THE PROBLEMS OF LANGUAGE AND INTUITION

THE PROBLEMS OF LANGUAGE AND INTUITION IN BERGSON'S PHILOSOPHY

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INTRODUCTION

In 1907, William James wrote to congratulate the author of Creative Evolution.

> You are a magician and your book is a marvel, a real wonder . . .but, unlike the works of genius of the Transcendentalist Movement (which are so obscurely and abominably and inaccessibly written), a pure classic in point of form . . .such a flavour of persistent euphony, as of a rich river that never foamed or ran thin, but steadily proceeded with its banks full to the brim. Then the aptness of your illustrations, that never scratch or stand out at right angles, but invariably simplify the thought and help to pour it along. Oh, indeed you are a magician! And if your book proves to be as great an advance on this one as this is on its two predecessors, your name will surely go down as one of the great creative names in philosophy.[1]

Thirty-four years later Henri Bergson died, almost forgotten, in Paris. Long before his death James's prophecy had been proved false. Bergson's long lifetime had seen his reputation attain unprecedented heights, and decline almost to nothing.

Henri Bergson was born in 1859, a member of that Parisian Jewish community which finds a place in Proust's descriptions of fin-de-siècle society: a community that was also to produce Julien Benda, one of Bergson's most

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[1]Quoted by Irwin Edman, introduction, Creative Evolution (Modern Library, 1944), pp. ix-x.

stringent critics.[2] (One of the few dramatic events of Bergson's life was his refusal to the privileges offered him by the Vichy government despite his Jewish origin.) Until middle-age he led a life of increasing fame and distinction. Bergson claimed as his philosophic predecessors Blondel, Le Roy, Maine de Biron and Emile Boutroux, as well as the English utilitarian and evolutionist doctrines, particularly the thought of Herbert Spencer. It was his attempt to deepen Spencer's system that led him to perceive what was in his eyes its most crippling inadequacy, its essentially "static" form, and forced him to reject it.

Bergson had other precursors, some of whom strongly influenced him. His work contains elements of a mystical tradition extending back to Plotinus (to whom Bergson acknowledged an intellectual debt), and of a romanticism for which the way had been variously prepared by Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Schelling, Fichte and Rousseau.[3] Bergson's attempt to cast philosophical romanticism into a scientific mould (Matter and Memory, Creative Evolution) formed part of a romantic movement which had evolved over many years and many other aspects of European culture besides the philosophi-

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[2] H. Stuart Hughes, Consciousness and Society (Knopf, 1958).

[3] Claim made by Edman, Creative Evolution, pp. xvi-xvii.

cal. This evolution had also affected the public taste and helped to prepare the eagerness with which Bergson's work was received. Public acceptance is not necessarily an indication of excellence, but neither is waning popularity a decisive criterion of failure. Bergson's work has been out of fashion for many years, but the problems to which he addressed himself remain. His effort to solve them still deserves our serious attention.

His main works are Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience (1889); Matière et Mémoire: L'Evolution créatrice (1907); and Les deux sources de la morale et de la religion (1932). In 1927 he was awarded the Nobel Prize. William James praised his "flavour of persistent euphony", and it is perhaps to their erudition and stylistic beauty, as Russell was to suggest, that Bergson's works owe much of their attractiveness.

I am presenting this essay in the context of a Department of Religion. His chief concern is with a problem that ramifies throughout the realms of religion, philosophy, and art: the problem of intuition -- its existence, its proper scope, and its relation to intellect. Bergson's discovery or rediscovery of intuition is the lynchpin of his philosophy. Intuition alone, he maintains,

enables us to enter into and truly apprehend what he names Duration, and which might equally be called Reality or the Absolute. It is for this doctrine that he has become notorious, and around this doctrine that most of the philosophical objections to his work have centred. Bergson repeatedly tried to close the gap which his language was in danger of creating between that aspect of intelligence which apprehends Duration (Intuition) and that aspect which, he maintained, Nature has evolved to enable us to manipulate the material world (Intellect). I intend to describe these arguments more fully at a later point in this essay. However, despite his efforts the question remains: did Bergson fully understand the implications of his philosophy? Does his strong emphasis on Intuition in fact create a separation from Intellect too great to be bridged? Does he depreciate Intellect, as his critics have claimed? Many of his critics, including Benda, Russell and Suzanne Langer, have maintained, not only that Bergson fails to accord actual rather than nominal equality to Intellect, but that his emphasis on Intuition must lead to disastrous consequences, both for thought and for society. I believe that several of these objections, in particular those of Russell and Benda, rest on inadequate understanding and sympathy for what Bergson is trying to achieve, as well as on inadequate study of his writings.

However, my interest is not in Bergson's thought alone, but in his thought as it exemplifies a conflict ancient in Western thought. Bergson establishes (or his critics believe and claim he has established) a dichotomy, perhaps an actual opposition, between Intellect and Intuition. It would create unnecessary controversy to attempt comprehensive definitions of religion, philosophy and art; but is it not clear that, within the ordinarily accepted meanings of these terms, this dichotomy is a familiar one? It is loosely expressed in the terms "Romantic Age" and "Age of Reason"; it appears in the classical opposition between Apollo and Dionysus. Should men give their allegiance to one of these two gods, or by worshipping only one, do they risk the retaliation of the god they have scorned?

The artist has a practical and immediate interest in discovering the relationship between the intellectual and the intuitive, for both play a part in his special gift. No novelist who has learned his craft can naively assert that his art embodied his emotion, directly, simply and without mediation. He knows, on the contrary, that without strenuous intellectual effort his insight would remain unintelligible, not only to his readers, but to the writer himself. The relationship between intellect and intuition is part of his intimate experience.

It has also formed a continuing dialogue within the

Christian tradition. The Church has traditionally warned against an intuition that is tempted, because of its confidence in its unaided ability to penetrate to the Real, to rely only on itself; and orthodox religion has often viewed with hostility the individualism that threatened not only to shake off the yoke of authority, but to distort the judgment of those who succumbed to "enthusiasm" at the expense of revealed, authoritative truth.

The tendency to exaltation of intellect on the one side, and of emotion on the other, has formed a strand of Western culture for many centuries.[4] The Enlightenment did not succeed in eradicating romanticism (with its heavy emphasis on the individual, his judgment and his emotions) from our twentieth-century consciousness. Whether or not we realize it, the emotional factor -- even a bias in favor of the emotional, intuitive and personal -- enters into our judgment of many things.

His critics agree -- and Bergson himself might, as long as he believed his position to be not distorted but genuinely understood, admit -- that his philosophy falls heavily on the side of those who have emphasized the intuitive, the emotional, the personal. Is his position valid -- can any such be valid? Is his effort to achieve a rapprochement with

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[4] *Ibid.*, p. xvi.

Intellect successful, or is it even necessary? I wish to pass from a critical examination of his thought to the larger issues it brings up.

CHAPTER ONE

The whole of Bergson's vision sprang from one essential insight, which came to him one day when he was in his late twenties. He had just delivered a lecture on the teachings of Zeno, and had gone out to take his usual afternoon walk. From the sudden instant of intuition that came to him during that walk, there sprang in essence his whole analysis of time and of intellect. "For the following half-century," says H. Stuart Hughes, "Bergson was to follow through the infinitely ramifying implications of one simple flash of understanding."[1]

Only when one has read all Bergson's major works does one realize how unified and fundamental this basic position is. The titles of his books seem to promise radical differences of subject-matter: he tackles now the problem of the creative mind, now the theory of evolution, now the questions of matter and memory or of morality and religion. But, despite what appears at first sight to be their diversity of approach, all these books consist in the elaboration of one series of essential insights. So consistent is Bergson's thought that, once one has mastered

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[1]Hughes, op. cit., p. 116.

his basic theory, it becomes possible accurately to predict what he will say about other subjects.

For this reason I believe it is possible, without doing Bergson the injustice of oversimplification, sharply to reduce his verbiage, and pare his thought down to its essentials. In the summary that follows I hope to describe what Bergson says, passing in thematic fashion through the basic categories of his thought. This general discussion is necessary because Bergson's categories ramify and reinforce each other to produce a consistent fabric; without this larger background it would be impossible to focus more narrowly on the issue of Intellect and Intuition.

A. Time and Duration

In his famous paradox, Zeno of Elea had taken the story of the race between Achilles and the tortoise, and had turned it inside-out. Despite the obvious advantage of the swift runner over the slow-moving tortoise, Zeno had divided the motion of both into ever smaller segments in an infinite regress, and so "proved" the impossibility, either of the race ever reaching its end, or of Achilles overtaking the tortoise. "The argument . . .is, that since the pursuer in every interval or subdivision of time must first reach the point from which the pursued simultaneously starts, it follows that the latter will always be in advance, though

by an interval which becomes constantly smaller and approaches the minimum."[2] The logic of this argument was absurd from the standpoint of ordinary experience, but it had never been satisfactorily refuted.[3]

Bergson's original illumination arose from his effort to grapple with the absurdity of claiming that the runner can never overtake the tortoise, and the structure of logic by which the intellect can, nevertheless, appear to prove this absurdity beyond hope of appeal to common sense. In Zeno's paradox Bergson came to believe he found exemplified the most fundamental errors of our intellect -- certain habitual errors in our thinking.

Time flows. This seems an obvious statement to make, but in fact, Bergson insists, we habitually overlook the true nature of time and the implications of this truth for our perception.

(It is difficult here to disentangle the reality of Time from the workings of the intellect as Bergson analyzes them. At the basis of all Bergson's thought lies the insistence on this one illumination: that motion/flow/dynamic

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[2]Wilhelm Windelband, A History of Philosophy (Harper, 1958), I, 56.

[3]Loc. cit.

change is the fundamental characteristic of all material and psychic reality. Evolution, the dynamic, is therefore the essence of the universe, and of our own beings insofar as these partake of the universal.)

It is the nature of our intellect -- an error exemplified in Zeno's paradox -- to suppose that not the dynamic, but the static is the basic element of reality. The philosophers have been especially guilty in perpetuating this error, for philosophy and metaphysics have habitually applied to time conclusions that were appropriate only to space, to the world of extension. Time and space, Bergson maintains, differ in quality, and the same faculty cannot be used to understand them both. Actually, movement is indivisible continuity; but for the vitality of real experience, metaphysics has substituted "a system of abstract ideas". This is not surprising, for Bergson claims: "If it is a question of movement, all the intelligence retains is a series of positions".[4]

To this paradoxically constant dimension of motion, which permeates all our experience whether physical, temporal or psychic, Bergson gives the name Duration: la durée. He is not denying the existence of the material order or of

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[4]Bergson, The Creative Mind (Philosophical Library, 1946), p. 14.

linear time; but, though these things are real in their appropriate dimension, Bergson is attempting to elucidate the reality which he believes underlies and, as it were, gives birth to them all. In Duration our own human being is rooted, and to it we must, and -- by a faculty of transcendence which is particularly developed in the saint or artistic genius -- can return, to experience the deepest dimensions of the self. It is what Bergson claims to be the intellect's inability to apprehend Duration -- an inability closely linked with the intellect's special function, as we shall see -- that enabled Zeno to deny the reality of motion.

Since the term Duration has been introduced, it may be useful to note that here, as with other terms which he either coined (such as _l'élan vital_) or arrogated to his own peculiar use (such as "Intuition"), Bergson never fully and explicitly defines the key words of his philosophy. When we encounter the concept of Duration,[5] it is already full-blown, and Bergson appears to expect that we will for the most part gather his meaning from his usage. Indeed, in introducing the term "Intuition", he actively rejects the possibility of what he calls "geometrical" definition.[6]

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[5] _Ibid._, Introduction I, _Creative Evolution_, Ch. I.

[6] _The Creative Mind_, p. 37.

Throughout his philosophy, the meaning of key words is rather to be deduced by the reader than defined by the writer.

The idea of Duration might be illuminated by a comparison with the Christian concept of Eternity, to which it bears a close resemblance (a resemblance of which, considering his admiration for the tenets of Catholicism, Bergson may have been aware). Duration, like Eternity, is not static as we are usually tempted to conceive it, but dynamic. Like Eternity, Duration forms the basic stratum of the individual personality (though our consciousness, because of its specialized, practical function, cannot always afford to acknowledge this). It is the flow of growth and change within us, constant in its dynamic motion. But this change is by its nature not ephemeral, but eternal.

> For our Duration is not merely one instant replacing another; if it were, there would never be anything but the present -- no prolonging of the past into the actual, no evolution, no concrete duration. Duration is the continuous progress of the past which gnaws into the future and which swells as it advances.[7]

Duration, then, is time and growth taken, not as a succession of instants, but as a whole. Bergson is careful to explain that this does not imply an understanding of Duration as a finite quantity. Rather, genuine growth is characterized by "radical novelty". While Bergson does not

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[7] Creative Evolution, p. 7.

deny the influence of our past in shaping the present, he maintains emphatically that the future, the product of a Duration which is in a sense organic and alive, cannot be divined or predicted on a statistical basis. In speaking so, he is not speaking in narrow empirical terms. It is doubtful that he would deny our ability to predict tomorrow's weather or the time the sun will rise. Bergson's denial is on a far larger scale: we cannot predict the _end_. He therefore rejects both the mechanistic and the finalistic philosophies.[8] "The essence of mechanical explanation, in fact, is to regard the future and the past as calculable functions of the present, and thus to claim that _all is given_";[9] while the finalistic view point errs in predicting the end or purpose of creation, which then imposes itself upon and seeks to mould the present. Duration is constantly creating itself; it is capable of a novelty which the logical intellect alone cannot encompass.

B. Intellect and Memory

Bergson claims that most human thought, and all philosophy, has been involved in a semenal error: misunderstanding the nature and function of Intellect. The Intellect

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[8] _Op. cit._, pp. 42-50.

[9] _Ibid._, p. 43.

constantly distorts Duration because it was not formed for the purpose of understanding Duration in the first place, and its aspiration after a grasp of the absolute which does not properly belong to its traps the Intellect, by virtue of its own structure, into philosophical problems which are insoluble because they spring from a fundamental mistake.

Intellect has developed in the course of evolution to enable us to manipulate the world of matter: it is an instrument for the construction of tools. In this sense its specialized function directs it toward our material survival, and, Bergson maintains, nothing more. It therefore follows that our contact with the world around us is a real one, that our perceptions of it are genuine: he emphatically rejects those philosophers who have claimed that intelligence distorts its proper object -- i.e. the material realm. Intellect distorts only when we apply it to an object with which it is not, by structure and function, able to deal: Duration.[10]

The Intellect's purpose is to deal with matter. It does this, he claims, in an analytical and disintegrative way: before a tool can be constructed to deal with a problem, the problem itself must be dissected, put back together, and thoroughly understood. So must the material from which the

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[10] The Creative Mind, p. 44.

tool will be made, and the principle on which it will work.

Here Bergson introduces the metaphor of the "cinematographic intellect".[11] He asserts that the basic unit of the moving picture is not the motion that appears on the screen before us, but the many static frames of which the film, once we stop and examine it, is found to be composed. Similarly, if we analyze the functioning of intellect down to its basic unit, we will find, according to Bergson, that it consists of many frozen "moments". To Intellect, as to the film, the static "frame" is basic. This process is not merely one of selection, of the Intellect's learning to ignore irrelevancies and concentrate on the essential: the metaphor implies that it is capable of _arresting_ reality in a momentary "freeze" for purposes of analysis.

Intellect must possess this power in order to perform its function. But, Bergson maintains, we must not assume, as so many of our philosophic predecessors have done, that the structure of Intellect transparently reflects the structure of Reality in its largest sense -- that Reality which Bergson names Duration. If we truly understand the strictly practical function to which Intellect is properly directed, we will realize how inadequate it is to grasp _la durée_.

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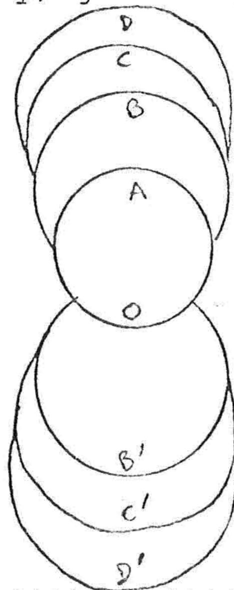
[11] _Creative Evolution_, pp. 332-4, 339-46, etc.

Despite the general reliability of our senses and intelligence when they are mediating facts about the material order, our perceptions of the world are not completely undistorted: for, Bergson maintains, each carries a covert load of memory. Memory fills out each perception with a shadowy dimension of other experiences, of generalizations based on our past life. Where these memories are most relevant, in a practical sense, to our immediate need, they are clearcut and easily available to consciousness. Thereafter they expand in ever wider circles, retreating farther and farther from our conscious awareness. Bergson illustrates this[12] with an interesting diagram, in which O represents the object, A the primary awareness, B, C, and D the widening circles of memory, and B', C', and D' the "causes of growing depth (of memory) given within the object itself . . .".



[12] *Matter and Memory*, p. 128.

The widest circle of all includes our past in its entirety: for Bergson asserts that at this unconscious depth, brought to awareness only by practical need or by chance association, our past "preserves itself automatically". (Recent psychiatric experiments in drug therapy, using "truth serums" such as sodium amathol and sodium pentathol, have enabled patients to recover incidents and conversations from very early years with such vividness that they could be said, in a psychic sense, to be reliving the experience. While this provides fascinating support for Bergson's theory, nevertheless in a philosophical context his claim that we possess total memory is one of those unsupported assertions that Russell was later sharply to criticize.)

The long discussion of selective amnesia to be found in *Matter and Memory* is aimed at proving that the brain, like the intellect, has a predominantly practical purpose: not to preserve memories, but to *exclude* from consciousness all that is not immediately useful. The brain, argues Bergson, is the organ of intellect; it is not the seat of memory. In fact "pure" memory cannot be physically located in the body.

> If it is memory above all that lends to perception its subjective character, the philosophy of matter must aim in the first instance, we said, at eliminating the contributions of memory. We must now add that, as pure perception gives us the whole or at least the essential part of matter (since the rest comes from memory and is superadded to matter), it follows that memory must be, in principle, a power absolutely independent of matter. If, then, spirit is a reality, it is here, in the phenomenon of

> memory, that we may come into touch with it experimentally. And hence any attempt to derive pure memory from an operation of the brain should reveal on analysis a radical illusion.[13]

The brain stands to memory in the relation, not of receptacle, but of filter; for finally memory is not a physical thing and cannot be physically located. Rather it is a manifestation of Spirit. An interestingly similar point of view has been expressed by Sir John Eccles, the eminent brain physiologist, who,

> after years of research on the activity of the brain, considers that from its general structure it would seem to be an apparatus, not so much for generating conscious activity, but for detecting and responding to the conscious activity of some immaterial agent, which might reasonably be called a mind. It is, as he puts it, "just such a machine as a ghost might operate".[14]

Memory, then, is the fifth column; for within our perceptions, within our intellect, but separable from both, it is the living presence of Spirit. It is logical to think, therefore, that through an analysis of Memory we can reach an understanding of what the Christians have called the soul.

A Note on Language

Philosophers, according to Bergson, have not only

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[13] Ibid., p. 80.

[14] Quoted in Man, Myth and Magic, (periodical) Purnell, LXXXII.

erred in their understanding of Intellect: they have compounded the error by imagining language to be a fit tool for the expression of Duration. In fact language is the tool of Intellect, created by Intellect for a direct grappling with material reality. Language expresses the analytical, manipulative character of Intellect, and therefore makes a tool of great crudity and imprecision when taken beyond its appropriate sphere. Nevertheless, Bergson reluctantly admits, we have no other means of communication. When speaking of Duration it is necessary to make use of language, but with reservations, keeping its original function always in mind.

Bergson has placed himself in a difficult position, since he has declared himself to be a philosopher -- a _métier_ which is commonly thought to deal in ideas -- and is writing in language, which he has declared to be the manipulative, materially-oriented tool of Intellect. With this equipment, which he admits one cannot escape if one wishes to communicate with others, he is attempting to discuss a reality that, he claims, largely transcends both ideas and language. For this reason his use of language is at least as informative as his theory.

How is it possible to suggest in words something that so far transcends language? Bergson's answer appears to be, by imagery. Bertrand Russell sought to expose the

intellectual inadequacy of this method by compiling a list of the things Bergson compared life to, letting this juxtaposition speak for itself: does a life that is capable of being *like* so many things have any quality intrinsic to itself? After reading Russell's list, one is at first inclined to doubt it. However, I think Russell has done Bergson an injustice by wresting these metaphors from their context. He has misunderstood Bergson's use of imagery, for Russell is demanding that each comparison be complete and exact, and on this ground he finds the method inadequate. But it seems clear from Bergson's usage that for him each was at best a *partial* comparison, meant to illuminate one facet of a reality so complex no single metaphor could capture it. Only by Russell's criterion is this method to be condemned.

C. Intuition

How can we speak and think about Duration at all, if Intellect is not adequate to this purpose? To this question Bergson makes a famous, controversial and not entirely original answer. We do possess a faculty capable of apprehending Duration, and Bergson calls this Intuition.

What, exactly, is Intuition? Its complexity is such that it cannot be captured by what Bergson calls a "geometrical" definition; instead he offers a series of partial definitions, and leaves the reader to draw out the

rest from his actual usage of the word. One place where we can surprise Intuition at work is in the phenomenon of memory (insofar as Intuition is the incursion of Duration into our lives); for in its ordinary workings memory, according to Bergson, frequently eliminates time, thus passing from the static, material realm into the timeless flow which is characteristic of Duration. He cites the example of the dying man who, in an instant, "re-experiences" his past life with such vividness and intensity that his consciousness is completely diverted from the present moment. This should not surprise us, since Bergson appears to believe that our conscious orientation to the present is a matter, not of inevitable necessity, but of practicality, allied with the survival-directed functions of the intellect and the brain.

Bergson claims to raise Intuition to the level of a philosophical method. For him the word has the fundamental meaning of "thinking in Duration": Intuition partakes of Duration in that it is characterized by motion, by flow, unlike Intellect for which Bergson asserts immobility -- being able to reduce perceptions to a series of static frames -- to be the basic and necessary characteristic.

Intuition is an instantaneous and complete apprehension of Duration; unlike a purely intellectual understanding, it is a whole and cannot be broken down into

"frames" and "moments". Bergson expresses this by saying that Intuition has no elements and is indivisible. It is an understanding that transcends ideas and therefore language, since both of these, Bergson asserts, are tools of Intellect and partake of its static nature. For this reason Intuition at first seems inexpressible. Only gradually and partially does it translate itself into expressible ideas, and it has the greatest difficulty communicating itself through language.

In Creative Evolution Bergson returns to this theme,[15] and implies the image of the mind as a condensing star, with a solid core of Intellect and an outer atmosphere of Intuition, representing "that part of the evolving principle which has not shrunk to the peculiar form of our organization". "Intelligence," he reiterates, "remains the luminous nucleus around which . . .Intuition forms only a vague nebulosity".[16] Here we find one of the many metaphors whose proliferation, at least according to Russell, constitute a serious intellectual weakness in Bergson's work.

On interpretation of all these sayings I believe Bergson means that we penetrate to the essence of the personality and of being (Duration) by means of intuition,

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[15]Gabriel Marcel, "Bergonism and Music", in Reflections on Art, edited by S. K. Langer (Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 56.

[16]Ibid., p. 195.

I agree with him that in fact our understanding does often, in its natural workings, appear to eliminate time: by intense memory, and by occasional phenomena of precognition. Whether this elimination is genuine or only apparent is a matter for debate (see Chapter Two).

Common usage certainly acknowledges the existence of Intuition, and I too wish to start by assuming its existence. The crucial question, as Bergson rightly emphasizes, is the proper scope of Intuition, and its relation to Intellect, if indeed the separation between them is legitimate. Here let us note that Bergson's claim that Intuition does and must elude definition -- a claim he expresses, paradoxically enough, in sophisticated intellectual terms -- in effect, involves him in asking us to intuit the meaning of Intuition.

Intuition, for Bergson, seems to be that elusive non-conceptual understanding that enables us to shear past the categories of space-time which normally limit our perceptions. It is that element of our nature which enables us to experience the Duration in which our lives are rooted, and to dwell there as the mystic dwells in the Divine. Indeed the saint or religious genius is, according to Bergson, one human type who possesses Intuition in the supreme degree.

He was probably aware how closely his thought paralleled certain traditional Christian doctrines (for instance, the resemblance between Duration and the concept

of Eternity): his late conversion to Catholicism was not formalized only because he refused to renounce the noble danger of being a Jew, and in his will he requested that his funeral service be read by a Roman Catholic priest.

D. Bergson's Concept of Art

Perhaps it is relevant here to say how disappointing I have found Bergson's treatment of art. The only place where he studies this explicitly at any length, as far as I know, is his essay on Lucretius;[17] elsewhere I have found only glancing references. Of the other writers who have tried to deal with this same subject, Gabriel Marcel in his essay "Bergsonism and Music"[18] seems similarly perplexed and obliged to rely on deduction.

The impression I have gleaned from Bergson's writing is that he believes the artist to possess Intuition in the supreme degree, Intuition of which his art is the glorious manifestation. Bergson treats art as if it were a direct, almost unmediated reflection of intuitive knowledge. He would, I think, admit that to express his intuition the artist must deploy a really formidable intellectual technique, though he does not in fact explicitly admit this. But I suspect he

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[17] Bergson, *Philosophy of Poetry* (Philosophical Library, 1959).

[18] *Reflections on Art*, *op. cit.*

would also insist that, in artistic creation, Intellect remains the handmaiden of Intuition, a mere tool.

In Chapter Three I will argue that the question of artistic creation is far too complex to divide it simply into Intellect and Intuition, the creative impulse being assigned to Intuition, and the organized manifestation to Intellect. To do so is to separate art from its form, and this, I shall maintain, is inconceivable. In the work of the artist, Intellect holds so high a place that it partakes of the godlike power Bergson attributes to Intuition. When this happens, the distinction between the two becomes infinitely more problematic.

E. The Elan Vital

I include this section because the *élan vital* is probably the most famous phrase of Bergson's coining, though in the total picture of his philosophy, to which the analyses of time and intelligence are basic, it does not play so large a part as popular belief has ascribed to it. The concept of the vital impulse is elaborated mainly in *Creative Evolution*.

According to Bergson, Nature is dynamic. In a sense it is also purposive, though he asks us to understand this without personifying it into a conscious intent. Nature is a living whole, continually self-creating; and the vital impulse is that thrust of life which has elaborated itself into organisms of increasing complexity, ever tending toward

consciousness, finally emerging into reflective self-awareness: Nature whose crown is Man.

Bergson rejected Darwinism because it lacked an inner directing principle.[19] Nevertheless, the concept of the _élan vital_ is not truly finalistic in that it allows of discord and adaptation: it is a wide _common impetus_ within which discord can exist: an impetus, not an end. "Harmony is rather behind us than before".[20]

> Of the road which was going to be travelled, the human mind could have nothing to say, for the road has been created _pari passu_ with the act of travelling over it, being nothing but the direction of this act itself.

F. Morality and Religion

I mention Bergson's discussion of morality and religion mainly in order to bring up two points which will appear in the criticism of his work: his critique of Eastern mysticism, and the alleged action-directedness of his thought.

The Two Sources, unlike Bergson's other works which tend to be loosely-knit and repetetive, preserves a symmetrical

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[19] _Creative Evolution_, p. 85.

[20] _Ibid._, p. 58.

structure: for both morality and religion, Bergson believes, stem from two sources and express two complementary aspects of human culture: the dynamic or intuitive, and the static, dedicated to stability and the conservation of the present order. So he establishes pairs which he designates by interchangeable terms -- "the morality or pressure"/"closed morality", and "static religion"; and on the other side, "the morality of aspiration"/"open morality", and "dynamic religion".

Neither extreme can still be found in pure and undiluted form, if indeed they were ever so found historically. "Static" morality is the collective pressure of society upon the individual; "static" religion Bergson holds to be Nature's line of defense against the destructive effects of intelligence, which if left to itself might counsel egoism at the expense of the community, and undermine the individual's will to live by making him aware that he must die (so the religious doctrines of immortality, which play down individual death). Because the conservation of the social order is their common aim, static religion and static morality have tended to become identified, but Bergson maintains that they are basically separate entities. (Since both, in their "dynamic" aspect, are rooted in Duration, it is however difficult to accept this division as absolute.)

Repeatedly Bergson protests his appreciation of the conserving force, and emphasizes how essential it is in

maintaining the balance of human culture. But it is for intuition and mystical religion that he reserves his most lyrical enthusiasm. Bergson's critics have always deplored what they feel to be his depreciation of Intellect. Theoretically he does give Intellect and the conserving force, whether in morality or in religion, their due. In fact, however, it is difficult to avoid the impression that he is strongly biased in favour of Intuition.

Static and dynamic religion differ in quality: man does not (pace the ancient religions) pass from one to the other by stages of gradual perfection. Dynamic religion (Intuition) culiminates in mystical experience. The true mystic, like all geniuses, "transcends his humanity".

This is not the first time Bergson has spoken in this way. He has already stated that open morality (of which the mystic partakes, since "open" morality is rooted in Duration) transcends Nature and is the contribution of man's genius, which enables him to rise above what Nature formed him to be.[21]

It depends, of course, on what one thinks Nature is and what she formed man to be; but Bergson has made his own understanding of these terms fairly clear. Man as an animal

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[21] Bergson, The Two Sources of Morality and Religion (Holt, 1935), p. 64.

was equipped with abilities that enabled him to survive and to live in society, thus specializing the individual into one unit of a whole more powerful and diverse than the individual alone could ever be. One of these faculties was intelligence; one would think its evolution toward self-transcendence -- i.e. toward reflective thought -- was also naturally given!

However, in speaking of man's genius, of his transcendence of Nature, I think Bergson is referring again to the equivalence between Eternity and Duration, and is speaking once more _sub specie aeternitatis_. Man can, he asserts, achieve the leap into Duration, which means rising above the physical and psychological conditioning to which he is admittedly subject on other levels. Once again Bergson is refusing to agree that this conditioning expresses the final truth about human being.

At this point Bergson's views on religion involve him in several assertions which remain assertions; which he takes to be either axiomatic or self-evident, and so makes no attempt to prove. He maintains that religion is essentially _action_ and must, to be "true", direct itself toward action.[22] Since this is so, he goes on, complete mysticism is to be found only in the Christian tradition, rather than in what Bergson calls the life- and will-renunciation of Buddhism.

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[22] _Ibid._, p. 203.

> . . .We shall not hesitate to see mysticism in the Buddhist faith. But we shall understand why it is not complete mysticism. This would be action, creation, love. Not that Buddhism ignored charity. On the contrary it recommended it in the most exalted terms. And it joined precept to example. But it lacked warmth and glow. As a religious historian very justly puts it, it knew nothing of "the complete and mysterious gift of self".23

One suspects that Bergson's unnamed historian was a Christian. One may further remark on the extraordinary occurrence of the words "warmth and glow" as a suppossedly objective criterion for the appreciation of Buddhism. Finally, and apparently as a self-evident truth since he makes no attempt to discuss let alone to prove it, Bergson goes on to assert that Christ was the greatest mystic who ever lived.[24]

It is evident that Bergson is heavily biased toward Christianity, and that he shares an oversimplified and self-congratulatory view of the Eastern religions that is unfortunately often found among Christian scholars (Thomas Altizer's very similar dismissal of Buddhism comes to mind). However, the most important point in his analysis of religion is his belief that it is essentially action, and the implication that his own doctrine of intuition is perfectly compatible with this action-directedness.

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[23] Ibid., p. 225.

[24] Ibid., p. 240.

From our examination of Bergson's thought, several problems have emerged which require our critical consideration. Among these are his dismissal of Eastern mysticism, and his contention that "true" religion leads to action in the world. However, the important and central issues are two: Bergson's language -- his theory of its nature and limitations, and his actual usage, a problem which opens out into the questions of language in religion and in art; and the distinction he draws between intellect and intuition.

These last are so complex that each will require a section of its own. In Chapter Two, therefore, I intend to deal first with the lesser problems, and then pass on to the question of language, making use of Russell's criticism. In Chapter Three, Suzanne Langer's critique of Bergson will lead us into the whole question of Intellect vs. Intuition. Finally, in Chapter Four, I will present a summary and conclusions.

CHAPTER TWO

A. Action

In The Varieties of Religious Experience[1] William James remarks that the only way we have of judging the quality of someone else's experience -- for example a religious conversion -- is to see what good it does, i.e. how it affects the person's actions in the world. If it does not affect them intelligibly for the better (though the intelligibility may be retrospective, as is usual with saints, whom the Church made a habit of burning first and canonizing later), then we have no evidence beyond the person's own assertion that something decisive has occurred, and we are justified in being skeptical.

Now Bergson's philosophy is, by his own proclamation, dynamic, and it is an alleged lack of activity that enables him to dismiss the whole of the Eastern tradition. He several times makes explicit that "true" religion leads to action. Does this action-directedness in fact follow from Bergson's philosophy? From one perspective, it does not. By polarizing Intuition and Intellect -- an effect which is not countered by his claim that the two are in fact

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[1] William James, The Varieties of Religious Experience (The Modern Library, 1929), Lectures XIV and XV, "The Values of Saintliness".

mutually complementary -- it could be argued that Bergson has severed the planet from its sun and sent it spinning off into illimitable space. This severance is made more dangerous by his implicit preference for intuition: a knowledge which can only approximately, and with difficulty, be communicated in words. To put so heavy an emphasis on this kind of knowledge (if indeed that word can be applied to an entity so different from the other knowledge, which is marked by the precision possible to Intellect and is easily expressible in language), is to reinforce the radical inwardness that characterizes Bergson's philosophy and all lines of thought that resemble it. Logically this leads, not into the world, but away from it. For the mystic, action in the world is only a preliminary to a renunciation that reaches beyond time, space and personality itself.

At this ultimate level, action is transcended; but, in support of Bergson's contention that enlightenment is dynamic, it is possible to argue that action is a penultimate value appropriate to the penultimate reality in which the mystic finds himself -- that is, the world. Would he therefore discover the key to meaningful action in his experience of the Absolute? Schleiermacher maintained[2] that the essence of the mystical experience is the dissolution of barriers, the realization that "no man is an island". Ethical action could intelligibly be made to follow

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[2] Schleiermacher, On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers (Harper, 1958), Second Speech, pp. 71-2.

from such a revelation, thus confirming Bergson's contention.

The radical inwardness of Bergson's thought makes me feel that the logical connection between enlightenment and action is a fragile one. But he has many authorities on his side, and his claim cannot be disproved. Since the solution to this problem lies within the mystical experience, which is not accessible to most individuals, it is doubtful whether any argument springing from the intellect alone can be decisive on either side.

B. Buddhism

The second minor problem I wish to deal with in this chapter, before passing on to the main theme of language, is Bergson's critique of Buddhism. He asserts Christ to be the supreme mystic, and in addition he falls into the old, fatuous error of supposing that Christianity is more "dynamic" than the Eastern religions, and therefore, *a priori*, better.

There is a deep misunderstanding, filled with an unpleasant sort of self-congratulation, on the part of Christians who assert the negativity and immobility of Eastern enlightenment. Bergson himself admits that the Buddhists practise an exalted charity, and is driven back to saying that this is, however, somehow colder and more

mechanical than the Christian variety: it lacks "warmth and glow". Such subjective criteria are precisely what one arrives at when one attempts to depreciate Buddhism on ethical grounds, for in practical terms the differences are small. And the "dynamism" of such Christian apologists as Bergson and Altizer is never fully defined, so completely do they -- at least when arguing the superiority of Western religion -- accept mere restless motion as a value in itself. It is a value the Buddhists would scorn. Unless "dynamism" is more carefully explicated in terms of moral growth or some equally complex concept that permits of real discussion, it does not constitute a one-word argument for the superiority of the Christian faith.

As to Christ's being the supreme mystic, even if one admits the possibility of penetrating the superstitions and distortions that have obscured him for us, it seems a singular assertion that existence in Duration, which saints of _all_ eras have achieved, leaves any residue of meaning to such inequality.

C. Russell's Critique of Bergson

Bertrand Russell's criticism of Bergson can be found in _The History of Western Philosophy_ (1946). It is rich and lively, although he starts by taking at its face value Bergson's claim about the activism of his own

philosophy. He "regard(s) action as the supreme good, considering happiness an effect and knowledge a mere instrument of successful activity".[3]

Russell has here managed a threefold though rather elusive error, which has to do with what Bergson actually does say as distinct from what he claims he intends to say. The action-directedness of his thought rests mainly on the repeated claim that true religion will necessarily issue in action. But as we have seen, the actual inwardness of Bergson's thought undermines any inevitable logical connection between Intuition and action. Russell's overestimation of Bergson's activism is perhaps based on inadequate study of the man he is discussing. In terms of the actual impression created by Bergson's philosophy, both the supreme happiness -- as in his poetic descriptions of mystical ecstasy -- and knowledge, come closer than does action to being ends in themselves. Considering that the core of his thought is an analysis of the two kinds of knowledge, it is difficult to agree that he sees knowledge as "a *mere* instrument of successful activity".

Russell speaks with extreme sarcasm of Bergson's depreciation of the intellect, and notes his tendency to locate perception *in* the object perceived, and so to blur the distinction between perception and its object (*Matter*

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[3]Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy* (G. Allen & Unwin, 1946), p. 820.

and Memory).[4] I suspect that Bergson's terminology, which certainly does give the impression Russell relays, is more a misleading manner of saying that we do in truth perceive the object, and not just our own perception of it.

As I have already noted, Russell points out that Bergson seldom accounts for his views, but relies on assertion backed up by simile. To expose the inadequacy of this method he has compiled several dozen of Bergson's similes. This juxtaposition does indeed make the philosopher's linguistic usage appear ridiculous, for, by putting his metaphors shoulder to shoulder, Russell demonstrates the fragmented and heterogeneous character of Bergson's imagery. I have already said that I do not consider Russell's attack to be fully justified, and will return to this subject in Section D.

Russell maintains that Bergson's doctrines of space and time are both crucial, and both false. His concept of space is necessary for his condemnation of intellect -- "and if he fails in his condemnation of the intellect, the intellect will succeed in its condemnation of him, for between the two it is war to the knife".[5]

It is on these two concepts, therefore, that Russell

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[4] *Ibid.*, p. 825.

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 828.

concentrates his heavy fire. Bergson, he claims, starts with the erroneous belief that magnitude implies space. If this is so, he demands, what about the emotions, which are certainly capable of varying magnitudes, but cannot be located in space? Similarly with the idea of number: Bergson's attempt to spatialize it simply shows that he does not know what number is. He has in fact made three confusions, among a) number, the general concept; b) particular numbers; and c) the various collections to which particular numbers can be applied. When Bergson says "Number is a collection of units", he is defining c). In fact "number" is so abstract it eludes any pictorial image such as Bergson tries to use, and assumes that intellect habitually uses.[6] Russell maintains that Bergson does not muster convincing support for his view that all separatedness implies space. He concludes with the interesting claim that this "spatializing", so basic to Bergson's philosophy, is not a necessity of thought but a personal idiosyncrisy given universal application, that is the predominance of the visual in Bergson's own sensibility.

Russell holds that because a philosophy like Bergson's thrives on the errors of the intellect, it comes

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[6] *Ibid.*, p. 829.

to prefer bad thought to good: for instance, in discussing mathematics, Bergson habitually preferred traditional errors to their more modern corrections.[7]

Finally, dealing with Bergson's concept of time, Russell points to the circularity of his definitions of past and present, which involve using past and present tenses as an integral part of the definition.[8] He has been guilty of an elementary confusion between a past occurrence and our present recollection of it: so the "self-perpetuation" of the past is, on the contrary, only our present idea of the past.[9] All these confusions, claims Russell, spring from an initial blurring of the distinction between subjective and objective.

D. The Problem of Language

Russell's critique contains much that is of interest, but this essay is concerned with examining Bergson from only two angles: that of language, and that of the Intellect-Intuition split. For our purposes the main point of Russell's

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[7] *Ibid.*, p. 833.

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 834.

[9] *Ibid.*, p. 835.

criticism is his mockery of Bergson's use of language.

In the above outline, I have in the main endeavoured merely to state Bergson's views, without giving the reasons adduced by him in favour of their truth. This is easier than it would be with most philosophers, since as a rule he does not give reasons for his opinions, but relies on their inherent attractiveness, and on the charm of an excellent style. Like advertisers, he relies upon picturesque and varied statement, and an apparent explanation of many obscure facts. Analogies and similes, especially, form a very large part of the whole process by which he recommends his views to the reader. The number of similes for life to be found in his works exceeds the number in any poet known to me. Life, he says, is like a shell bursting into fragments which are again shells. It is like a sheaf. Initially, it was a 'tendency to accumulate in a reservoir, as do especially the green parts of vegetables'. But the reservoir is to be filled with boiling water from which steam is issuing; 'jets must be gushing out unceasingly, of which each, falling back, is a world'. Again 'life appears in its entirety as an immense wave which, starting from a centre, spreads outwards, and which on almost the whole of its circumference is stopped and converted into oscillation: at one single point the obstacle has been forced, the impulsion has passed freely'. Then there is the great climax in which life is compared to a cavalry charge . . . .

"But a cool critic, who feels himself a mere spectator, perhaps an unsympathetic spectator, of the charge in which man is mounted uon animality, may be inclined to think that calm and careful thought is hardly compatible with this form of exercise. When he is told that thought is a mere means of action, the mere impulse to avoid obstacles in the field, he may feel that such a view is becoming in a cavalry officer, but not in a philosopher, whose business, after all, is with thought . . . .He may be tempted to ask whether there are any reasons for accepting such a restless view of the world.[10]

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[10] _Ibid._, pp. 799-800.

No more than Bergson does Russell <u>argue coherently</u> for his point of view. Bergson's weapon of persuasion is simile: Russell's is sarcastic dismissal. The reader marvels that a man of such monumental stupidity as Russell makes Bergson out to be should ever have found his way into print, let alone into the serious and enthusiastic consideration of so many readers, and so many thinkers of repute in his own day. If one examines Russell's objections, the two solid ideas that emerge (and that only implicitly) from the surrounding complacent sarcasm are that: a) this welter of comparisons destroys any central, stable conceptual core: that is, Bergson tells us what life is <u>like</u> to the point where he cannot tell us what life <u>is</u>; and b) in any case, objective rational thought -- which is the business of the philosopher -- cannot possibly operate by means of images.

Russell fails to make these ideas explicit, and fails also to pick up the sweeping implications that follow on his contemptuous dismissal of Bergson's imagery. This imprecision is surprising: one is tempted to ascribe it to spleen, and to a complete temperamental disharmony with the kind of effort Bergson is making, and knows and acknowledges he is making. By finding his method unacceptable, Russell implies that the use of imagery and metaphor cannot perform the function of rational argument in the thought of anyone

who presumes to call himself a philosopher.

To set up an experimental definition of philosophy, as a straw man to be knocked down, would be to miss the main thrust of this argument. For the question involved is: can imagery be made the vehicle of meaningful thought? Can Bergson legitimately use images to persuade us to his point of view, or is this method, as Russell charges, only a species of intellectual sleight-of-hand?

Bergson is well aware of the paradox involved in his using language at all. For his words are directed to explicating the basic nature of language, and to warning us of the difficulties of expression which spring from what manipulative, materially-oriented nature, especially when one attempts to deal with experience of a unified, super-linguistic, super-conceptual kind, what might be denominated "spiritual" experience. For these reasons Bergson is reluctant to use language, but he maintains that no other means of communication is available to us when attempting to render Intuition intelligible in conceptual terms. It would be pleasant if he could prove his point by picking the reader up and immersing him in a bath of undifferentiated Intuition, but this is not possible; and the compromise method Bergson is obliged to adopt, and of whose difficult and contradictory nature he is well aware, cannot, at least by Lord Russell's showing, have any hope of success.

Bergson's method begins with fairly clear-cut conceptual statements; but by the nature of the subject-matter he soon reaches the limits of language, and then he resorts to imagery -- to stimulating the mind, by unexpected jolts and partial images, to venture a little beyond the categories in which language has taught it to conceive of its experience. It is precisely because these similes are partial that I do not find Russell's criticism well-founded. Bergson warned us at the beginning that he would attempt to speak about a reality that is essentially unrelated to the operation and capability of Intellect, and of its tool, language. Our assent must come, if it comes at all, from deep in our own experience; it cannot be arrived at by a process of argument such as represents, for Russell, the only valid philosophical criterion. Far from being surprised and embarrassed when a penetrating critic confronts him with this difficulty, Bergson knows of it already, and has cautioned us against it. It appears, then, that he and Russell are operating in two entirely different spheres, and that Russell's criticisms miss the mark because he has not genuinely understood the task Bergson has undertaken.

I do not wish to turn this into an unqualified encomium of Bergson's method. I merely wish to make clear that his use of language, far from being vulnerable to the criticisms Russell levels at it, is perfectly consistent with his subject-matter and with the theory of language he

has outlined. He enters into the difficult task with a degree of self-awareness for which Russell refuses to give him credit. In an effort which partially transcends Intellect, it is irrelevant to dismiss his similes as meaningless because they lack intellectual consistency.

A similar criticism has been directed at Hegel's use of imagery. For this reason, J. N. Findlay's defense of the philosopher is relevant to our discussion. After all, it was Hegel who first spoke of "the bewitchment of our understanding through the instruments of our speech"[11] -- that is, the conceptual structure which language imposes on our experience, the analysis of which was to become so important to Bergson's thought.

> That Hegel's use of language is in every way defensible can certainly not be maintained; it is however, less indefensible than is usually supposed. For the purpose of Hegel is to explore notions from a peculiar angle, to see them as embodying half-formed *tendencies*, sometimes conflicting, which other notions will bring out into the open, and to explore *such* relations among notions certainly requires a new vocabulary . . . Hegel is, therefore, within his rights in resorting to metaphor. And since the relations dealt with are relations of *tendency*, which could be misdescribed if given too clear-cut an outline, Hegel is justified in using metaphors which are nebulous and shifting . . . . The main contemporary importance of Hegel lies in his recognition of the 'open texture', the unclear corners of all living notions, the fact that they

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[11]Quoted by Findlay in *Hegel: A Re-Examination*, p. 27.

> clearly cover, and in the further fact that it is natural for them to move or develop in certain ways as soon as they are subjected to unwonted pressures. Our ideas of time, of matter, of infinity, of knowledge, of being and so forth, are all poised, as it were, in unstable equilibrium, and the slightest push given by unusual examples will suffice to set them rolling.12

The use of imagery as a vehicle for meaning, then, has its defenders as well as its opponents. Art and religion in all cultures have traditionally found it necessary to use such language. Russell's dismissal cannot be simply accepted.

I have argued that, within the criteria he establishes for himself, Bergson's use of language is legitimate. But his method, and Russell's criticism, bring up a larger question. Can imagery be used to convey meaning? If it can, to establish the method and the kind of meaning conveyed is important both to the artist and to the religious person, since the latter in particular frequently encounters intellectualist criticisms.

The very bafflement of a man like Russell, when confronted by Bergson's use of imagery as a philosophical method, should alert us to the possibility that the meaning

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12 *Ibid.*, pp. 25-6.

Russell understands, and the meaning Bergson intends, are different in kind. Here Russell himself unintentionally gives support to Bergson's theory of language. The whole assumption on which his argument rests is that language becomes meaningless once it tries to exceed its proper function -- and this, in his view, is what Bergson has done. Bergson is not so pessimistic about meaning, but with regard to the fundamentally pragmatic character of language, I suspect he and Russell are in agreement. The question is: given these limitations, what can be accomplished?

Russell does not admit that Bergson's similes for life have meaning. I have argued, however, that a purely intellectual criterion is insufficient to establish or refute the meaningfulness of an image. A piece of logic, to be meaningful in the sense proper to it, must be consistent, must include no contradictions. But to apply these standards to a metaphor, philosophical or otherwise, is to assume that metaphor works on the same principle as logic: and Bergson would be the first to assure us that it does not.

I think we can assume, therefore, that Bergson and Russell are dealing in two different kinds of meaning. Here I am speaking, to borrow a Bergsonian term, of "pure" imagery, not of those pseudo-images whose purity of meaning is travestied by making them correspond, transparently and

exactly, to a definite system of facts or ideas. That is, I am not speaking of allegory, but of a poetic or religious imagery that is strongly meaningful although it allows of no simple intellectual interpretation.

How we can find meaning in such language, if not by the kind of criterion Russell has set up? Surely by reference to our own experience. An image is meaningful if, as Findlay expresses it, it succeeds in "throwing light on natural or social facts, or the relationship between ideas".[13] By this standard the success -- that is, the meaningfulness -- of an image cannot be legislated for us by someone else, at least in many cases: it depends on our own conviction that the image expresses something in our experience. This is why a certain work of art may move one man deeply, while it "leaves another completely cold". The work of art has meaning in subjective terms -- first of all for the artist, whose experience, emotions or convictions it expresses; second, for the man who finds meaning in it -- the man whom it touches in the depths of his own being. The corollary to this argument is that the "meaning" of art does not have a fixed, objective existence. There could conceivably be a man for whom a certain piece had no meaning at all, but his immunity does not call its meaningfulness into ultimate

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[13] *Ibid.*, p. 25.

question if others have found the work moving or significant.

Bergson's theory of the genesis and purpose of language adequately explains the great difficulties encountered by the poet or novelist who is trying to capture meaning in a net of words. The image is appropriate, because once the artist succombs to the materialism of language, attempts to promote his meaning by argument or even to state it explicitly, he often finds that it vanishes. This is not completely true of novels, like those of Simone de Beauvoir, whose characters, rather than developing organically in the writer's imagination, are presented as exponents of a philosophical point of view. This is not art, it is argument in disguise, however cleverly it is done. But there exists another kind of novelistic experience: that in which characters form themselves as if of their own volition, and become filled with such vigorous life that they take the story into their own hands. Neither the writer, nor the reader whom the book moves, doubts the significance of these characters, their sufferings and their decisions; but, though it is a significance that may be intellectually discussed, the verdict on the book's "meaning" will not finally lie with Intellect, nor can it ever be definitively established beyond possibility of further doubt, change and enrichment.

I cannot tackle the problem of religious language

in all its intricacy. But I suspect that it too would fall under Russell's strictures, and therefore, though attempts have been made to render religious experience in intellectual terms (attempts so chronically unsatisfactory that they have been beset with controversy and bloodshed), that its meaning is essentially of the super-linguistic, super-conceptual kind Bergson has laboured so hard to describe. In this way the artist and the mystic are akin. By the standard I have set up, I cannot dismiss as meaningless the theological formulations of religious experience, or I should also be obliged to dismiss the poet's words, on the grounds that both inevitably embody partial failure to express what, by its nature, cannot fully be expressed.

To sum up: I have argued that Russell's criticisms, far from exposing the nonsensical nature of Bergson's imagery, spring from a radical failure to understand the kind of meaning Bergson deals with. This opened out into the general assertion that imagery can convey meaning, though of a kind that is experientially rooted and cannot always be rendered in precise intellectual terms. This essay does not have the scope, and I do not have the knowledge, that would enable me to tackle the question of religious language in all its ramifications. But it seems clear to me that the language of religion and of art are basically akin, at least in their partial transcendence of intellectual meaning,

and in the consequent difficulty that is experienced when one attempts to render them in conceptual terms. Finally, I have stated that this difficulty is well explained by Bergson's theory of the nature of language, which for this reason I am inclined to accept.

CHAPTER THREE

There is one fact about Bergson's work which I have already expressed; but at the beginning of this chapter it must be emphasized again. Bergson divides the workings of Intelligence into two aspects, Intellect and Intuition. The proper province of Intellect is material reality, and its method, according to Bergson, is a basically static analysis of its object. The proper province of Intuition is Duration -- the flow of being to which, by virtue of the function Bergson has assigned to it, Intellect has no access.

Both are necessary aspects of Intelligence, and in theory Bergson recognizes their complementarity and their equal importance. But mere assurances are not enough. *In practice* Bergson does not treat Intellect as equal to Intuition, because Intuition alone has access to that Duration which may be called God. The fact I wish to emphasize is this: a discrepancy exists between what Bergson claims to say and what he actually does say. Intuition is his sentimental favourite, and this inequality appears more serious when it is seen that, logically, Intuition rather than Intellect is capable of experiencing that Being in which the material world is rooted. Intuition

has access to the creator, while Intellect is capable only of comprehending the creation. If this function is assigned to it, how can it escape being a secondary faculty suitable to the secondary reality with which it deals?

I am not the only one to assert that this is an important failing. It is curious that, despite Bergson's assurances that he has not created a polarity between Intuition and Intellect, his most influential critics -- including Russell, Julien Benda and Susanne Langer -- have all founded their disagreement with him on this supposedly nonexistent polarity. According to these authorities, Bergson has in practice severed these two faculties from each other and assigned the "higher" function to Intuition, the "lower" to Intellect. The breach exists, and Bergson's reassurances do not suffice to heal it.

Let us pass, then, to Langer's critique of Bergson.

> . . .Is it not possible that the sort of 'intuitive' knowledge which Bergson extols above all rational knowledge because it is supposedly not mediated by any formulating (and hence deforming) symbol is itself perfectly rational, but not to be conceived through language -- a product of that presentational symbolism which the mind reads in a flash, and preserves in a disposition or an attitude?
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> . . .The very idea of a <u>non-rational</u> source of any knowledge vitiates the concept of mind as an organ of understanding. 'The power of reason is simply the power of the whole mind at its fullest stretch and compass,' said Professor Creighton, in an essay that sought to stem the great wave of

> irrationalism and emotionalism following the (first) World War. This assumption appears to me to be a basic one in any study of mentality. Rationality is the essence of mind . . . .It is a fundamental error, therefore, to recognize it only in the phenomenon of systematic, explicit reasoning. That is a mature and precarious product.
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> Rationality, however, is embodied in every mental act, not only when the mind is 'at its fullest stretch and compass'. It permeates the peripheral activities of the human nervous system, just as truly as the cortical functions . . . .
>
> The title of Professor Creighton's trenchant little article is 'Reason and Feeling'. Its central thesis is that if there is something in our mental life besides 'reason', by which he means, of course, discursive thinking, then it cannot be an alogical factor, but must be in essence cognitive, too; and since the only alternative to this reason is feeling (the author does not question that axiom of epistemology), feeling itself must somehow participate in knowledge and understanding.[1]

Langer agrees with Creighton up to this point, but goes on to ask: "*Just how* can feelings be conceived as possible ingredients of rationality?" She quotes Creighton again to the effect that "*feelings have definite forms, which become progressively articulated*".[2] But,

> If feeling has articulate forms, what are they like? For what these are *like* determines by what symbolism we might understand them. Everybody knows that

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[1] Susanne Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key* (New American Library, 1951), pp. 90-92.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 92.

> language is a very poor medium for expressing our emotional nature. It merely names certain vaguely and crudely conceived states, but fails miserably in any attempt to convey the ever-moving patterns, the ambivalences and intricacies of inner experience . . . .[3]

Language denotes; but the symbolism Langer seeks in order to express "unspeakable" things is a connotative symbolism, of which music is the most highly developed example.

> We are not talking nonsense when we say that a certain musical progression is significant, or that a given phrase lacks meaning, or a player's rendering fails to convey the import of a passage . . . .Musical understanding is not hampered by the possession of an active intellect, not even by that love of pure reason which is known as rationalism or intellectualism . . . . Speech and music have essentially different functions, despite their oft-remarked union in song. Their original relationship lies much deeper than any such union . . .and can be seen only when their respective natures are understood.[4]

Here Langer's study plunges into a depth where we cannot follow it and still keep within the bounds of this essay; but within these limits her analysis has given us much to think about.

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[3] *Loc. cit.*

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 93.

Langer, then, finds Bergson's definition of rationality too narrow: in fact, she believes, it is a phenomenon fully broad enough to incorporate what Bergson thought necessary to distinguish as a separate faculty ("Intuition"). Discursive thought, far from being, as Bergson assumes, the type of rationality, is only one manifestation of it, a "mature and precarious" manifestation at that.

Bergson's analysis disintegrates Intelligence, human understanding, into two faculties whose different functions separate them still further. In doing this, Langer believes, he undermines the integrity of both "Intellect" and "Intuition". Her view of Intelligence, on the contrary, is passionately unitary. Understanding must be one. If any aspect of our experience lies by definition beyond its ability to grasp (as Bergson's Duration forever lies beyond the grasp of Intellect), then this threatens the whole integrity of our understanding.

Langer is not quarrelling with Bergson's assertion that certain truths appear to be grasped instantaneously by the mind, rather than being reached by a process of intellectual examination; nor does she dispute, in fact she explicitly agrees, that much that is most intimate and most important to us exceeds the capacity of words to express. Her quarrel lies with Bergson's refusal to see rationality

as a unified whole, and with his splitting into two far too clearly-defined faculties what are, in actuality, twin aspects of understanding. Some truths are capable of being expressed by the denotation involved in language; others exist to which connotation is appropriate, but by this means they, too, "take form" and become accessible to reason.

Like Langer's, my own dispute with Bergson lies not so much in the existence of what he chooses to call "Intuition", but in the way he defines the word, in the sphere he marks out for it. I have already accepted (and so does Langer) the existence of "intuition" in a loose popular sense, an understanding which has been defined by the Oxford Pocket Dictionary (Fifth Edition) as "immediate apprehension by the mind without reasoning; . . .immediate insight". Bergson, however, gives the word his own peculiar meaning: Intuition is that aspect of Intelligence which alone is capable of participating in Duration. I do not see the need to exclude "Intellect" so rigidly from this privilege, and feel that Russell is to be pardoned for suspecting that Bergson's sole reason was his unexplained vendetta against Intellect.

The validity of the division Bergson draws, and his justification for maintaining that Intellect cannot experience Duration, is rooted in his analysis of the workings of Intellect: that is, in his contention that the

basic unit of intellectual understanding is the static "moment". It is here, therefore, that we must examine his thought most searchingly.

I agree that the mind is <u>capable</u> of the arresting-for-purposes-of-analysis that Bergson ascribes to it; but that this is its essential and habitual method of operation appears to me to remain one of those assertions, unproven except by metaphor and analogy, which drew such protests from Bertrand Russell. The method itself is legitimate, as I have shown; but in this case Bergson's imagery can be used against him as well as for him, for the chief analogy he uses, when describing the workings of Intellect, is that of the film-strip, which at first presents to our sight a convincing appearance of motion. Looking more closely, however, we find that this is an appearance only; for the motion is constituted of hundreds of "frames", each of which, if we stop the film, reveals itself as a static unit, a frozen picture.

Let us start the film again, however; let us see the static images blend and blur into each other until they take on life and movement; let us carry on Bergson's image from where he leaves off. For it is in <u>motion</u> that the meaning of the film discovers itself to us. How much of that meaning can we perceive from a single "still"? To analyze the film down to the absolutely static seems a

strange, backward kind of process. It would be far more consistent, within the analogy Bergson has chosen, to recognize that each frame exists for the purpose of motion, and therefore fulfils itself and reveals its full meaning only when it is integrated into the movement of the film as a whole.

Let us now make the parallel with Intelligence more exact. At times one can observe one's intellect working in the disintegrative fashion Bergson has outlined: I do not dispute its ability to do this. But Bergson goes on to make a large, unjustified assumption: for the Intellect's ability to break its object down into static "frames" does not logically entail an inability to go beyond these frames and comprehend the reality of motion.

If we must speak of intuition, let us use the word in the common or garden sense, for it does not deserve to be canonized, or to be separated so ruthlessly from that understanding by which we grasp the material world. Rather it exists on the fringes of this understanding, and always finds its way into the sphere of words and concepts, at least to some extent. Can we really conceive of "pure" Intuition? An intuition that was pure insight into the Absolute might well be unthinkable to our finite understanding, conditioned as it is by heredity, by constitution, by language and by culture. For all that it could present itself to our understanding in intelligible terms, such a

"pure" Intuition might as well not exist. When we attempt to envision what such a state would involve, we might picture the saint struck dumb and immobile with religious ecstasy; but what *use* (as William James might say), in terms of enlightenment, is a man struck dumb and immobile, saint though he may be?

Can we really conceive of an insight which tolerates *no* relation whatever to concepts or to language? Bergson plays at conceiving of pure Intuition; but I believe that this was self-delusion.

The weakness of his argument becomes clear when one looks more closely at his statements about art. I have noted in Chapter Two that his beliefs on this subject mostly remain implicit, and must be drawn out by such students as Gabriel Marcel; but I concur with Marcel, that eventually a clear picture does emerge. Bergson believes art to reflect almost undifferentiated Intuition.

To an artist this view may appear idealistic and naive. Poetry does not gush from a transcendental fountain; the art of the novelist may involve years of thought and patient craftsmanship; Michelangelo laboured with a passionate, questing intellect, which his poems reveal, in order to free the angel imprisoned in the block of stone.

In each case the original insight passed through the forge of Intellect. And it is in this that the creative process consists. A formless Intuition, resting in tranquillity, is not yet art. The inner dynamic of creativity consists in the labouring of Intuition toward birth, form, intelligibility. It is toward this birth that the artist strives. Only in achieving it does he completely fulfill his vocation.

In art, therefore, Intellect and Intuition can no longer be separated, for the creative process has transformed both, and has produced a tempered synthesis in which form and content can no longer be distinguished from each other. Every artist might say with Stephen Dedalus,

> I go to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience, and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race.

However, Bergson might object that both Langer and I have misunderstood this aspect of his thought. We must keep in mind that he, too, protests the unity of understanding, however much we may maintain that his practice sometimes falls short of this ideal. He might reply that Langer's interpretation of his philosophy (which he would call mistaken, insofar as Langer opposes her own unitary theory

of understanding to what she believes is Bergson's fragmentary theory) merely goes to prove his point: i.e. that Langer's insistence on seeing a polarity where he intended none is a further example of the ingrained perversity of intellectual perception. In short, Bergson might say, Langer's argument illustrates the static and disintegrative nature of Intellect which he has endeavoured to point out -- though she has projected on him the fragmentation, her own intellect is in fact committing.

My criticism of his remarks on Art might encounter a similar objection. From Bergson's point of view, this rebuttal is valid. However, the impression left by his writings does render his critics' doubt comprehensible. At times Bergson does, perhaps only in carelessness, seem to set Intellect and Intuition apart and in competition with each other; at times he does lapse into a merely sentimental emphasis on the Intuitive. His critics might retort that the seriousness with which one treats these lapses depends on how much one is prepared to concede to Bergson as extrapolation from his theory: how much one is inclined to grant him beyond what he explicitly says. In terms of Art it is impossible to resolve this question finally, because so much of Bergson's thinking on this subject remains implicit and requires to be drawn out.

Does a distinction (between Intellect and Intuition)

necessarily involve polarity? Langer seems to think that, given the distinction and Bergson's preference for Intuition, he is inevitably drawn into setting up a polarity, which she then treats as a fact.

However, Langer's critique suffers from linguistic carelessness. She several times uses words interchangeably where Bergson might not admit their synonymous character. The most serious of these equations is her assumption that "rationality" is the same thing as Bergson's Intellect. From this is follows that Intuition, because non-Intellectual, must be non-rational. But this is a facile assumption. If rationality be defined as true understanding, then Bergson's Intuition is fully rational, and it is the diseases of Intellect -- including that tendency to paradox which, because it poses mistaken and insoluble problems, leads only to a philosophical abyss -- that are aberrant and non-rational.

At this point it is apparent that we are dealing in words. It may be that much of Langer's objection to Bergson rests on a semantic confusion. She uses him, as she uses Creighton, to promote her own theory, and this self-interest may obscure sympathetic understanding of Bergson's intentions. It is regrettable that Bergson neglected to bring his practice fully into line with his theory, and so preclude all possibility of interpretations

such as Langer's which, as his text stands, must be allowed considerable justification. However, in the end we must do Bergson the justice to recall his stated intention, and that was not to propose a fragmented theory of human rationality. He, like Langer, attempts to offer a unified theory of understanding.

CHAPTER FOUR

At the end of the first chapter I stated that the two important problems in terms of this thesis were Bergson's theory and use of language, and his distinction between Intellect and Intuition. Both these issues have wider ramifications in the realms of religion and of artistic creation.

We have now examined the arguments of Bergson and two of his critics. What conclusions has this examination enabled us to reach?

First, I found that Bergson's theory of the genesis and original function of language -- i.e., that it is primarily a tool developed by Intellect in order to facilitate our manipulation of the material world -- was adequate to explain one aspect of this complex question. His theory makes intelligible the difficulty we encounter whenever we try to take language beyond the material realm in which it works with most precision, and use it to express artistic or religious experience. This sort of expression is apt to remain frustratingly partial, I think because Bergson is correct about one strand of language's purpose and origin.

Second, I defended Bergson's use of metaphor against Russell's charge that this kind of language presents only a clever, but hollow, appearance of meaning. On the contrary, I argued that Russell and Bergson were dealing in two different types of meaning, and that Russell was mistaken in applying to Bergson's imagery criticisms appropriate to the realm of logic. Russell has failed to see that his meaning and Bergson's are different in kind. Within the terms he has outlined for himself, Bergson's use of imagery is legitimate and significant.

Third, I have examined the alleged "split" that Bergson posits between Intellect and Intuition, and have set against this theory that unitary approach of Suzanne Langer. This problem is difficult of resolution because Bergson persistently asserts the unity and complementarity of Intellect and Intuition; however, in practice he often does speak in such a way as to create a fragmented picture of Intelligence, and sometimes lapses into a sentimental enthusiasm for Intuition which aggravates the division further. Starting from his theory, we can argue that his doctrine of Intelligence is as unitary as Langer's own; but starting from his practice, we find that her criticisms have some validity. However, I suggested that part of Langer's opposition rests on a semantic confusion, since Bergson's Intuition is not necessarily so "non-rational"

as she assumes.

I began by saying that the crucial question in our study of Bergson was to be the problem of Intuition. Now we must return to it. Has our discussion of his philosophy brought us any nearer to understanding Intuition's proper role?

To some extent, as Bergson has confessed, we are dealing here with a faculty that transcends words and concepts, and therefore need not fully express itself through either. But words and concepts form part of the realm in which theses are written: the realm in which art is born and religion preached: the realm of our everyday living and thinking. I sense danger in the frequent tendency of Bergson's language to sever us, through a too-fervent exaltation of Intuition, from all that can be thought and spoken. Whether this severance is fully consonant with his intention is, as we have seen, a problem that can be argued both ways. If we regard Intuition as our contact with that Reality in which the material world is rooted, then perhaps one can argue, as Bergson does, that intuitive knowledge will stimulate us to enlightened action and the creation of perfect art. This is his theory. But a

distinction so clear must be carefully controlled if it is not to lead to rupture between Intellect and Intuition as Bergson has described them. Unfortunately his work often falls short of this control; and after reading him one is left with the disquieting possibility of an Intuition so exalted above the material world that it has no logical connection with it whatever. This leads not to action, not to art, but to darkness and silence.

My own approach is pragmatic, for it is in the material world that Intuition must manifest itself. In a sense "pure" Intuition does not concern us, for even if it exists, how can it be thought or spoken? No, our concern is with those -- inevitably mediated -- forms of Intuition with which we come in daily contact. I have assumed a certain common meaning of this word, without being fully prepared to define it as Bergson has done. And I have argued that we experience Intuition largely as it expresses itself in words and concepts: the creative process in particular contains an inherent drive toward form, a drive which, far from being an incidental aspect of "pure" Intuition, is the very essence of art. We do not and cannot experience it apart from this striving toward intelligibility, for without this striving, art does not exist. Whatever of Intuition lies beyond the scope of words and concepts lies also beyond the scope of this essay, and, I might add,

of most of what we ordinarily speak and think.

What, in the final analysis, is Bergson's value as a philosopher? More than his recent successors have been willing to admit. For the problem of subjectivity, of emotion -- of all those things he attempted to subsume under the heading "Intuition" -- remains alive in our culture. If Bergson has not fully succeeded in integrating Intuition and Intellect into a theory of Intelligence that is unified beyond doubt, he has at least exhibited the problem to our notice in all its formidable complexity. He has offered an analysis of Intelligence which, contrary to Russell's complacent assumption, we have not found it easy to dismiss. At the same time his ideas have left many readers dissatisfied.

Our inability to reach any absolute decision about the problems he attempted demonstrates their continuing validity. Since we have not solved these questions ourselves, we owe respect to Bergson. He attempted a comprehensive solution which, however inconclusive we may find it, his successors have been more content to carp at than prepared to imitate.

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