would necessarily, when the spirit was victorious, be reabsorbed and identified in the universal spirit. This view also seems most consonant with M. Bergson's theory of primitive reality, as a flux of fused images, or a mind lost in matter; to this view, too, is attributable his hostility to intelligence, in that it arrests the flux, divides the fused images, and thereby murders and devitalises reality. Of course the destiny of spirit would not be to revert to that diffused materiality; for the original mind lost in matter had a very short memory; it was a sort of cosmic trepidation only, whereas the ultimate mind would remember all that, in its efforts after freedom, it had ever superadded to that trepidation or made it turn into. Even the abstract views of things taken by the practical intellect would, I fear, have to burden the universal memory to the end. We should be remembered, even if we could no longer exist.

On the other more profound view, however, might not personal immortality be secured? Suppose the original message said: Translate

me into a thousand tongues! In fulfilling its duty, the universe would then continue to divide its dream into phantom individuals; as it had to insulate its parts in the beginning in order to dominate and transform them freely, so it would always continue to insulate them, so as not to lose its cross-vistas and its mobility. There is no reason, then, why individuals should not live for ever. But a condition seems to be involved which may well make belief stagger. It would be impossible for the universe to divide its images into particular minds unless it preserved the images of their particular bodies also. Particular minds arise, according to this philosophy, in the interests of practice: which means, biologically, to secure a better adjustment of the body to its environment, so that it may survive. Mystically, too, the fundamental force is a half-conscious purpose that practice, or freedom, should come to be; or rather, that an apparition or experience of practice and freedom should arise; for in this philosophy appearance is all. To secure this desirable apparition of practice special tasks are set to various nuclei in felt space (such, for instance, as the task to *see*), and the image of a body (in this case that of an eye) is gradually formed, in order to execute that task; for evidently the Absolute can see only if it looks, and to look it must first choose a point of view and an optical method. This point of view and this method posit the individual; they fix him in time and space, and determine the quality and range of his passive experience: they are his body. If the Absolute, then, wishes to retain the individual not merely as one of its memories but as one of its organs of practical life, it must begin by retaining the image of his body. His body must continue to figure in that landscape of nature which the absolute life, as it pulses, keeps always composing and recomposing. Otherwise a personal mind, a sketch of things made from the point of view and in the interests of that body, cannot be preserved.

M. Bergson, accordingly, should either tell us that our bodies are going to rise again, or he should not tell us, or give us to understand, that our minds are going to endure. I suppose he cannot venture to preach the resurrection of the body to this weak-kneed generation; he is too modern and plausible for that. Yet he is too amiable to deny to our dilated nostrils some voluptuous whiffs of immortality. He asks if we are not "led to suppose" that consciousness passes through matter to be tempered like steel, to constitute distinct personalities, and prepare them for a higher existence. Other animal minds are but human

minds arrested; men at last (what men, I wonder?) are “capable of remembering all and willing all and controlling their past and their future,” so that “we shall have no repugnance in admitting that in man, though perhaps in man alone, consciousness pursues its path beyond this earthly life.” Elsewhere he says, in a phrase already much quoted and perhaps destined to be famous, that in man the spirit can “spurn every kind of resistance and break through many an obstacle, perhaps even death.” Here the tenor has ended on the inevitable high note, and the gallery is delighted. But was that the note set down for him in the music? And has he not sung it in falsetto?

The immediate knows nothing about death; it takes intelligence to conceive it; and that perhaps is why M. Bergson says so little about it, and that little so far from serious. But he talks a great deal about life, he feels he has penetrated deeply into its nature; and yet death, together with birth, is the natural analysis of what life is. What is this creative purpose, that must wait for sun and rain to set it in motion? What is this life, that in any individual can be suddenly extinguished by a bullet? What is this *élan vital*, that a little fall in temperature would banish altogether from the universe? The study of death may be out of fashion, but it is never out of season. The omission of this, which is almost the omission of wisdom from philosophy, warns us that in M. Bergson’s thought we have something occasional and partial, the work of an astute apologist, a party man, driven to desperate speculation by a timid attachment to prejudice. Like other terrified idealisms, the system of M. Bergson has neither good sense, nor rigour, nor candour, nor solidity. It is a brilliant attempt to confuse the lessons of experience by refining upon its texture, an attempt to make us halt, for the love of primitive illusions, in the path of discipline and reason. It is likely to prove a successful attempt, because it flatters the weaknesses of the moment, expresses them with emotion, and covers them with a feint at scientific speculation. It is not, however, a powerful system, like that of Hegel, capable of bewildering and obsessing many who have no natural love for shams. M. Bergson will hardly bewilder; his style is too clear, the field where his just observations lie – the immediate – is too well defined, and the mythology which results from projecting the terms of the immediate into the absolute, and turning them into powers, is too obviously verbal. He will not long impose on any save those who enjoy being imposed upon; but for a long time he may increase their number. His doctrine is indeed alluring. Instead of tell-

ing us, as a stern and contrite philosophy would, that the truth is remote, difficult, and almost undiscoverable by human efforts, that the universe is vast and unfathomable, yet that the knowledge of its ways is precious to our better selves, if we would not live befooled, this philosophy rather tells us that nothing is truer or more precious than our rudimentary consciousness, with its vague instincts and premonitions, that everything ideal is fictitious, and that the universe, at heart, is as palpitating and irrational as ourselves. Why then strain the inquiry? Why seek to dominate passion by understanding it? Rather live on; work, it matters little at what, and grow, it matters nothing in what direction. Exert your instinctive powers of vegetation and emotion; let your philosophy itself be a frank expression of this flux, the roar of the ocean in your little sea-shell, a momentary posture of your living soul, not a stark adoration of things reputed eternal.

So the intellectual faithlessness and the material servility of the age are flattered together and taught to justify themselves theoretically. They cry joyfully, *non peccavi*, which is the modern formula for confession. M. Bergson's philosophy itself is a confession of a certain mystical rebellion and atavism in the contemporary mind. It will remain a beautiful monument to the passing moment, a capital film for the cinematograph of history, full of psychological truth and of a kind of restrained sentimental piety. His thought has all the charm that can go without strength and all the competence that can go without mastery. This is not an age of mastery; it is confused with too much business; it has no brave simplicity. The mind has forgotten its proper function, which is to crown life by quickening it into intelligence, and thinks if it could only prove that it accelerated life, that might perhaps justify its existence; like a philosopher at sea who, to make himself useful, should blow into the sail.



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