On Bergson’s metaphysics of time

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The separation of the individual sciences from philosophy as the standard model of knowledge in general had already begun in antiquity. Towards the end of the bourgeois age this process, in connection with the spread of industry, assumes such a rapid tempo that no task appears to remain for philosophy itself. If this development has witnessed all of the important theoretical interests of society entering into the ruling establishment of the sciences, so philosophy today would have to bother itself only with some scientifically specialized questions which have not been taken over by other disciplines. However, the same is valid for science as for the other branches of production in contemporary society. On the basis of the anarchic and irrational form in which the social life-process takes place, the modern division of labour has brought with it, for the individual industries and business branches just as for the spheres of culture, not merely their liberation from feudal fetters, but also, to an increasing degree, their separation from the interests of the whole society. The scope and content, methods and goals of the scientific establishment, don’t have any controllable relation to the needs of humans any more. It appears as a matter of chance whether and to what extent the results of labour possess any social value at all. In the face of this fact there exists no good reason to accept the external and internal structure which science has assumed, especially in the last one hundred years, as the correct form of contemporary, necessary and attainable knowledge, and to make do in philosophy with logically justifying, classifying and apologizing for the disciplines and their ways of proceeding. Through this limitation, which in Germany has been announced since the last third of the nineteenth century from neo-Kantianism to modern scientific logic, not only was the absolutization of the individual scientific methods legitimated as the only possible theoretical behaviour, but the narrowing of horizon, the impoverishment regarding content, the reactionary tendency corresponding to the ethos of official science was also accelerated.

In opposition to this epistemological philosophy that concealed the estrangement between great social interests and the sciences, new metaphysical schools were able to make the fertilization of the sciences their concern, by positive critique just as much as by work on problems. The last two decades have seen a revival of interest in the work of Henri Bergson (1859–1941), in large part because of its role in the writings of Gilles Deleuze. However, it has been a noteworthy characteristic of the new Bergsonism (or Deleuze-Bergsonism) that it has proceeded more or less as if earlier criticisms of Bergson’s philosophy did not exist. Occasionally, reference is made to Merleau-Ponty’s 1959 paper ‘Bergson in the Making’, which points towards the writings of Péguy as the ground of a possible Bergsonian view of history. But there has been little engagement with established criticisms. At the same time, Walter Benjamin’s Bergson-inflected writings on Baudelaire are increasingly taken to provide the basis for a general account of modernism. Yet Benjamin rejected Bergson’s metaphysics, citing approvingly from the 1934 essay by Max Horkheimer, ‘Zu Bergsons Metaphysik der Zeit’, from the Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung, vol. 3, no. 3, Paris, 1934. Oddly, this essay has never previously appeared in English. We publish it here in the hope that it might contribute to a broadening of the debate about the philosophical and political significance of Bergson’s writings and their relevance today. Horkheimer’s essay was reprinted in Max Horkheimer, Kritische Theorie: Eine Dokumentation, ed. Alfred Schmidt, S. Fischer Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 1968, from which this translation is made, Vol. 1, pp. 175–99, with the permission of S. Fischer Verlag GmbH.
which science had neglected. The fact that, for example, ontology and material value-ethics in the postwar period were able to exercise such a great influence lies, among other things, in the unsatisfying development the reigning scientific establishment has taken. Individual disciplines, such as, for example, some branches of political economy, run the risk of ending up in a formalistic problematic and of forgetting the way back from the most extreme abstractions to reality; others, like a part of sociology, don’t cross over from the collection of materials to theoretical thought and debase science to the mindless piling up of facts. In the face of the flight of contemporary science, and the philosophy linked to it, to the opposed poles of research into all-embracing statistics and completely empty abstraction, metaphysics spoke out against this defect and kept a relationship, even if a problematic one, to the questions which science left behind. Like the situation in contemporary history, where the fascist opponents of liberalism took advantage of the fact that liberalism overlooked the estrangement between the uninhibited development of the capitalist economy and the real needs of humans, contemporary metaphysics grew stronger in the face of the failings of positivistic science and philosophy; it is their true heir, just as fascism is the legitimate heir of liberalism.

Bergson developed his metaphysics at the same time as a positivistic theory of science. The extent to which both support and condition each other in his work is testimony to their close relationship. Not only is it thus characteristic of the contemporary situation in terms of the history of ideas; Bergson’s philosophy has fulfilled, to a particularly high degree, the task of advancing both methodological and content-related problems neglected by the contemporary scientific establishment. Psychology and biology owe to him important contributions and have struck out on new paths under his influence. His foundational theme, real time, is a central category of any thinking of history, indeed of any comprehensive formation of theories at all. Bergson has differentiated lived time from the abstract time of the natural sciences, and made it into the object of his research. This has often led him to the threshold of dialectics. In following such approaches, he has of course been hindered by the function of metaphysics, also characteristic of his work, which seeks to bring reality into connection with an eternal or divine principle.

On the occasion of his new book, The Creative Mind, some of the relationships to dialectics should be noted. That his whole thought is subordinated to the final aim of metaphysics has been falsified by the fertile parts of his work. Instead of placing his psychological analyses in the service of a more differentiated knowledge of the historical context, always more conscious of its own preconditions, for Bergson himself they are directed to the goal of establishing and of guaranteeing his myth of ‘creative evolution’. However, the contradiction which disrupts this philosophy in its totality – which is the matter under discussion here – consists between the, in principle, unhistorical thought of the entire tradition upon which Bergson is dependent, and his undertaking to comprehend the role of time. Since every metaphysics necessarily includes the idea that its form and its sense of events are not themselves again subordinated to time, the intention of Bergson’s thought annuls its own content. It denies time in that it elevates it to a metaphysical principle. Bergson’s whole work towers above most philosophical phenomena of the present. It deserves to be taken seriously and not merely refused without understanding or to be recognized in a conventional sense. The following critique, whose author owes decisive elements to this philosopher, is conscious of highlighting only a few traits.

The new volume’s collection of essays and speeches offers an overview of Bergson’s philosophy. The majority of the articles were dispersed in different journals and difficult to access, among them the ‘Introduction to Metaphysics’, the magnificent and concise formulation of his standpoint. Only the first two essays were written especially for this volume, where, in the form of a report on the development of his views, Bergson gives an account of his fundamental ideas.

Bergson began with Spencer’s doctrine. The intention of providing a philosophical theory of development also appeared to him as the contemporary task of philosophy. However, he recognized that the philosophers of development had failed to carry this out. According to Bergson, it was correct that the essence of the world, ‘substance’, is development; any philosophy that describes being as resting in itself, persisting in all changes and eternally remaining the same essence, misses the truth. Change is not merely the external, but rather the very core of being; it is impossible to explain the world with the schema of a fixed thing that only changes its modes of appearance. The concept of the thing that persists in its changing circumstances is merely formed in order to cope with the practical tasks of life; it doesn’t signify living reality. Rather, it belongs to the picture of the world, embedded deep in consciousness by linguistic convention, sketched out by the understanding [Der Verstand] for practical goals.
Certainly, Spencer and the tendencies related to him also falsify the essence of time. Although Spencer indeed recognizes that this belongs to actual being, he nevertheless takes over its customary intellectual concept. In the sciences there are valid reasons for comprehending time as a series of punctuated instants, for that is the precondition for goal-directed action: the beginning and end of results are determined by attribution to such points, repetitions are determined, regularities are observed. Since the individual sciences are in the service of praxis, it is appropriate that they work with this concept of time derived from spatial relations. Metaphysics, on the other hand, has to do with the inner essence of reality. In order to comprehend this essence one cannot use representations that are appropriate to space. Metaphysics, according to Bergson, has not developed with the social reproduction of life like mechanical natural science; it has nothing at all to do with the satisfaction of needs. Rather, it is based upon the unconditioned act of intuition, free from all setting of goals, and gives the truth immediately.

A continuation of themes known from previous works is contained in the essay ‘The Possible and the Real’. In this essay Bergson seeks to demonstrate that the category of the possible is a mere artefact of the understanding. Inasmuch as the understanding singles out a section from the indivisible course of events, the illusion arises that this part of being had already previously led a shadowy existence and was then subsequently ‘realized’. In truth, however, there are certainly not these shadowy ideas, these pure possibilities, some of which step into reality. Rather, the life of the world is a continually new and unforeseeable creation. The understanding cuts out individual pictures and projects them back into the past in each case as almost pre-existing possibilities. By letting these pictures precede the present – from which they are nevertheless extracted – the understanding turns that which is conditioned into that which conditions. ‘The possible is … the mirage of the present in the past.’

It almost appears that, in the concept of the possible, Bergson thinks of the Platonic ideas and uncover the reason for their hypostatization. With their rejection he simultaneously proposes that all happening is absolutely new and unpredictable. Asked about the future of a drama, he answers a visitor: ‘If I knew what the great dramatic work of tomorrow was to be, I would produce it.’ How it will be cannot be known precisely by anyone before it is real. And don’t nature and, even more, human history resemble a great artwork that is always still to be created? Bergson doesn’t think about historical forces and tendencies, those actual fulfiments of the concept of the possible. His philosophical attitude to the world is contemplative. Only for the onlooker is future history to be compared to an unborn artwork; humans must accomplish it, and indeed in a struggle with opposing forces. There are aspirations that still want to reach their goal, drives and capacities that are inhibited in their effects. In short, there exist forces and tendencies before they have been realized. These possibilities belong to reality. It is not true that the idea of the possibility of an event only appears somewhere when it is there. On the contrary, the idea of the possibility of an event can be decisive for its realization. But ideas can also become forces [Gewalten]. The contemporary struggle about determinate social transformations assumes not only that, in general, these forces are not completely impossible, but that the whole social development drives towards them, and that only an organization of life that has gone wrong, albeit tenaciously, stands in the way.

Despite its deficiency, this study, like many earlier analyses, illuminates a part of the unconscious mechanisms of the psychic apparatus that is involved in the formation of natural world-views and academic philosophy. Bergson’s work is rich in contributions for uncovering conventional mentality in its emergence and thus for comprehending and sublating the reified pictures of thought in their dependence on human praxis. He criticizes dogmatic philosophy and does not tire of demonstrating that individual abstract concepts which humans have won as theoretical tools in their practical work have been detached and absolutized from this foundation by dogmatic philosophy’s different schools. Just as in his previous book, he explains the existence of ‘closed’ morality and religion from the need for maintaining an existing society and thus undertakes the attempt – of course, since Marx, an attempt already conducted much more sophisticatedly – of comprehending historically these absolutized products of human activity, so, in the remaining works, he has set forth natural science as a function related to praxis and criticized the philosophical hypostatization of its foundational categories and methods. Through this intention, Bergson is much closer to Kant than he himself suspects. In the attempt to save metaphysics, both have limited natural science and related it to the situation of the finite human. Nevertheless, the inclusion of knowledge in the historical context breaks off immediately for Bergson when it is no longer science that is being discussed, but metaphysics. He has not recognized that this is also dependent on historical
conditions and exerts social functions. Rather, he has hypostatized and romanticized the findings of intuition, named self-observation, just as much as the other metaphysicians did to the conceptual products of the natural sciences. In relation to his own absolutization of an isolated moment of knowledge, he remains naive. In the struggle with absolutism and in connection with industrial development, bourgeois thought has developed ever more subtle means for the sublation of fetishized concepts and intuitions. From the beginning, it took the direction of critique and enlightenment, and has pursued it decisively for a long time. Its other function, the ideological justification of the ruling state of affairs on the basis of eternal principles, has not become more superfluous; on the contrary, with the increasing irrationality of the existing state of affairs, it has become more urgent. Thus, it resulted in new philosophy in which each subsequently emerging system criticized and rejected the foundational doctrines of previous systems with always more refined means, while simultaneously creating a dogma itself, which lay behind the level of development of its own methods, and already forfeited to its successor from the outset. As Hegel said, the word of the apostle could therefore be applied to each of these systems: behold, the feet of them that shall carry thee out are at the door. ‘Behold, the philosophy by which thine own will be refuted and displaced shall not tarry long as it has not tarried before.’ By demonstrating, in some ways magnificently, the connection of the earlier philosophical foundational concepts like representation, idea, will and substance, with human production – thus stripping these categories of their absolutization – Bergson establishes at the same time a new metaphysical myth, thanks to which he falls far behind the insights that can be attained today.

This myth is repeated in the new book. He says that our own stream of experience, which we comprehend through ‘intuitive’ immersion in our own interior, is identical with the creative, spiritual life that flows through the entire world. Material forms or bodies represent only the congealed products of this universal movement. Our own essence is durée – that is, a constant duration continually taking on new qualities, lived time [gelebte Zeit]. This concrete, ‘fulfilled’ time that the philosopher comprehends as our own essence is also regarded by him, in an act of sympathy, as the interior of the whole world. True reality is an indivisible, continuous flow, which, in all the novelty of the instant, and in each individual just as in the whole world, always includes the whole past and carries it with it. This oppositional determination of the real as identity that is at the same time transformation, and as continuation that is at the same time conservation, applies only to conscious life. While Bergson seeks to interpret this, so to speak, from below, in terms of dark biological powers, German philosophy has comprehended it in terms of its most highly developed form, the subject that is conscious of itself. Even German philosophy understood – of course, in a much more pregnant sense – the world as a spiritual [geistig] process. With the materialist discovery that all events, right down to their ‘spiritual’ bifurcation, have been co-determined in a preceding history from blind, natural necessity, the interpretation of the course of the world by the philosophy of spirit was liquidated, although of course not for opposed determinations of the living. Bergson fails to connect up with this philosophical development, and therefore remains on a level overtaken by it.

Even if we buy into the assurances that indivisible change (changement) is not, like the principles of dogmatic philosophy, an abstract concept but rather concrete reality itself, and that concepts have here only the technical function of the guidance of one’s viewpoint, the Bergsonian philosophy nevertheless still agrees with earlier metaphysical systems in decisive respects. It reduces the whole world to a single, eternal essence, claims a spiritual meaning for events and refers humans’ suffering under real relations to unification with that essence – that is, to spiritual elevation. Like earlier metaphysicians, Bergson romanticizes the existing state of affairs – indeed, he asserts its divinity. There are of course great differences. His achievement is subject to the special conditions of his epoch and determinate social tendencies; the optimistic and activist trait, the irrational character of all descriptions of durée certainly reflects that which Bergson observes. But that he gets to see this and nothing else is well founded in the history of the social situation determinant for his thought. A more extensive report on the Bergsonian metaphysics could, among other things, show how, similar to the impressionist and expressionist currents in art with which it shows numerous affinities, it expresses a protest against the fixed forms of life of bourgeois society. The same historical dynamic which constrained the originally progressive parts of the bourgeoisie before and during the war to following the economically authoritative groups also changed the meaning of the activist Lebensphilosophie and transformed it, often against the intentions of its initiator, from a progressive power of social critique into an element of contemporary nationalist ideology. This transformation of the
meaning of principles escapes the author. Under the title *The Creative Mind (La pensée et le mouvant)* he treats only the relation of thought to the eternal creative power; historical powers, which actually ‘move’ the meaning and content of thoughts, do not fall in the field of positive metaphysics, which, for the sake of its eternalizing function, must do without knowledge. Bergson doesn’t merely mistake the historical relativity of his own thought; he also denies that of earlier metaphysics. He says about Berkeley:

In a different age, he would doubtless have produced different theses. But, as movement is the same, these theses would have been similarly situated with respect to one another. They would have had the same relations with one another, like new words of a new sentence, between which an old meaning continues to circulate. And this would have been the same philosophy.?

As if interaction didn’t reign between expression and meaning, form and content of thought, just as much as between thought as a totality and reality!

Naivety in relation to history prevents Bergson from positing his concrete researches in a fruitful theoretical context. While for Bergson himself the analyses of the activity of understanding, especially the spatial function of the intellect, only serve to declare the products of this activity, concepts, to be metaphysically futile, these results must be included as corrections of the given state of knowledge, as determinate negation in a Hegelian sense – as a moment of self-critique, conscious of the process of the labour of social knowledge, in order to unfold their genuine fertility. Bergson only goes half way. He has X-rayed one of the most important factors which mediate the dependency of ideas on social praxis through his research into the concept-forming activity of the understanding. Correctly, he explains the absolutization of categories into a world-view to be illegitimate, and due to the integration of all categories in the labour process. However, instead of then deploying these categories, which society has acquired in connection with the production of its life, in a way that is philosophically correct – that is, with a consciousness of this heritage – he eliminates them from philosophical truth and relegates them to the ‘merely’ material field, to the science of dead objects. But retraction of a fetishized excess of concepts, the annulment of ossified views, by no means belittles their usefulness in terms of knowledge. It doesn’t mean, as Bergson suggests, their limitation to the field of fixed bodies. The activity of sublating dogmatic content through an analysis of their provenance forms, rather, a necessary element of thought, in whose context those concepts, stripped of their dogmatic character, can then play a fruitful role in the future. Even water and air were once, in the Ionic philosophy, metaphysical essences. Not only the condition that they form factors of the seafaring upon which the existence of the Greeks depended, but also many other, highly varied conditions of that hypostatization have in the meantime been noticed, and the illusion has vanished. The concepts, however, have lost nothing of their real validity. Equally, Spinoza, Hume and Fichte have without doubt hypostatized isolated contents when they elevate persistent substance, sensuous representations, or the ‘I’ to a universal world principle. However, these concepts must appear in our theoretical image of the world, in the structure of the truth, if this should not be abstract and barren. Since Bergson relegates all concepts of the understanding, entrapped in praxis, to natural science, his analyses obtain a negative significance. They clear the ground for his myth of the creative spirit. While knowledge of real history is not only concerned with the ‘interior’ and the spiritual, but just as much with spaces and things, and seeks to grasp the interaction between both with the help, in each case, of the entire developed scientific conceptual apparatus, it is outside of history that Bergson composes his myth of the unbroken, divine, creative power, which is supposed to elude the concepts of humans and only be open to metaphysical immersion.

The attempt to produce a philosophy of concrete time that is to comprehend reality not as something fixed in itself, only in time, extending to the ‘fourth dimension of space’, but rather as itself development, transformation and change, while at the same time to abandon human history: this undertaking had to fail. By claiming, according to an analogy with the interior lived time of the individual, a so-called spiritual interior of the world – that is, by making up a story about a divine current of experience as absolute being – Bergson must also deny time. His long outmoded pantheistic metaphysics contradicts his insight into the temporality of reality and sublates it. This contradiction, which also finds expression in the distance between the magnificent language and mode of thinking of Bergson and the naive mythology of its content, has given his work from the outset its ambivalent character. There is no metaphysics of time: this is rather a beginning full of contradictions in itself. The concept of an eternal time is also in Bergson’s conception nothing other than a bad formulation for the dimension of time as it plays a role in physical
observation. In the outline of natural science to which Bergson's conception corresponds in this respect no less than that of Spencer, time is certainly not eternal, but unlimited. Human time, on the other hand, is limited. Lived duration has in itself the fact of having an end, in opposition to the divine creative power to which Bergson inflates it. Among the many insights about time that appear in the history of philosophical thought – many of which are united in the Bergsonian conception of *durée* – those which were not closely linked with the new mathematical natural science have emphasized, precisely, finiteness. While in Bergson's sense the expression *sub specie durationis* certainly means the point of view of transformation, but at the same time of infinite transformation, of eternity, talk of existence as temporal means instead that this doesn't endure, but is finite and transient. The exertion of time on each being means that it ages and passes away – not merely that it changes. To comprehend passing away as mere change might be managed by a contemplative historian of the past. In himself, even he must experience that time, which appears to the observer as mere change, has an end for the human who experiences it. It is, however, even more the specific illusion of the metaphysician than that of the contemplative historian to elevate oneself above the limits of one's own existence to an overview of the entire world and to place oneself in the position of an omniscient God. This transcendent and therefore skewed line of vision leads to the effacement of the end of lived time by the idea of change, while humans nevertheless must draw from the irrevocability, the unconditioned finality of one's own death and the death of others, the desperate powers which they require in their historical activity. By setting the concept of *durée* in the place of that of development, Bergson has, without wishing it, nevertheless abstracted from 'real' time and negated it.

The myth of the life current stands in contradiction to the truth. Through his idea of immediate, unitary movement as the substance of the universe, Bergson is convinced he has not only overcome a whole series of philosophical difficulties and pseudo-problems, and has led European thinking out of enmeshment in Zeno's paradoxes which are founded upon the false concept of time, but has also defeated the metaphysical *horror vacui*, the fear of nothingness: ‘“Nothing” is a word of ordinary language that can have meaning only if one remains on the ground, characteristic of man, of action and fabrication.’19 Nothingness, of which we are horrified in the fear of death, is only a misunderstood conception of the understanding sequestered in praxis, whose transfer from the sphere of production into metaphysics Bergson criticizes in a similarly sharp fashion to that to which he subjects the dogmatic concept of possibility. However, the analysis of nothingness, whose idea according to Bergson emerges from the aimless abandonment of determinate objects, is from the outset determined to direct attention away from this mirage of the understanding, to the fulfilled unity of the stream of reality that never runs dry. Through internal unification with it, we comprehend ourselves as eternal.

Indeed, the more we acquire the habit of conceiving and perceiving all things *sub specie durationis*, the deeper we sink into real duration. And the deeper we sink into it, the more we orientate ourselves towards the principle, though it be transcendent, in which we participate, and which is not an eternity of immutability but an eternity of life: how could we live and move in it otherwise? *In ea vivimus et movemur et sumus.*

*Et morimur!* The metaphysician Bergson suppresses death. Like every theologian who promises humans eternal life, Bergson wants to conjure away the fact of death by means of cant about an eternal reality with which we could unite ourselves, and thus proves that his work exerts the same function as religion and, after and next to it, modern philosophy: to console humans about that which befalls them on earth with make-believe stories about their own eternity. The innumerable types of this deception in contemporary society that are effective alongside each other have not been investigated for a long time. From the simple and straightforward belief in the individual persistence of the soul to the certainty of continuing to exist in the ‘Völkisch community’, to the sublime self-deception of the idealist for whom the idea of possessing some thoughts valid for all time, however ludicrous and poor in terms of content, suffices for the feeling of his own eternity, there is a rich spectrum of this human delusion. But if in earlier epochs, due to the low degree of development of human capabilities, the real and the ephemeral effect of the fear of death, rational praxis and superstition, might have been entwined with one another, today an explicit divorce is necessary. The rational work of combating death, the productive attitude that results from the *horror vacui*, is the conscious labour of solidarity for the improvement of human relations, for the development of all good human arrangements, which are atrophying today, for the always more effective offensive against need and disease. The pacification of this fear through spiritual indulgence in an eternal principle as it is practised in
metaphysics has no foundation. Because such pacification can today merely euthanize the driving forces for real help, the resistance of materialist philosophy is necessary. Even the future society will require a development of thought not tied to social goals alone in order to meet the illusions that stem from that fear.

Reality is neither unitary nor eternal. Humans suffer and die for themselves alone and in different circumstances. The claim that reality is essentially indivisible contradicts the fact distinguishing history, at least in its form until now, that humanity is divided into the happy and the unhappy, the ruling and the ruled, the healthy and the sick. The concepts with which we comprehend this division, its causes and concatenation, are certainly formed with the involvement of the spatial-ordering understanding; they have founded their historical conditions – that is, their structure just as much upon the physical and psychic situation of knowing subjects as upon previous objects. All the same, they belong to the truth as it is given to us in the present. The fact that they are formed in connection with the social life struggle is also the case for the world-view to which they subscribe. This nevertheless makes it neither false nor useless, but merely prohibits its being split apart to form an apparently fixed totality of knowledge. Untrue, on the other hand, is the Bergsonian myth of a unity that does not exist. It is not from the alleged immersion in the absolute, which according to Bergson should be mediated by philosophy, that the illusionless composure of the real fighter emerges in opposition to the \textit{élan} lauded by Bergson. Rather, such a composure arises from the consciousness of overcoming the existing unjust divisions and catastrophic contradictions in favour of a, still to be worked out, happier state of humanity. In this the clear knowledge of oppositions is just as decisive a moment as knowledge of the tendencies that strive towards unity, the judgement of the opposing interests just as important as connection with the correct forces. Not to view the unity of the interior, but to realize it externally is the historical task.

Hegel has already criticized in detail the metaphysical disdain for analytical concepts of the understanding, which was diffused long before Bergson in the earlier period of reaction against the Enlightenment in German Romanticism, and had defended the truth of the transitory products of abstraction against the harmonizing doctrines of the earlier \textit{Naturphilosophen}. Analysis only arrives at thoughts which are themselves familiar elements, fixed and inert determinations. But what is thus \textit{separated}, and non-actual, is an essential moment; for it is only because the concrete does divide itself, and make itself into something non-actual, that it is self-moving. The activity of dissolution is the power and work of the Understanding, the most astonishing and mightiest of powers, or rather the absolute power…. Death, if that is what we want to call this non-actuality, is of all things the most dreadful, and to hold fast what is dead requires the greatest strength. Lacking strength, Beauty hates the Understanding for asking of her what it cannot do.\footnote{11}

The Hegelian system forms an idealist metaphysics also, and it certainly contains dogmatic traits, but it has accepted the negative, the necessity of individuals, and has at least not ejected differences from metaphysics as merely pragmatic constructions by romanticizing them. Therefore Hegelian idealism is closer to reality than the biological realism of Bergson.

The opposition of real history to the hymn of \textit{él\textordmasculine}n vital isn't even expressed in the new volume. In contrast, Bergson adheres to the caveat of exact science. A philosophical disparagement of the intellect can be read off from the assertion that only intuition illumines the inner essence of being, while scientific understanding, on the other hand, deforms reality. Conciliatorily, Bergson declares this to be a misunderstanding. Metaphysics is not to be placed above the sciences; it consists neither in their synthesis nor in their critique. Rather, both relate to different objects: metaphysics to spirit, science to matter. The different modes of observation also arise from the objects: spirit demands intuition, matter demands the ordering understanding. Thus the two great theoretical endeavours split into the two halves of the world. And it is not accepted that science shouldn't also be founded on ‘an absolute’. Instead of dialectically including metaphysics in history, in this last work Bergson also allows, almost out of true liberty, the absolutization of the sciences.
The difficulties that accrue to his philosophy due to this concession shouldn’t be discussed extensively here. It originally appeared to be built upon the opposition between intuition giving truth and the merely practical import of the understanding. The habits of the understanding deform reality according to Bergson’s earlier insight, and the philosopher had to make this deformation retrogressive if he wanted to gain contact with it. Now positive science, if it only advances far enough, is also supposed to constitute the entrance to an’ absolute. This difficulty adds a new obscurity to this great work. Bergson’s mechanistic conception of knowledge, the claim that the spiritual exertion of humans is related to two different parts of the real – which of course are connected with each other in determinate fields of being – corresponds more to the dividing thought of natural science than to philosophical intuition, as Bergson describes it.

By pursuing this problem Bergson nevertheless brings a thought forward whose consequences should lead to the overcoming of metaphysics and to dialectical thinking. That is, he justifies his concession that matter doesn’t represent merely a fiction of the understanding but rather a reality, with the consideration, among others, that a word that lacks delimiting determination loses its sense. All systems that place any concept in a fundamental position as a single principle that is supposed to contain all reality within itself had to fail as a result, because the determinate meaning of a concept is founded not through itself alone, but, just as much, by the principle that limits it.

As we said earlier: one can give whatever name one likes to the ‘thing in itself’, one can make it Spinoza’s Substance, Fichte’s Ego, Schelling’s Absolute, Hegel’s Idea, or Schopenhauer’s Will; the word can present itself with a well-defined meaning all it likes; it will lose all meaning, empty itself of all meaning, as soon as one applies it to the totality of things …. It doesn’t much matter to me whether one says ‘Everything is a mechanism’ or ‘Everything is will’. In both cases, ‘mechanism’ and ‘will’ become synonyms of ‘being’, and, consequently, synonyms of one another. There lies the initial vice of philosophical systems.12

Pushing this thought further, Bergson would have arrived at the true insight of thought. For what is valid for one concept is just as valid for a pair of concepts. Two general principles can, comprehended undialectically, just as little comprehend the whole world together as a single one. The will is not only no will any more if it has no antagonistic matter against it, but just as little, if it is not detached from the mere idea, with which nonetheless it is connected.

Furthermore, however, neither will nor idea nor representation nor physical mechanism can be understood as that which they are without the consciousness that, and how, they have been notionally removed from the living psychological events in which they form, in turn, a particular unity. The thesis that the three principles in their sum could misrepresent or correspond to that which is signalled in concrete concepts – for example, that of drive – assumed that absolutely nothing is lost in abstraction, that the activity of division changes nothing. The most vivid pages of Bergson’s work nevertheless make clear that abstracted traits of events are never identical with real parts, and that their mere setting together therefore never reflects the original life of the object.13

If that is so, then that which Bergson now emphasizes in terms of the highest individual concepts of the philosophical systems is also valid for the usual concepts and complexes of concepts: all of them require for their understanding the other concepts from which they distinguish themselves. However, an arbitrary knowledge of these concepts does not suffice in order to establish the correct relation of each individual concept to reality. Rather, consciousness is required of the entire circumstances in which the subject of the confrontation with his world – which always occurs in the context of a determinate social development – has come to those abstract concepts with their definitions. Since the formation of concepts is not merely a process of exclusion, but has in each instance a tendency determined by social and individual impulses and interests, in turn, the reversal from concept to reality doesn’t represent only an addition of peculiarities. The correct deployment of a concept involves reflection on the process by which the theoretical structure has come about that includes this concept, and, furthermore, reflection on the intellectual movement that leads to this concept from each part of this structure. The more progressive and true thought becomes, so the more consciousness of the material and theoretical activity of society enters into its concepts and judgement, in short into all of its acts. The foundational categories of dialectical materialism intentionally reflect not only contemporary social praxis but also the embittered will for its transformation. But, then, even the relationship of concepts to their object does not remain the same once and for all. Any theoretical image only has real validity in so far as it is adapted to the continually transforming reality and the new claims that arise from the situation of the subject.

The dialectical insight that each determinate characteristic of a concrete reality is one-sided and calls for
contradiction arises from the fundamental difference between each representation grasped and the moving reality. Bergson has noted this trait of any theory very well, this feature that necessarily adheres to any theorem in so far as it is related to reality. Due to this consciousness alone, he supersedes the majority of contemporary philosophers.

Concepts … ordinarily come in pairs and represent the two opposites. There is virtually no concrete reality with respect to which one cannot simultaneously adopt the two opposed points of view, which are not, consequently, subsumed under the two antagonistic conceptions. Whence a thesis and an antithesis that one seeks in vain to reconcile logically, for the simple reason that one will never make a thing out of concepts or points of view.\(^{14}\)

It is correct that one cannot reconstitute a real process through mere addition of conceptual attributes. It is precisely for this reason that theoretical ability is necessary in order to animate concepts in a representation that stays close to the object. The dialectical method is nothing else.\(^{15}\) But for Bergson, every difference between concept and reality is only an argument to abolish conceptual thinking completely and to abandon oneself solely to intuition. ‘Thereby (that is, in intuition), we see thesis and antithesis emerge from reality; we grasp, at one and the same time, how this thesis and antithesis are counterposed and how they are reconciled.’\(^{16}\) The fact that intuition shows how opposed nominal determinations in knowledge become necessary and are sublated into more comprehensive insights must not in any way lead to the rejection of the understanding in philosophy, but rather, initially, to the discovery of the problematic relation between abstract logic and the process of coming to terms intellectually with reality. The content and function of thought change in the course of history; they are never one and the same in the different classes of a society. The conservation of acquired knowledge doesn’t consist in ossified fixation on theoretical forms, but in how well available knowledge functions in solving historically posed problems. While doing so, it doesn’t remain unaffected. Fidelity to an idea can therefore be just as remote from its unchanged affirmation as from its characterless deformation on the basis of the contradictory momentary appearance. At any rate, the universal interpretation of the world from two isolated concepts is no less inadequate than the interpretation from one, and Bergson’s principles of durée and spirit do not become better by being limited to merely one half of the world and conceding the other half to dead matter.

All of Bergson’s views about the concept correspond to the pre-Hegelian state of logic, otherwise he would not have been able to regard and to dismiss thought as merely the construction of fixed conceptual containers and a purely mechanical operation. This idea of thought corresponds badly even to mathematical natural science. Nevertheless, the social interests on this terrain and the type of simple processes which are discussed there change so slowly that only a few observers note the structural transformation and functional change of theories, and the scientific process may appear to most specialists and lay people as mere ordering and differentiation. Thus the fixed correlation of concepts to each other, and of the whole system to reality, is regarded as an ideal of knowledge. Bergson shares this definition of science with the traditional view. Nevertheless, neither reality nor the sense of order remains the same, and therefore both the correlation and the conceptual construction must not simply be cancelled, but recognized in connection with praxis and overcome in their merely transitory and limited significance. Without thereby giving away the knowledge contained in them, all theories are always to be adapted again to reality by means of reflection on their own preconditions and on the developing moments of the object; definitions are to be reconfigured following later insights, otherwise they lose their real validity. This entire intellectual, social activity connected to practical tasks and struggles is called thought; ordering is in reality only an aspect of this, and the products of ordering – concepts and judgements fixed on symbols – are only frozen forms of this living act. Nevertheless, knowledge trapped in words naturally participates in its own reconfiguration and is not only philosophically restricted as ‘socially conditioned’. By equating, in accordance with the worse parts of traditional logic and epistemology, conceptual thinking with the establishment of closed systems and leaving out of consideration its real function in the historical process, Bergson misconceives its truth and arrives at the erroneous belief that there is a capacity for truth existing besides thought and a myth which is to be formulated besides conceptual knowledge.

If the view of thought is acquired, not as in Bergson from natural science, but from historical knowledge, then its character as an exertion of the most varied psychical powers towards the constitution of the most just theory of changing interests and tasks becomes clear. What Bergson calls intuition and sympathy plays just as much a role in thought as establishing and ordering. Nevertheless, as soon as these moments do not reflect themselves in their real function, changing according
to the social situation, and instead are split up into a single and absolute method, their results become just so many phantasies and ideologies. In psychology, for example, Bergsonian self-observation and ‘sympathy’ has greater weight than in pure economy. Nevertheless, apart from the fact that in psychology the value of this act changes according to the level of development of the problem, this takes on the most highly differentiated meaning and form in the total structure of knowledge, according to the tasks of the historical moment. If it is a case, for example, of winning social groups for a thought and of educating them, it requires psychological knowledge to a greater degree than the construction of a new political economy. Psychology plays a role like economics in influencing the masses, and the more developed both theoretical branches are, then so much the better are tasks solved. However, psychology has an alternative face in both arenas and, moreover, its object develops. Bergson’s metaphysics is founded upon the over-evaluation of the intuitive side of intellectual activity, which of course had been strongly disregarded, and indeed ignored, by the rationalists. The result of his view is nevertheless just as ahistorical and abstract as the system of any dogmatist. Abstractness is not abolished by claiming that reality is moved within itself, that it is continual change – the isolated and eternalized idea of change is just as static and abstract as any hypostatized concept – but, rather, by incorporating in each case every concept and every isolated point of view into the total structure of the progressively changing state of knowledge, on the basis of the penetrating investigation – which of course is itself never able to be completed – of thought as a changeable human function. Naturally, in this the possibility of the fetishized use of intellectual capabilities disappears; they lose their function as guarantees.

The methodological principles through which the metaphysical function of thinking is overcome had already been classically formulated in Spencer’s time by Hegel: the interaction of psychic powers in knowledge; thought as activity which is in no way merely opposed to outlook and feeling, but, rather, takes up the immediately given conditions only in true contexts; the task of showing in the thought process itself conditionality, limits and lack of its own forms. Assessed according to these principles, Bergson’s project appears to be antiquated. Philosophy must abandon the qualities occultae of the soul, just as physics dispensed with those of matter. To credit the abstract thinking of the understanding or intuition or another psychic capacity with the power to unite itself with a unitary absolute is only a special case of the superstition that ascribes secret miraculous powers to things. Not the thought which prescinds from history, but the thought conscious of its connection with history, organizing all intellectual capacities, is able to manage that knowledge which ‘establishes itself in movement and adopts the very life of things’.17

By imagining himself to be independent from time, the metaphysician must also misjudge those who strive theoretically towards it. The task and honesty of the writer of history have no place in Bergson’s work. The fact that, in the analysis of the possible, he indeed comes to speak about academic philosophy’s misuse of the concept in the sense of pre-existing ideas, but does not speak of its productive use in the sense of historical tendencies, belongs to his limited natural scientific way of thinking. The function of science in technology and industry doesn’t escape him, but the meaning of theory for the historical struggle does. But one shouldn’t speak here of this immediately evident lack so much as of another, less momentous, failing. The superstition that everything which is past also exists in the present without the consciously managed activity of remembrance, and will be ‘advanced’ in the future, precisely because real change is indivisible, suppresses not only the role of the historian in the struggle for new forms of life of society but also its assignment to preserve that which has been lost in memory. ‘Memory … has no need of explanation. Or, rather, there exists no special faculty whose role would be to retain the past in order to pour it into the present. The past preserves itself by itself, automatically.’18 The exercise of this capacity, especially denied by Bergson, is the business of the historian. There is no doubt that the historian requires the instinctive power to which Bergson refers from his first writings, in opposition to the compartment theory of memory. There is interaction between the unconscious forming of each social and individual unity through the past and their ordering in memory which formulates earlier experiences and places them in the service of conscious work in the future. Through the deliberate ordering and preservation, banished by Bergson from metaphysics, history makes itself not merely into a tool for better social relations, but also into a mirror of past injustice. No future heals any more that which has happened to humans who have passed away. They will never be called upon to be blessed in eternity. Nature and society have done their work to them, and the idea of the last judgement formed from the eternal longing of the oppressed and mortal constitutes only a residue of primitive thinking, which mistakes the futile role
of humans in natural history and anthropomorphizes the universe. In the middle of this immeasurable indifference, only human consciousness can be the place in which suffered injustice is sublated, the only instance which isn’t satisfied. The almighty good that was supposed to erase suffering in eternity was from the beginning merely the projection of human participation in the dull universe. The art and religion in which this dream has found expression are just as immediate witnesses to this dissatisfaction, as they have been a pure means of domination in many places in history. Now, where trust in the eternal must collapse, history constitutes the only ear to which contemporary humanity, and even past humanity, can still present the complaints of the past. Even if this appeal could not become a productive power for a better society, the function of memory alone already places the profession of the writer of history over that of metaphysics.

The following sentence appears in Bergson: ‘The rule of science is the one that Bacon posed: obey in order to command. The philosopher neither obeys nor commands; he seeks to sympathize.’ This formulation contains unintentionally a precise formulation of the social situation into which philosophy in the contemporary world has fallen. It appears to us that humanity is allowed to expect from this increasingly weakened intellectual endeavour not so much undifferentiated sympathy with reality as knowledge of its contradictions. Sympathy with the whole is just as empty as those global concepts correctly criticized by Bergson.

Translation by Peter Thomas, revised by Stewart Martin

The 1968 publication of Horkheimer’s essay includes, as an opening footnote, an extract of a letter (in French) from Henri Bergson to Charles Bouglé of 24 January 1935, responding to Horkheimer’s essay.

The Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung has done me a great honour in deducing an entire article to me, the one by M. Horkheimer…. Unfortunately, I can’t discuss in full the fine study, ‘On Bergson’s Metaphysics of Time’. It shows a serious fathoming of my works and at the same time a very penetrating philosophical sense. Naturally, I would have a lot of trouble accepting the objections M. Horkheimer raises about a certain number of points. For instance the objections coming from the author’s reading of the élan vital as a hypothesis, whereas in fact it is an empirical summary obtained from our knowledge and our ignorance (as I have demonstrated in pages 115–20 of my book before last, Les deux sources de la morale et de la religion); other objections do not take sufficient account of the method that I have tried to introduce into metaphysics and which consists of (1) dividing [découper] problems according to their natural lines; and (2) studying each problem as if it was isolated, with the idea that if, in each case, one finds oneself heading in the direction of the truth, the solutions will be joined together again, or pretty nearly so. Obviously, the junction will no longer be able to be perfect, as if it was a traditional, essentially systematic metaphysics.

But, I am not able to elaborate on all that, due to the little time my sickness allows me, and also on account of some neuralgia, probably due to insomnia, which for some time now makes all my efforts so painful. Will you therefore simply pass on my thanks to M. Horkheimer.’

Translated by Frances Stracey

Notes

4. Ibid., p. 127; trans. p. 100 (modified).
7. Bergson, La pensée et le mouvant, p. 152; The Creative Mind, pp. 120–21 (translation modified).
8. Ibid., p. 199; trans. p. 158.
13. See, for instance, La pensée et le mouvant, pp. 210–18. (Horkheimer is referring to the first part of the chapter ‘Introduction to Metaphysics’ – trans.)
15. Hegel, Phänomenologie des Geistes, p. 139.
16. Bergson, La pensée et le mouvant, p. 224; The Creative Mind, p. 177 (translation modified).
17. Ibid., p. 244; trans. p. 192.