

Wednesday, June 17th 2026 — Philosophy at the Pub

Bergsonism: a Forgotten Metaphysics

- How does intensity, multiplicity and time inform our metaphysics?
- How does one find truth and falsity at the level of problems and not solutions?
- Is there a limit to our symbolic thinking?

Key Ideas

Duration — Intuition — Memory — Intensity — Multiplicity — Virtual/Actual

Bergsonian Methodology - Intuition

Not a feeling or an inspiration, but a fully formed methodology. A method which presupposes Duration

Three Rules

- 1) Apply the test of true and false to problems themselves. Condemn false problems and reconcile truth and creation at the level of problems.
“The truth is that in philosophy and even elsewhere it is a question of *finding* the problem and consequently of *positing* it, even more than solving it.”
 - a) Complementary Rule: False problems are of two sorts, “nonexistent problem,” defined as problems whose very terms contain a confusion of the “more” and the “less”; and “badly stated” questions, so defined because their terms represent badly analyzed composites.
- 2) Struggle against illusion, rediscover the true differences in kind or articulations of the real.
 - a) Complementary Rule: The real is not only that which is cut out according to natural articulations or differences in kind; it is also that which intersects again along paths converging towards the same ideal or virtual point.
- 3) State problems and solve them in terms of time rather than of space.
(The presupposition of duration)

Of the Two Types of False Problems

- 1) Nonexistent Problems
 - a) Why is there disorder rather than order?
 - b) Why is there something rather than nothing?
 - i) For Bergson, these both posit their positive attribute and their negation.

- ii) Since they posit knowing their attribute and their negation, they are positing more than the positive concept alone.
- 2) Badly Stated Questions or Badly Analyzed Composites
 - a) The notions of Intensity and Freedom are an example
 - i) In an intensity we confuse the sensation with the muscular effort or the quantity of a physical cause of a sensation
 - (1) If you have a paralyzed arm and you are ordered to lift it, you feel a form or exertion, of intensity.
 - (2) However, the feeling of exertion or intensity you have in this movement is not the body part in question, but the surrounding body parts acting in compensation or sympathy.
 - (3) The composite here is the simultaneous activations of other muscles and the successive states of attention given to the event of the effort itself.
 - (4) “The idea of intensity is thus situated at the junction of two streams, one of which brings us the idea of extensive magnitude from without, while the other brings us from within... (TFW 73)
 - ii) That we are asked to translate the sensation/intensity into a magnitude, and in that translation of the sensation/intensity we have focused on one half of the real without giving attention to that which has given rise to the measurement.
 - (1) It is not substituting one for the other, but finding both parts of the composite there without denaturing the examination.

Differences in Kind and Differences in Degree

Bergson the Dualist

Duration-Space — heterogeneous-homogeneous — quality-quantity —
continuous-discontinuous — memory-matter — recollection-perception

- A difference in kind looks at the articulations according to the tendencies of reality.
- A difference in degree looks at that which would remain the same, only larger and smaller if it were divided.

Duration and Simultaneity

“There are two elements to be distinguished in motion, the space traversed and the act by which we traverse it, the successive positions and the synthesis of these positions.”(TFW 112)

“On the one hand we attribute to the motion the divisibility of space which it traverses, forgetting that it is quite possible to divide an object, but not an act: and on the other hand we accustom

ourselves to projecting this act into space, to applying it to the whole of the line which the moving body traverses, in a word, to solidifying it.” (TFW 112)

Argument Breakdowns

Intensity and Qualitative Multiplicity

- 1) If multiplicity is understood as spatial and quantitative, then it can be divided into discrete parts.
- 2) Consciousness exhibits a form of multiplicity characterized by continuous intensity, which is qualitative and indivisible.
- 3) This form of multiplicity (qualitative, continuous) cannot be reduced to or equated with spatial, quantitative multiplicity.
- 4) The nature of consciousness involves a form of multiplicity fundamentally different from spatial, quantitative multiplicity, namely intensity.

Perception, the Brain, and the World — Differences in Degree vs Kind

- 1) The body is composed of matter, sharing the same substance as the world.
 - a) There is only a difference in degree between our brain and our spinal cord.
- 2) The body functions as a zone of indetermination resulting from the hyphenation of matter and memory—it's a region where physical and mental aspects intersect.
- 3) This hyphenation creates a zone of indeterminacy, not a mirror or a different mode of existence, but a region of potentiality and open-endedness.
- 4) The body is an indeterminate zone that mediates between matter and memory, a site of intersection and potentiality.

The Primacy of Memory - Opposition to Phenomenology: Conscious is something

- 1) Perception depends on the organization and content of memory.
- 2) Without memory, perception would lack continuity and coherence.
- 3) Therefore, memory is more fundamental and primary than perception.
- 4) Or memory has primacy over perception because perception depends on memory.

The Coextension of Past and Present or the Past is contemporaneous with the Present

- 1) For the present to occur, it must draw upon and actualize past states.
- 2) The past exists as a virtual continuum that the present actualizes.
- 3) If the past did not already exist co-extensively with the present, the present could not fully come into being.
- 4) The past and the present are co-extensive because the present depends on the prior existence of the past as a virtual continuum.

The Actual and the Virtual

- 1) Virtual states are real tendencies or dispositions that are not currently actualized
- 2) Virtual states have an existence, independent of their actualization, as they contain real possibilities.
- 3) Actual states are the concrete instantiations of virtual tendencies.
- 4) Therefore: there is a fundamental divide between virtual and actual states, but virtual states are real.

For Bergson, Science is never “reductionist” but, on the contrary, demands a metaphysics — without which it would remain abstract, deprived of meaning or intuition. To continue Bergson’s project today, means for example to constitute a metaphysical image of thought corresponding to new lines, openings, traces, leaps, dynamisms, discovered by molecular biology of the brain: new linkings and re-linkings in thought. (Bergsonism 116-17)

Brief History

- Born October 18th 1859 - Died January 4th 1941
- Like Gottlob Frege (1848-1925) and Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), he trained as a mathematician.
- In 1877, Bergson won first prize for the Concours Général for the solution of a Problem in mathematics left behind by Blaise Pascal, he was 17 years old at the time.
 - His Math teacher was disappointed that he chose to study philosophy: “you could have been a mathematician; you will be a mere philosopher.” (Soulez & Worms 2002, 35)
- In 1878 he became a French Citizen and entered the École Normale..
 - His major influence at the time was Herbert Spencer. (CM 11)
- In 1889 Bergson published his two doctoral theses per the requirement of the French University system: *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience* (*Time and Free Will*) and *Quid Aristoteles de loco senserit* (*Aristotle’s Conception of Place*).
- In 1896 Bergson published his second book *Matter and Memory*.
- In 1900 Bergson published *Laughter: an Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* and starts teaching at the College of France.
- In 1903 Bergson published his “Introduction to Metaphysics in the *Revue de métaphysique et de morale*.
- In 1907 Bergson published *Creative Evolution*.
- In 1913 Bergson traveled to the United States and a week before his first lecture at Columbia University the New York Times published an article on him.
 - This is said to have caused the first traffic jam in the history of Broadway.
- In 1917 Bergson was sent by France to Spain and America due to World War 1. Bergson met with President Wilson in order to have America join the French side of the war.

- During this time Bergson also helped form the League of Nations which was in existence till 1946.
- In 1919 Bergson published *Mind Energy* which is a collection of essays and lectures concerning metaphysical and psychological problems.
- In 1922, Bergson had a famous debate with Einstein on the theory of time and relativity theory.
 - Einstein stated “Il n’y a donc pas un temps des philosophes.” (There is, therefore, no time of the philosophers.)
 - The Debate was such that Einstein did not win the Nobel Prize for Relativity theory as it was claimed to be a theory of Epistemology.
 - Bergson Publishes *Duration and Simultaneity*.
 - Later Bergson regrets this publication, he is not against relativity theory as many claimed, but thinks there is more we need to consider.
 - “For my part, I think that the theory of relativity represents a very great advance, not only from the viewpoint of physics, but also from the viewpoint of philosophy (Bergson, *Correspondence* 1122)” Quoted from the Stanford Encyclopedia.
- In 1928 Bergson received the Nobel Prize for Literature, there isn’t a nobel prize for Philosophy.
- In 1932 Bergson published his last work *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*.
- In 1934 Bergson has *The Creative Mind (La Pensée et le mouvant)* published

Recommended Reading/References

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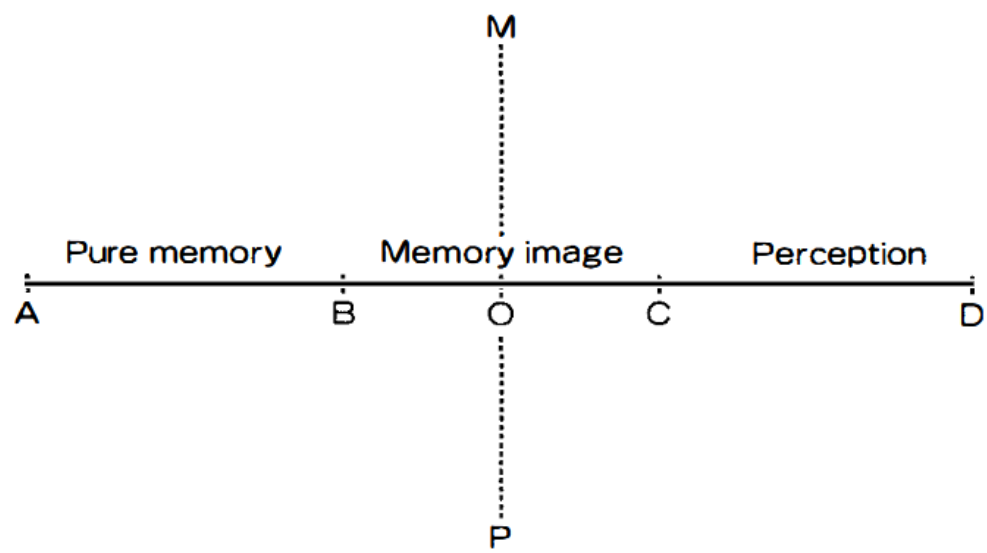


Fig. 2

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Fig. 4

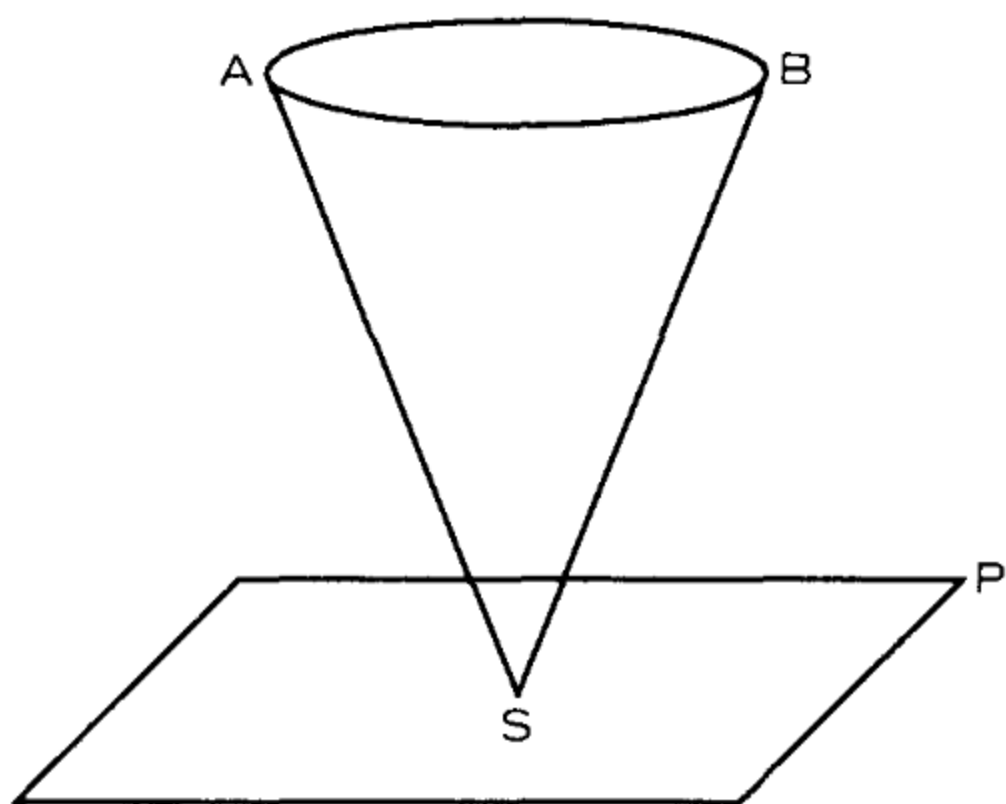


Fig. 5

