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Charles University

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(BA Module + Erasmus students)

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**H. Bergson, *Matière et mémoire. Essai sur la relation du corps à l’esprit***

***(Matter and Memory. An Essay on the Relation Between Body and Mind*) (1896)**

• Bergson’s major finding in the *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience* (*Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*) *(1889)*

🡪 At the end of the analysis of consciousness, and how of how conscious life should be generally understood, Bergson comes to acknowledging the existence of what he calls two different types of multiplicity

🡪 *Duration* is the proper name for the multiplicity that characterizes consciousness in opposition to space (*internal* vs. *external* multiplicity)

“When I follow with my eyes on the dial of a clock the movement of the hand which corresponds to the oscillations of the pendulum, I do not measure duration, as seems to be thought; I merely count simultaneities, which is very different. Outside of me, in space (*en dehors de moi, dans l’espace*), there is never more than a single position of the hand and the pendulum, for nothing is left of the past positions. Within myself a process of organization or interpenetration of conscious states is going on, which makes up true duration. It is because I *endure* in this way that I picture to myself what I call the past oscillations of the pendulum at the same time as I perceive the present oscillation. Now, let us withdraw for a moment the ego which thinks these so-called successive oscillations: there will never be more than a single oscillation, and indeed only a single position. Withdraw, on the other hand, the pendulum and its oscillations; there will no longer be anything but the heterogeneous duration of the ego, without moments external to one another (…). Thus, within our ego, there is succession without mutual externality (*sans extériorité réciproque*); outside the ego, in pure space, mutual externality without succession: mutual externality, for the present oscillation is radically distinct from the previous oscillation, which no longer exists” (80-81/107-108)

“There is a real space, without duration, in which phenomena appear and disappear simultaneously with our states of consciousness. There is a real duration, the heterogeneous moments of which permeate one another” (82/110)

🡪 **The result is a form of dualism between space and time, consciousness and what lies outside of consciousness, real or pure duration and spatial homogeneity**

• The conclusion of the 1889 book provides the starting point for the 1896 work

🡪 Already at the outset Bergson explicitly embraces a form of **radical dualism**:

“*This book affirms the reality of spirit (*la réalité de l’espirt*) and the reality of matter (*la réalité de la matière*), and tries to determine the relation of the one to the other by the study of a definite example, that of memory. It is, then, frankly dualistic. But, on the other hand, it deals with body and mind in such a way as, we hope, to lessen greatly, if not to overcome, the theoretical difficulties which have always beset dualism, and which cause it, though suggested by the immediate verdict of consciousness and adopted by common sense, to be held in small honor among philosophers*” (9)

🡪 What are there “theoretical difficulties”? Where do they derive from? They are due to the conception of **reality**

- Idealism

- Realism Both are wrong

“*The aim of our first chapter is to show that realism and idealism both go too far, that it is a mistake to reduce matter to the perception which we have of it, a mistake also to make of it a thing able to produce in us perceptions, but in itself of another nature than they*” (9)

- Idealism: things are nothing but our representations of them

- Realism: things have a nature different from our representations (and are what actually produce them)

🡪 Bergson’s intermediate position by means of the introduction of the notion of **image** as a different way to understand **matter** in general:

“*Matter, in our view, is an aggregate of ‘images.’ And by ‘image’ we mean a certain existence which is more than that which the idealist calls a representation, but less than that which the realist calls a thing—an existence placed halfway between the ‘thing’ and the ‘representation.’ This conception of matter is simply that of common sense. It would greatly astonish a man unaware of the speculations of philosophy if we told him that the object before him, which he sees and touches, exists only in his mind and for his mind or even, more generally, exists only for mind, as Berkeley held. Such a man would always maintain that the object exists independently of the consciousness that perceives it. But, on the other hand, we should astonish him quite as much by telling him that the object is entirely different from that which is perceived in it, that it has neither the color ascribed to it by the eye nor the resistance found in it by the hand*” (9-10)

Representation < Image < Thing

- Unlike representations, images *do not* simply exist in the mind (*dans son esprit*)

- Unlike things, images *are not* entirely different from that which is “perceived” (*de ce qu’on y aperçoit*)

- Like things, they exist *independently* of the perceiving consciousness

- Like representations, *they have*, for example, *the properties* which we ascribe to them by means of perception

“*For common sense, then, the object exists in itself, and, on the other hand, the object is, in itself, pictorial, as we perceive it: image it is, but a self-existing image*”

🡪 “*We place ourselves at the point of view of a mind unaware of the disputes between philosophers (…). In a word, we consider matter before the dissociation which idealism and realism have brought about between its existence and its appearance*” (10)

• From the “thing-representation” dichotomy to the “mind-body” problem

“*This relation, though it has been a favorite theme throughout the history of philosophy, has really been very little studied. If we leave on one side the theories which are content to state the ‘union of mind and body’ as an irreducible and inexplicable fact, and those which speak vaguely of the body as an instrument of the soul, there remains hardly any other conception of the psychophysiological relation than the hypothesis of ‘epiphenomenalism’ or that of ‘parallelism,’ which in practice—I mean in the interpretation of particular facts—both end in the same conclusions. For whether, indeed, thought is regarded as a mere function of the brain and the state of consciousness as an epiphenomenon of the state of the brain, or whether mental states and brain states are held to be two versions, in two different languages, of one and the same original, in either case it is laid down that, could we penetrate into the inside of a brain at work and behold the dance of the atoms which make up the cortex, and if, on the other hand, we possessed the key to psychophysiology, we should know every detail of what is going on in the corresponding consciousness.*”

🡪 Just like the notion of **image** in brought in in order to overcome the representation-thing dualism, so is **memory** the phenomenon to be taken into consideration in order to clarify the relation between spirit and matter, **body** and **mind**:

“*Anyone who approaches, without preconceived ideas and on the firm ground of facts, the classical problem of the relations of soul and body, will soon see this problem as centering upon the subject of memory, and, even more particularly, upon the memory (*le souvenir*) of words: it is from this quarter, undoubtedly, that will come the light which will illumine the obscurer parts of the problem*”