

## HENRI BERGSON: PERSONALIST.

THE object of this brief paper is to protest against the abstractness of the current interpretations of Bergson's teaching. He is claimed, or criticized, as pragmatist or temporalist when, as a matter of fact he is, first and foremost a personalist, an idealist of the renaissance spiritualistic school.<sup>1</sup> To assert with one of his critics that "the fundamental principle" of his whole philosophy is duration is to take his statements out of their context. For Bergson's teaching is that the reality, with which we are in immediate contact is—not duration, but the self which endures (*le moi qui dure*).<sup>2</sup> Nor is this the statement of a single isolated passage. The earliest of his books treats duration and freedom as characters of the 'fundamental self,' the living, concrete I;<sup>3</sup> *Matière et Mémoire* plunges at once into the study of 'myself'<sup>4</sup>; and finally in *L'évolution créatrice*, the latest of his books, Bergson begins with the statement that "the existence of which we are surest is incontestably our own" and then proceeds, as will appear, to base his whole philosophy of nature on this truth and its implications.

To the claim that Bergson is a personalist two objections will at once be made. It will be urged that he incessantly opposes idealism; and from *Matière et Mémoire* will be quoted his definite statement: "we do not accept idealism."<sup>5</sup> Stress will be laid also on the fact that *L'évolution créatrice* throughout asserts the existence of 'brute matter' as an essential factor in evolution. Bergson's definite disclaimers of idealism need not long detain

<sup>1</sup> The very title "Time and Free Will" which is given (with Bergson's approval) to the translation of the book entitled *Les données immédiates de la conscience* is an evidence of the tendency to lose the forest for the trees—"big trees," though they are.

<sup>2</sup> "Introduction à la métaphysique," in *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*, 1903, XI, p. 4; *Les données immédiates de la conscience*, p. 164<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> *Les données immédiates de la conscience*, pp. 95, 128 ff., 135 ff. et al.

<sup>4</sup> "Me voici donc en présence d'images" *Matière et Mémoire*, page 1, second sentence.

<sup>5</sup> Chapter III, p. 199. Cf. pp. 12, 22, 252, 256.

us. For the careful reading of the passages, in *Matière et Mémoire*, in which Bergson criticises idealism discloses the fact that the idealism which he opposes is often qualified by the tell-tale term 'subjective,'<sup>1</sup> and that while he sharply criticizes associationism,<sup>2</sup> representative idealism,<sup>3</sup> and dualistic spiritualism,<sup>4</sup> he never argues against that humanistic or personalistic form of idealism which, in truth, is the background of all his teaching.

The conception of matter as contained in *L'évolution créatrice* offers a greater difficulty. This will be discussed as the concluding section of a brief analysis of Bergson's teachings which aims to bring his personalism into clear relief. Bergson's characteristic doctrines may be summarized under two main heads: his doctrine of self and its environment, and his doctrine of nature, the universe in its totality. The first is the topic of Bergson's earlier works and includes his discussions of duration and freedom, of mechanism, and of body and mind. His conception of nature is the theme of *L'évolution créatrice*.

I. (a) It has already appeared that Bergson conceives duration in personal terms. He refers to "our feeling of duration, that is to say, of the coincidence of our ego with itself (*de notre moi avec lui-même*)"<sup>5</sup> and says: "To touch the reality of spirit one must place oneself at the point at which an individual consciousness prolongs and preserves the past in a present."<sup>6</sup> Duration is here conceived as the creation of spirit. In still another passage it is thus defined: "Pure duration is the form which the succession of our states of consciousness assumes when our ego lets itself live (*quand notre moi se laisse vivre*)."<sup>7</sup> "Time," he elsewhere says, "coincides with my impatience."<sup>8</sup> These expressions, which might be multiplied indefinitely, show clearly that Bergson

<sup>1</sup> *Matière et Mémoire*, p. 12.

<sup>2</sup> *Les données immédiates de la conscience*, Chapter III, pp. 122 ff.; *Matière et Mémoire*, chapter II, pp. 123 ff. Cf. *L'évolution créatrice*, Chapter IV, pp. 302, 306.

<sup>3</sup> *Matière et Mémoire*, Chapter I, p. 61; Résumé, pp. 252 ff.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, Chapter I, pp. 66-67.

<sup>5</sup> "*L'évolution créatrice*," Chapter III, p. 218.

<sup>6</sup> *Matière et Mémoire*, p. 263.

<sup>7</sup> *Les données immédiates de la conscience*, p. 76.

<sup>8</sup> *L'évolution créatrice*, Chapter I, p. 10.

conceives time as a form of personal experience. Indeed, the fundamental argument of *L'évolution créatrice* is based on the fact that change is introspectively known as reality. "We perceive ourselves," Bergson argues, "and what do we find? . . . I find that I pass from state to state. I am hot or cold, gay or sad, I work or I do nothing. . . . Thus, I change unceasingly.<sup>1</sup> . . . We seek," he continues, "the precise sense which our consciousness gives to the word 'exist' and we find that for a conscious being to exist is to change, to change is to mature, to mature is indefinitely to create oneself. May we," he asks, "say the same of existence in general?"<sup>2</sup> Bergson's affirmative answer to this question will later be discussed; at present it concerns us to notice that duration is defined as self-creation, and that the whole of Bergson's nature-philosophy is erected on the foundation of this conception of change as personal.

Obviously, Bergson's doctrine of freedom<sup>3</sup> is the direct outgrowth of this view of the self as changing, as forever creating itself. It is needless to argue that in this teaching Bergson is openly personalistic. What he asserts is genuine indeterminism, an "evolution" in which "something absolutely new is added."<sup>4</sup> "Consciousness," he says, "is essentially free; it is liberty's very self (*elle est la liberté même*);"<sup>5</sup> "to act freely is to re-take possession of oneself."<sup>6</sup>

(b) The changing, freely developing nature of the self as immediately realized by intuition, or instinct, is sharply contrasted by Bergson with the mechanical nature of the physical world as known to the intellect.<sup>7</sup> In brief, his teaching is the following: We immediately experience both duration—change, movement—and extensity. Extensity is not (as Berkeley taught) exclusively tactile: it is a character of all our sensational experi-

<sup>1</sup> *L'évolution créatrice*, p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. especially *Les données immédiates de la conscience*, Chapter III.

<sup>4</sup> *Matière et Mémoire*, Chapter III, p. 205.

<sup>5</sup> *L'évolution créatrice*, Chapter III, p. 293.

<sup>6</sup> *Les données immédiates de la conscience*, Conclusion, p. 178.

<sup>7</sup> On the important distinction between instinct and intellect cf. especially *L'évolution créatrice*, Chapter II.

ence.<sup>1</sup> But we are active willing beings; and for our practical purposes, for the sake of making better use of the sense-complex which we directly perceive, we arrest (by attention) the flux of this sensational experience; we create discontinuity in this originally continuous, sensational complex. After this fashion, individual selves, Bergson teaches, constitute and distinguish first their own bodies, then other organic bodies (which they regard as sources of their own nourishment), and finally inorganic bodies. And after thus creating, for practical purposes, discrete, spatial things, they speculatively interest themselves in artificially dividing and subdividing these discontinuous units. Hence arises the discontinuous, measurable space of physicist and mathematician and, at an even farther remove from experienced reality, mathematical time.

It is thus perfectly evident that Bergson regards the human body, all other external objects, mathematical space, and measurable time as the constructions of individual selves. "Our needs," he says, "are thus so many lighted torches which directed toward the sense-continuum outline upon it distinct objects. These needs can be satisfied only by distinguishing a body within

<sup>1</sup> *Matière et Mémoire*, Chapter IV, pp. 237-242 ff. *Les données immédiates de la conscience*, chapter II., pp. 73-74. It is curious that Bergson does not realize that this admission of a qualitative space-consciousness destroys his cherished antithesis between space and time. The truth is not, as Bergson states it, that space is quantitative, homogeneous, and measurable, whereas time is qualitative, heterogeneous, and incapable of being measured or divided. Rather time and space alike may be regarded either qualitatively or quantitatively. On the one hand, there is spatial as well as temporal quality (as Bergson here admits). On the other hand, time as well as space may be abstractly, artificially and mathematically regarded. Bergson's assertion that time, thus conceived, is really space is a misleading metaphor utterly overlooking the qualitative aspect of space.

A second difficulty in Bergson's doctrine is perhaps over-emphasized by Professor A. O. Lovejoy ("The Problem of Time in Recent French Philosophy," II, *PHILOSOPHICAL REVIEW*, 1912, XXI, pp. 323, 327 ff.). According to Lovejoy, Bergson combines with his teaching of the heterogeneity and the succession in time the denial of its 'internal plurality.' I am, however, inclined to think that Bergson is mainly interested, in the passages quoted by Lovejoy, in contrasting the consciousness of distinct, intellectually separated and measured moments from the consciousness of the changing self—in a word, that he intends to deny temporal plurality only in the associationist's conception of it. Yet, as Lovejoy shows, there is undoubted difficulty in reconciling Bergson's diverse statements.

this continuity, and then defining still other bodies with which the first will enter into relations as if with persons."<sup>1</sup>

(c) Bergson's theory of the relation of mind to body must be interpreted in accordance with this teaching about things and quantities. When he says that "the essential function of the body is . . . to limit the life of the spirit,"<sup>2</sup> the statement must be read in the light of his invariable assertion that body, nerves, and brain are images.<sup>3</sup> Somewhat to expand this summary statement: Bergson teaches that the body is a 'privileged image'<sup>4</sup> in that I am conscious of it both through affection (organic sensation) and through perception (spatial perception).<sup>5</sup> But he opposes with special vigor the materialistic doctrine that the brain is cause of consciousness,<sup>6</sup> and he argues in great detail that for memory (in the sense of recognition) there is no adequate cerebral explanation.<sup>7</sup> The body, he teaches, is best conceived as conductor of motions,<sup>8</sup> a link between me and the other images which environ me, a "*rendezvous* between excitations received and movements accomplished."<sup>9</sup> Occasionally Bergson expresses this relation by calling the body a "center of action";<sup>10</sup> but this, as he acknowledges, is an inexact expression. Really, as he says, my body is but the symbol of 'the real center of action';<sup>11</sup> and this real center of action is the self or 'person.' "My body," he definitely states, "has its position as center of [my] percepts; my personality (*ma personne*), is the being to which I must relate [my] actions."<sup>12</sup> The body, and in particular the brain, is thus

<sup>1</sup> *Matière et Mémoire*, Chapter IV, p. 220. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 234, and *Résumé*, p. 258; also, *L'évolution créatrice*, pp. 206, 229.

<sup>2</sup> *Matière et Mémoire*, Chapter IV, §1.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, Chapter I, pp. 3 ff., Chapter IV, pp. 199 ff.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, Chapter I, p. 54. Cf. *L'évolution créatrice*, chapter I, p. 12.

<sup>5</sup> *Matière et Mémoire*, Chapter I, pp. 1, ff.

<sup>6</sup> *Matière et Mémoire*, Chapter I, pp. 4 ff. Cf. *L'évolution créatrice*, Chapter III, p. 285.

<sup>7</sup> *Matière et Mémoire*, Chapter II.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, Chapter II, §1.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, Chapter III, p. 190.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, Chapter I, p. 4.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, *Résumé*, p. 259.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, Chapter I, p. 37. "*Mon corps* est ce qui se dessine aux centre de ces perceptions; *ma personne* est l'être auquel il faut rapporter les actions." Cf. pp. 54, 56.

simply an image among other images,<sup>1</sup> and a bodily or brain change is a link in that chain of continuous processes which either begins with inorganic phenomenon and ends in perception or, contrariwise, begins with perception and ends in the mechanical. From this demonstrable continuity between inorganic, organic, and psychic phenomena Bergson concludes that "things participate in the nature of our perception."<sup>2</sup> The idealistic character of this teaching is perfectly obvious.

II. When from this summary of Bergson's teaching about the changing self, in its environment, we turn to his conception of the universe we find him describing nature in the terms which he has so far applied to the single person. In truth, as has already been noted, he expounds the meaning and argues the reality of the ever changing vital life-impulse by appeal to my immediate assurance of myself as in constant change, in unceasing process of self-creation. "We create ourselves continuously,"<sup>3</sup> he asserts. "In willing," he declares, ". . . we feel that reality is a perpetual growth, a creation which pursues itself unendingly."<sup>4</sup>

In truth, Bergson explicitly uses the terms 'life'<sup>5</sup> and 'vital impulse,'<sup>6</sup> in which, most often, he describes the universe, as synonyms for consciousness. Of "life," he definitely says that it "is consciousness."<sup>7</sup> "To compare life to an impulse (*élan*) is," he says, "but a figure of speech. In reality, life belongs to the psychic order."<sup>8</sup> "The whole of life (*la vie entière*)," he elsewhere declares, "is a rising tide (*un flot qui monte*) . . . , and this tide is consciousness."<sup>9</sup> The essential causes of evolu-

<sup>1</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 4.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, Chapter IV, p. 200.

<sup>3</sup> *L'évolution créatrice*, Chapter I, p. 7.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, Chapter III, p. 260. Cf. *ibid.*, Chapter I, p. 21. "Such is the character of our evolution and, doubtless, such also is the nature of the evolution of life."

<sup>5</sup> *L'évolution créatrice*, Chapter I, p. 57; Chapter II, pp. 105-06; Chapter III, pp. 110, 112; Chapter I, p. 32.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, Chapter I, pp. 95; Chapter II, pp. 130 *et al.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, Chapter II, p. 197. Cf. Chapter II, pp. 197, 201 *et al.* for the interchangeable use of the expressions 'current of consciousness' and 'current of existence.'

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, Chapter III, p. 279.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 292. Cf. Chapter I, p. 58.

tion are psychological. Thus though he teaches, in accord with common biological doctrine, that human consciousness appears late in the evolutionary process,<sup>1</sup> we must attribute to him the conception of life as personal, not as impersonal.

There remains, however, a serious objection to a purely idealistic reading of Bergson's view of the universe. Unquestionably, the critic will admit, Bergson assigns to developing consciousness the title rôle in the life-drama. But matter also plays a necessary though subordinate part in this drama of the universe. Throughout *L'évolution créatrice* Bergson explains evolution by the opposition of brute, inert matter to the on-rushing current of life.<sup>2</sup> To this opposition which is "never," Bergson declares, "surmounted," are due the many failures of nature, the choked channels and the *culs de sac* of the life-current. The diverse manifestations and forms of life, the concrete living beings, represent the successful strivings of life, or nature, with opposing matter.<sup>3</sup> Superficially regarded, we certainly have here a dualism of life (that is, of consciousness) with matter. Three facts, however, prevent our conceiving this apparent dualism as the final expression of Bergson's conviction. In the first place, his references to matter in *L'évolution créatrice* are, many of them, introduced by qualifying phrases, such as 'in our view' and 'as if.' When Bergson says, for example, "the breaking up of life into individuals and species proceeds, we believe (*croyons nous*) from the resistance which life experiences from brute matter,"<sup>4</sup> it is not unlikely that this "*croyons nous*" has the force of "we are wont to think," and that he is here seeking to state simply the conventional view of the relation of matter to spirit. The probability of this explanation is strengthened by such statements as the following: "Life manifested by an organism is *in our view* (*à nos yeux*) a certain effort to obtain certain things from brute matter,"<sup>5</sup> and, "Everything happens *as if* a great current of consciousness had penetrated matter."<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Op. cit.*, pp. 145, 149 *et al.*

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, Chapter II, pp. 148, 197; Résumé, p. 260.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 107-108.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, Chapter II, p. 107.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, Chapter II, p. 148. Italics mine.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, Chapter II, p. 197. Italics mine. Cf. page 125.

This apparently traditional and everywhere vague and figurative fashion in which *L'évolution créatrice* describes matter throws us back upon the explicitly idealistic conception in *Matière et Mémoire*. As has appeared, Bergson there teaches that matter is made up of images and that "without doubt the material universe, defined as totality of images, is a kind of consciousness."<sup>1</sup> "In matter," he has previously said, "there is something more but not anything different from the actually given (*ce qui est actuellement donné*<sup>2</sup>). In other words, matter is not a hidden cause, an unknown reality, but a complex of qualities, immediately known. "Matter" so Bergson teaches (with Berkeley, though Bergson does not notice the likeness) "is precisely what it appears to be."<sup>3</sup>

We have, finally, in *L'évolution créatrice* itself, suggestions of a personalistic interpretation of matter. The first of these compares matter with the formulations, the expressions, of consciousness. "From bottom to top of the organic world," Bergson says "there is always one sole, great effort; but most often this effort . . . is at the mercy of the materiality which it has of necessity given to itself. This is what every one of us can experience in himself. Our liberty, in the very movements by which it affirms itself, creates growing habits which will suffocate it unless it renews itself by constant effort. The liveliest thought will freeze in the formula which expresses it."<sup>4</sup> Here matter is conceived as opposed not to consciousness but to freedom: in Bergson's words, once more, "Matter is necessity."<sup>5</sup>

In a second passage,<sup>6</sup> Bergson supposes a state in which there is "neither memory nor will . . . nothing but the moment which dies and is re-born again and again. . . . One may assume," he concludes, "that physical existence tends to be of this second sort." This reminds one of Ward's Leibnizian doctrine of 'bare monads' and his description of the bare monad as one "whose organism, so to say, reduces to a point, and its present to a

<sup>1</sup> *Matière et Mémoire*, Résumé, pp. 262-263. Cf. Chapter I, pp. 7, 22, 27, 49.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, Chapter I, p. 65.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, Chapter I, p. 67.

<sup>4</sup> *L'évolution créatrice*, Chapter II, p. 138.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, Chapter III, p. 286.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 219.



moment."<sup>1</sup> Clearly, Bergson here suggests that matter consists in momentarily, as contrasted with continuously, conscious being or beings.

The last of these passages conceives matter in its opposition to life after the fashion of a conflicting personality. "Life," Bergson says, "is tendency and the essence of a tendency is to develop in the form of a sheaf (*gerbe*); creating by the mere fact of its growth diverging directions among which its impulse (*élan*) will divide itself. This," Bergson continues, recurring to his constant analogy, "is what we observe in ourselves during the evolution of that special tendency which we call our character. Each one of us . . . will admit that his childhood personality, though indivisible, united in itself different persons. . . . But these interpenetrating personalities become incompatible as they grow older and since each of us lives but one life, he is forced to make a choice. In truth we choose unceasingly, and unceasingly we suffer great losses. The way which we take through time is strewn with the *débris* of all which we began to be. . . . Nature, on the other hand, is not bound to such sacrifices. . . . It retains the diverse tendencies. . . . It creates . . . diverging series of species which develop separately."<sup>2</sup> The opposition which is essential to the diverging forms of life is, according to this teaching, analogous to the conflicting aspects of a self. That 'brute matter' which, colliding with the life current, precipitates and defines single individuals is itself personal in however low a degree.

Thus interpreted, Bergson's view of nature is allied with Leibniz's, Fechner's and Ward's: he is, in technical terms, a pluralistic personalist. It is true that more than one of his statements lends itself to a numerically monistic interpretation. "In the absolute," he declares "we exist, we move and live."<sup>3</sup> "The Absolute," he says elsewhere, "reveals himself very close to us and, in a certain measure, in us."<sup>4</sup> But despite these statements, and though he admits that nothing logically forbids our imagining a unique individual within which the evolution of life

<sup>1</sup> "The Realm of Ends," Lecture XII, p. 257<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> *L'évolution créatrice*, pp. 108-109.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, Chapter III, p. 217<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, Chapter IV, p. 323<sup>1</sup>.

should be accomplished, he none the less believes that "in reality evolution has made its way (*s'est faite*) through the intermediary of millions of individuals.<sup>1</sup> Bergson's opposition to absolutism is, in truth, uncompromising: it is the most fundamental of his negations, based on his passionate conviction not merely of the reality but of the ultimacy of change and progress. An absolutist may believe that time and change are vitally real, but he must conceive them as aspects, and in the end, subordinated aspects, of the eternal purposes,<sup>2</sup> whereas to Bergson, as to every pluralist, reality is forever in the making, "we are forever creating ourselves." The cardinal error not only of Bergson's critics, but of Bergson himself, in the valuation and the estimate of his system, is the exclusive emphasis laid on this ultimateness of change and freedom, to the neglect of his equally positive doctrine that back of change is that which changes, that fundamental to time and freedom and evolution is the enduring, willing, developing self.

In conclusion, fresh stress should be laid on the personalistic character of Bergson's idealism. He loses no chance to criticise sharply what he calls deterministic associationism, that "gross psychology, the dupe of language [which] . . . reduces the I (*le moi*) to an aggregate of facts of consciousness."<sup>3</sup> In opposition to this view of the self as 'assemblage of psychic states,'<sup>4</sup> a conception, he declares, which "ever substitutes for the concrete phenomenon an artificial philosophical reconstitution of it,"<sup>5</sup> Bergson insists upon the fundamental reality of the 'I which feels, or thinks . . . or acts,'<sup>6</sup> the 'I ever identical with itself,'<sup>7</sup> the 'fundamental,' 'concrete,' 'living' self.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Op. cit.*, Chapter I, p. 58.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Royce, *The World and the Individual*, Lecture III, and the writer of this paper, *The Persistent Problems of Philosophy*, 3d edition, pp. 440 f.

<sup>3</sup> "*Les données immédiates de la conscience*," Chapter III, p. 126<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 122. Compare Bergson's criticism in *Matière et Mémoire* to the conception of 'the psychic state as a kind of atom' (p. 144<sup>3</sup>) and his assertion (p. 181): "Consciousness never reveals to us psychic facts floating about in a state of independence."

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 125.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 132<sup>2</sup>. Cf. pp. 124, 126<sup>2</sup>, 128 f.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 131<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 128. Cf. p. 167. Cf. also *Matière et Mémoire*, Chapter I, p. 54; and Chapter III; and *L'évolution créatrice*, Chapter IV, pp. 302-306, *et al.*