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Charles University

Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies

(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)**

• **The Body as an Image Among Images (“that particular image, which I call my body”)**

🡪 “Here I am in the presence of images, in the vaguest sense of the word”

(i) Images perceived when my senses are opened to them

(ii) Unperceived when my senses are closed

(iii) They act and react upon one another

(iv) Such actions and reactions follow certain constant laws (laws of nature)

(v) A perfect knowledge of these laws would allow me to calculate what will happen in each of these images (the future will be contained in the present, and nothing new will added to them)

Domain of Perception

🡪 Among these images there is also my body:

“Yet there is *one* of them which is distinct from all the others, in that I do not know it only from without by perceptions, but from within by affections: it is my body” (17)

- Let us examine the conditions “in which these affections are produced”:

“I find that they always interpose themselves between the excitations that I receive from without and the movements which I am about to execute, as though they had some undefined influence on the final issue. I pass in review my different affections: it seems to me that each of them contains, after its kind, an invitation to act, with at the same time leave to wait and even to do nothing. I look closer: I find movements begun, but not executed, the indication of a more or less useful decision, but not that constraint which precludes choice”

Movements (from within) Affections Excitations (from without)

which I am about to [The many images that I

execute perceive]

An Invitation to Act

**Bergson’s first thesis:**

“*All seems to take place as if, in this aggregate of images which I call the universe, nothing really new could happen except through the medium of certain particular images, the type of which is furnished me by my body*” (18)

🡪 The body as “a center of action”

(a) (Any) **Image** (Whatsoever)

Let us consider this last point. Here are external images, then my body, and, lastly, the changes brought about by my body in the surrounding images. I see plainly how external images influence the image that I call my body: they transmit movement to it. And I also see how this body influences external images: it gives back movement to them. My body is, then, in the aggregate of the material world, an image which acts like other images, receiving and giving back movement, with, perhaps, this difference only, that my body appears to choose, within certain limits, the manner in which it shall restore what it receives.

(b) **Body**

(As an Image (d)

Among Images) An Invitation to **Act**

(and to Bring About

Some Changes)

(c) **Affection**

***a* - *b* ≠ c - d**

*Image to Image Relation Image to Image via Affection Relation*

- Natural Relation - It Does Not Preclude Choice

(“As a rule, any image influences other images in a

manner which is determined, and even calculable,

through what are called the laws of nature”)

- Perception - Action

• **Bergson on Perception**

“I have supposed that the office of the image which I call my body was to exercise on other images a real influence, and, consequently, to decide which step to take among several which are all materially possible. And since these steps are probably suggested to it by the greater or lesser advantage which it can derive from the surrounding images, these images must display in some way, upon the aspect which they present to my body, the profit which my body can gain from them. In fact, I note that the size, shape, even the color, of external objects is modified as my body approaches or recedes from them; that the strength of an odor, the intensity of a sound, increases or diminishes with distance; finally, that this very distance represents, above all, the measure in which surrounding bodies are insured (*assurés*), in some way, against the immediate action of my body. To the degree that my horizon widens, the images that surround me seem to be painted upon a more uniform background and become to me more indifferent. The more I narrow this horizon, the more the objects which it circumscribes space themselves out distinctly according to the greater or lesser ease with which my body can touch and move them. They send back, then, to my body, as would a mirror, its eventual influence; they take rank in an order corresponding to the growing or decreasing powers of my body. *The objects which surround my body reflect its possible action upon them*” (21)

🡪 Perception = It displays, in the midst of the images, the virtual or possible actions of my body (*les actions virtuelles ou possibles de mon corps*)

“Whence, provisionally, these two definitions: *I call* matter *the aggregate of images, and perception of matter these same images referred to the eventual action of one particular image, my body*” (22)

**Matter =** Aggregate of Images (to the extent that they act and react upon one another)

**Perception (of Matter)** = Images in relation to the eventual action of that image, which I call my body

(a) **Matter** (Virtual Actions of My Body)

Perception

(b) **Body**

(Center of Action) (d)

Eventual **Action**

(c) **Affection**

“Here is a system of images which I term my perception of the universe, and which may be entirely altered by a very slight change in a certain privileged image - my body. This image occupies the center; by it all the others are conditioned; at each of its movements everything changes, as though by a turn of a kaleidoscope. Here, on the other hand, are the same images, but referred each one to itself, influencing each other no doubt, but in such a manner that the effect is always in proportion to the cause: this is what I term the universe. The question is: how can these two systems coexist, and why are the same images relatively invariable in the universe and infinitely variable in perception? The problem at issue between realism and idealism, perhaps even between materialism and spiritualism, should be stated, then, it seems to us, in the following terms: *How is it that the same images can belong at the same time to two different systems: one in which each image varies for itself and in the well-defined measure that it is patient of the real action of surrounding images; and another in which all images change for a single image and in the varying measure that they reflect the eventual action of this privileged image?*” (24-25)

🡪 A Prejudice Regarding Perception = The idea that perception is “pure knowledge” (*connaissance pure*) or that perception has a purely speculative interest

“The one doctrine starts from the order required by science, and sees in perception only a confused and provisional science. The other puts perception in the first place, erects it into an absolute, and then holds science to be a symbolic expression of the real. But, for both parties, to perceive means above all to know (*percevoir signifie avant tout connaître*)” (28)