

# *Bergsonism*

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## CHAPTER II

### Duration as Immediate Datum

We shall assume that the reader is familiar with the description of duration as psychological experience as it appears in *Time and Free Will* and in the first pages of *Creative Evolution*: It is a case of a "transition," of a "change," a *becoming*, but it is a becoming that endures, a change that is substance itself. The reader will note that Bergson has no difficulty in reconciling the two fundamental characteristics of duration; continuity and heterogeneity.<sup>1</sup> However, defined in this way, duration is not merely lived experience; it is also experience enlarged or even gone beyond; it is already a condition of experience. For experience always gives us a composite of space and duration. Pure duration offers us a succession that is purely internal, without exteriority; space, an exteriority without succession (in effect, this is the memory of the past; the recollection of what has happened in space would already imply a mind that endures). The two combine, and into this combination space introduces the forms of its extrinsic distinctions or of its homogeneous *and* discontinuous "sections," while duration contributes an internal succession that is both heterogeneous *and* continuous. We are thus able to "preserve" the instantaneous states of space

and to juxtapose them in a sort of "auxiliary space": But we also introduce extrinsic distinctions into our duration; we decompose it into external parts and align it in a sort of homogeneous time. A composite of this kind (where homogeneous time merges with auxiliary space) must be divided up. Even before Bergson had become conscious of intuition as method, he had to face the task of dividing up the composite. Should it be divided along two pure directions? So long as Bergson does not explicitly pose the problem of an ontological origin of space, it is rather a case of dividing the composite in two directions, only one of which (duration) is pure, the other (space) is the impurity that denatures it.<sup>2</sup> Duration will be attained as "immediate datum" because it is associated with the right side, the good side of the composite.

The important thing here is that the decomposition of the composite reveals to us two types of multiplicity. One is represented by space (or rather, if all the nuances are taken into account, by the impure combination of homogeneous time): It is a multiplicity of exteriority, of simultaneity, of juxtaposition, of order, of quantitative differentiation, of *difference in degree*; it is a numerical multiplicity, *discontinuous and actual*. The other type of multiplicity appears in pure duration: It is an internal multiplicity of succession, of fusion, of organization, of heterogeneity, of *qualitative discrimination*, or of *difference in kind*; it is a *virtual and continuous multiplicity* that cannot be reduced to numbers.

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Too little importance has been attached to the use of this word "multiplicity." It is not part of the traditional vocabulary at all — this is particularly not the case when denoting a *continuum*. We

shall see not only that it is fundamental in terms of the construction of the method, but also that, even at this early stage, it tells us about the problems that appear in *Time and Free Will*. (These will be developed later). The word "multiplicity" is not there as a vague noun corresponding to the well-known philosophical notion of the Multiple in general. In fact for Bergson it is not a question of opposing the Multiple to the One but, on the contrary, of distinguishing two types of multiplicity. Now, this problem goes back to a scholar of genius, G.B.R. Riemann, a physicist and mathematician. Riemann defined as "multiplicities" those things that could be determined in terms of their dimensions or their independent variables. He distinguished discrete multiplicities and continuous multiplicities. The former contain the principle of their own metrics (the measure of one of their parts being given by the number of elements they contain). The latter found a metrical principle in something else, even if only in phenomena unfolding in them or in the forces acting in them.<sup>4</sup> It is clear that Bergson, as a philosopher, was well aware of Riemann's general problems. Not only his interest in mathematics points toward this, but, more specifically, *Duration and Simultaneity* is a book in which Bergson opposes his own doctrine to the theory of Relativity, which is directly dependent on Riemann. If our hypothesis is correct, this book loses its doubly strange character. In the first place, it does not appear abruptly and without explanation. Rather, it brings into the open a confrontation that until then, had been implicit between Riemannian and Bergsonian interpretations of continuous multiplicities. Second, Bergson's renunciation and condemnation of this book is perhaps due to the fact that he did not feel able to pursue the mathematical implications of a theory of multiplicities. He had, in fact, profoundly changed the

direction of the Riemannian distinction. Continuous multiplicities seemed to him to belong essentially to the sphere of duration. In this way, for Bergson, duration was not simply the indivisible, nor was it the nonmeasurable. Rather, it was that which divided only by changing in kind, that which was susceptible to measurement only by varying its metrical principle at each stage of the division. Bergson did not confine himself to opposing a philosophical vision of duration to a scientific conception of space but took the problem into the sphere of the two kinds of multiplicity. [He thought that the multiplicity proper to duration had, for its part, a "precision" as great as that of science; moreover, that it should react upon science and open up a path for it that was not necessarily the same as that of Riemann and Einstein.] This is why we must attach so much importance to the way in which Bergson, borrowing the notion of multiplicity, gives it renewed range and distribution.

How is the qualitative and continuous multiplicity of duration defined, in opposition to quantitative or numerical multiplicity? A difficult passage from *Time and Free Will* is particularly significant in this respect as it foreshadows the developments in *Matter and Memory*. It distinguishes the subjective and the objective: "We apply the term subjective to what seems to be completely and adequately known; and the term objective, to what is known in such a way that a constantly increasing number of new impressions could be substituted for the idea which we actually have of it."<sup>5</sup> If we confine ourselves to these formulations, we run the risk of misunderstandings, which are fortunately dispelled by the context. Bergson in fact specifies that an *object* can be divided up in an infinity of ways. Now, even before these divisions are made, they are grasped by thought as possible, without anything changing in the total aspect of the

object. They are therefore already visible in the image of the object: Even when not realized (but simply possible), they are actually perceived, or at least perceptible in principle. "This actual, not merely virtual, apperception of subdivisions in the undivided is precisely what we call objectivity." Bergson means that the objective is that which has no virtuality — whether realized or not, whether possible or real, everything is actual in the objective. The first chapter of *Matter and Memory* develops this theme more clearly: Matter has neither virtuality nor hidden power, and that is why we can assimilate it to "the image." No doubt there can be *more* in matter than in the image we have of it, but there cannot be anything else in it, of a different kind.<sup>6</sup> And in another passage Bergson praises Berkeley for having assimilated body and idea, precisely because matter "has no interior, no underneath, . . . hides nothing, contains nothing . . . possesses neither power nor virtuality of any kind . . . is spread out as mere surface and . . . is no more than what it presents to us at any given moment."<sup>7</sup>

In short, "object" and "objective" denote not only what is divided, but what, in dividing, does not change in kind. It is thus what divides by differences in degree.<sup>8</sup> The object is characterized by the perfect equivalence of the divided and the divisions, of number and unit. In this sense, the object will be called a numerical multiplicity. For number, and primarily the arithmetical unit itself, is the model of that which divides without changing in kind. This is the same as saying that number has only differences in degree, or that its differences, whether realized or not, are always actual in it. "The units by means of which arithmetic forms numbers are *provisional* units which can be subdivided without limit, and . . . each of them is the sum of fractional quantities, as small and as numerous

For Marx:  
money is a  
kind of  
numerical  
multiplicity

as we like to imagine.... While all multiplication implies the possibility of treating any number whatever as a provisional unit that can be added to itself, conversely the units in their turn are true numbers which are as big as we like, but are regarded as provisionally indivisible for the purpose of compounding them with one another. Now, the very admission that it is possible to divide the unit into as many parts as we like, shows that we regard it as extended."<sup>9</sup>

On the other hand, what is a qualitative multiplicity? What is the subject or the subjective? Bergson gives the following example: "A complex feeling will contain a fairly large number of simple elements; but as long as these elements do not stand out with perfect clearness, we cannot say that they were completely realized, and as soon as consciousness has a distinct perception of them, the psychic state which results from their synthesis will have changed for this very reason."<sup>10</sup> (For example, a complex of love and hatred is actualized in consciousness, but hatred and love become conscious under such conditions that they differ in kind from one another and also differ in kind from the unconscious complex). It would therefore be a serious mistake to think that duration was simply the indivisible, although for convenience, Bergson often expresses himself in this way. In reality, duration divides up and does so constantly: That is why it is a multiplicity. But it does not divide up without changing in kind, it changes in kind in the process of dividing up: This is why it is a nonnumerical multiplicity, where we can speak of "indivisibles" at each stage of the division. There is *other* without there being *several*; number exists only potentially.<sup>11</sup> In other words, the subjective, or duration, is the *virtual*. To be more precise, it is the virtual insofar as it is actualized, in the course of being actualized, it

So too w/ the derivative and synthetic DAS (i.e. as VCS as DAS)

is inseparable from the movement of its actualization. For actualization comes about through differentiation, through divergent lines, and creates so many differences in kind by virtue of its own movement. Everything is actual in a numerical multiplicity; everything is not "realized," but everything there is actual. There are no relationships other than those between actuals, and no differences other than those in degree. On the other hand, a nonnumerical multiplicity by which duration or subjectivity is defined, plunges into another dimension, which is no longer spatial and is purely temporal. It moves from the virtual to its actualization, it actualizes itself by creating lines of differentiation that correspond to its differences in kind. A multiplicity of this kind has, essentially, the three properties of continuity, heterogeneity, and simplicity. In this instance Bergson does not have any real difficulty in reconciling heterogeneity and continuity.

The aforementioned passage from *Time and Free Will*, wherein Bergson distinguishes the subjective and the objective, appears to be all the more important insofar as it is the first to introduce indirectly the notion of the virtual. This notion of the virtual will come to play an increasingly important role in Bergsonian philosophy. For, as we shall see, the same author who rejects the concept of *possibility* — reserving a use for it only in relation to matter and to closed systems, but always seeing it as the source of all kinds of false problems — is also he who develops the notion of the *virtual* to its highest degree and bases a whole philosophy of memory and life on it.

A very important aspect of the notion of multiplicity is the way in which it is distinguished from a theory of the One and the Multiple. The notion of multiplicity saves us from thinking in terms of "One and Multiple." There are many theories

in philosophy that combine the one and the multiple. They share the characteristic of claiming to reconstruct the real with general ideas. We are told that the Self is one (thesis) and it is multiple (antithesis), then it is the unity of the multiple (synthesis). Or else we are told that the One is already multiple, that Being passes into nonbeing and produces becoming. The passages where Bergson condemns this movement of abstract thought are among the finest in his oeuvre. To Bergson, it seems that in this type of *dialectical* method, one begins with concepts that, like baggy clothes, are much too big.<sup>13</sup> The One in general, the multiple in general, nonbeing in general. . . . In such cases the real is recomposed with abstracts; but of what use is a dialectic that believes itself to be reunited with the real when it compensates for the inadequacy of a concept that is too broad or too general by invoking the opposite concept, which is no less broad and general? The concrete will never be attained by combining the inadequacy of one concept with the inadequacy of its opposite. The singular will never be attained by correcting a generality with another generality. In all this, Bergson clearly has in mind Hamelin whose *Essai sur les éléments principaux de la représentation* dates from 1907. Bergsonism's incompatibility with Hegelianism, indeed with any dialectical method, is also evident in these passages. Bergson criticizes the dialectic for being a *false movement*, that is, a movement of the abstract concept, which goes from one opposite to the other only by means of imprecision.<sup>14</sup>

Once again there is a Platonic tone in Bergson. Plato was the first to deride those who said "the One is multiple and the multiple one – Being is nonbeing," etc. In each case he asked *how, how many, when and where*. "What" unity of the multiple and "what" multiple of the one?<sup>15</sup> The combination of oppo-

sites tells us nothing; it forms a net so slack that everything slips through. Those metaphors of Plato about carving and the good cook (which Bergson likes so much) correspond to Bergson's invocation of the good tailor and the well-fitted outfit. This is what the precise concept must be like. "What really matters to philosophy is to know *what* unity, *what* multiplicity, *what* reality superior to the abstract one and the abstract multiple is the multiple unity of the person. . . . Concepts. . . ordinarily go by pairs and represent the two opposites. [There is scarcely any concrete reality upon which one cannot take two opposing views at the same time and that is consequently not subsumed under the two antagonistic concepts. Hence a thesis and an antithesis which it would be vain for us to try logically to reconcile, for the simple reason that never, with concepts or points of view, will you make a thing] . . . If I try to *analyze* duration, that is, to resolve it into ready-made concepts, I am obliged by the very nature of the concept and the analysis to take two opposing views of *duration in general*, with which I shall then claim to recompose it. This combination can present neither a diversity of degrees nor a variety of forms: It is, or it is not. I shall say, for example, that there is, on the one hand, a *multiplicity* of successive states of consciousness and, on the other hand, a *unity* which binds them together. Duration will be the *synthesis* of this unity and multiplicity, but how this mysterious operation can admit of shades or degrees, I repeat, is not quite clear."<sup>16</sup>

What Bergson calls for – against the dialectic, against a general conception of opposites (the One and the Multiple) – is an acute perception of the "what" and the "how many," of what he calls the "nuance" or the potential number. Duration is opposed to becoming precisely because it is a multiplicity, a

type of multiplicity that is not reducible to an overly broad combination in which the opposites, the One and the Multiple in general, only coincide on condition that they are grasped at the extreme point of their generalization, empty of all "measure" and of all real substance. This multiplicity that is duration is not at all the same thing as the multiple, any more than its simplicity is the same as the One.

Two forms of the negative are often distinguished: The negative of simple limitation and the negative of opposition. We are assured that the substitution of the second form for the first by Kant and the post-Kantians was a revolution in philosophy. It is all the more remarkable that Bergson, in his critique of the negative, condemns both forms. Both seem to him to involve and to demonstrate the same inadequacy. For if we consider negative notions like *disorder* or *nonbeing*, their very conception (from the starting-point of being and order as the limit of a "deterioration" in whose interval all things are [analytically] included) amounts to the same thing as our conceiving of them in opposition to being and order, as forces that exercise power and combine with their opposites to produce (synthetically) all things. Bergson's critique is thus a double one insofar as it condemns, in both forms of the negative, the same ignorance of *differences in kind*, which are sometimes treated as "deteriorations," sometimes as oppositions. The heart of Bergson's project is to think differences in kind independently of all forms of negation: There are differences in being and yet nothing negative. Negation always involves abstract concepts that are much too general. What is, in fact, the common root of all negation? We have already seen it. Instead of starting out from a difference in kind between two orders, from a difference in kind between two beings, a general idea of order or

being is created, which can no longer be thought except in opposition to a nonbeing in general, a disorder in general, or else which can only be posited as the starting point of a deterioration that leads us to disorder in general or to nonbeing in general. In any case, the question of difference in kind – "what" order? "what" being? – has been neglected. Likewise the difference in kind between the two types of multiplicity has been neglected: Thus a general idea of the One is created and is combined with its opposite, the Multiple in general, to reconstruct all things from the standpoint of the force opposed to the multiple or to the deterioration of the One. In fact, it is the category of multiplicity, with the difference in kind between two types that it involves, which enables us to condemn the mystification of a thought that operates in terms of the One and the Multiple. We see, therefore, how all the critical aspects of Bergsonian philosophy are part of a single theme: a critique of the negative of limitation, of the negative of opposition, of general ideas.

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"If we analyze in the same way the concept of motion . . ."17 In fact, movement as physical experience is itself a composite: on the one hand, the space traversed by the moving object, which forms an indefinitely divisible numerical multiplicity, all of whose parts – real or possible – are actual and differ only in degree; on the other hand, pure movement, which is *alteration*, a virtual qualitative multiplicity, like the run of Achilles that is divisible into steps, but which changes qualitatively each time that it divides.<sup>18</sup> Bergson discovers that beneath the local transfer there is always a conveyance of another nature. And what seemed from outside to be a numerical part, a com-

ponent of the run, turns out to be, experienced from inside, an obstacle avoided.

But in doubling the psychological experience of duration with the physical experience of movement, one problem becomes pressing. The question "Do external things endure?" remained indeterminate from the standpoint of psychological experience. Moreover, in *Time and Free Will*, Bergson invoked on two occasions an "inexpressible," an "incomprehensible" reason – "What duration is there existing outside us? The present only, or, if we prefer the expression, simultaneity. No doubt external things change, but their moments do not *succeed* (in the ordinary sense of the word) one another, except for a consciousness that keeps them in mind. . . . Hence we must not say that external things *endure*, but rather that there is some inexpressible reason in them which accounts for our inability to examine them at successive moments of our own duration without observing that they have changed." – "Although things do not endure as we do ourselves, nevertheless, there must be some incomprehensible reason why phenomena are seen to *succeed* one another instead of being set out all at once."<sup>19</sup>

However, *Time and Free Will* already had an analysis of movement. But movement had been primarily posited as a "fact of consciousness" implying a conscious and enduring subject confused with duration as psychological experience. It is only to the extent that movement is grasped as belonging to things as much as to consciousness that it ceases to be confused with psychological duration, whose point of application it will displace, thereby necessitating that things participate directly in duration itself. If qualities exist in things no less than they do in consciousness, if there is a movement of qualities outside myself, things must, of necessity, endure in their own way. Psy-

chological duration should be only a clearly determined case, an opening onto an ontological duration. Ontology should, of necessity, be possible. For duration was defined from the start as a multiplicity. Will this multiplicity not – thanks to movement – become confused with being itself? And, since it is endowed with very special properties, in what sense can it be said that there are *several* durations; in what sense can there be said to be a *single one*; in what sense can one get beyond the ontological alternative of one/*several*? A related problem now becomes more urgent. If things endure, or if there is duration in things, the question of space will need to be reassessed on new foundations. For space will no longer simply be a form of exteriority, a sort of screen that denatures duration, an impurity that comes to disturb the pure, a relative that is opposed to the absolute: Space itself will need to be based in things, in relations between things and between durations, to belong itself to the absolute, to have its own "purity." This was to be the double progression of the Bergsonian philosophy.