

THE 13th INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE OF



ISSEI

International Society for the Study of European Ideas

in cooperation with the University of Cyprus



Bergson: An Innovative Conception of Time

Eleni Papamichael

Cyprus Academy of Public Administration

Megalou Napoleontos 5, Appt. 301, 1057 Nicosia

Cyprus

Email : e.papamichael@yahoo.com

Introduction

According to Bergson, traditional metaphysics placed emphasis on logical thought, but not on the immediate consciousness. It placed emphasis on that thought which operates on the basis of logical abstractions; on that thought which operates with logical simplifications, with concepts. However, a concept is an abductive construction of the mind, an abstractive reduction from a number of elements to something which is one, to a

static and universal generalisation. It is therefore an artificial and additional construction of unification, in the attempt to ascribe a unified meaning, which is not really there, in what exists, since what exists is alive, and therefore, not static, but moving and constantly changing. A concept, in other words, according to Bergson, does not permit the grasping of the authentically real. It does not permit the grasping of life. The authentically real, that which Bergson comprehends as “metaphysical”, lies in life itself, in experience, which traditional metaphysics had precisely ignored.

Bergson asserts that to the distancing from the truth of the living experience leads inevitably also the use itself of language, since, when we speak, “we necessarily express ourselves with words”¹, which ascribe concepts: the static concepts which logical thought constructs.

In general the approach of the authenticity of things is in consequence not at all easy, according to Bergson. For experience, to be grasped, what is required in essence is an effort to transcend logical thought, to transcend that consciousness which is not “immediate” (e.g. 73), but, precisely as Bergson describes it, “reflected” (e.g. 21).

As such, as something constantly evolving, this experience is that which develops in time; that which develops throughout the life which we are precisely experiencing. The experience is experienced. It is not something static; it is continuous in time. That is exactly why it is alien to the concept which is only one and static.

Real Duration

The authenticity of things has, therefore, at its epicentre the idea of time, or what constitutes an immediate datum of the consciousness, and which Bergson calls “real duration” (e.g. 150). The word “real” in this case stems from the fact that, both common sense with its linguistic habits on the one hand and traditional metaphysics and science on the other, have always, in the Bergsonian view, had a *false* impression about time. This greatest error of all time and all systems, lay, according to Bergson, in a kind of misunderstanding, in a “*confusion*” (10) in essence between *time* and *space*. What man has always done was to make a false spatialisation of time, which, as such, did not allow him the possibility precisely of conceiving real time.

As a result of his “refracted” (293) by space conception of time, man has always at first attributed to time the false characteristic of homogeneity. Indeed, when we speak or think about time, we perceive it always as homogenous, as a thing which is the same for all people. We consider that we are all inside a same time, inside a time common to all. This impression of the homogeneity of time is nevertheless an error, Bergson asserts. He even considers that to the formation of this error, among other things, a particular contribution was also made by the philosophy of Kant. And this, as he observes, despite the fact that Kant had distinguished space from time. In his work on *The Immediate Data of Consciousness*, Bergson indeed notes the following:

“Kant’s mistake was to consider time as a homogenous field ... Thus, the distinction that he establishes between space and time means, in essence, that he confuses time with space, and the symbolic representation of the self with the self itself. He judged that consciousness is not capable of perceiving the psychological facts unless it juxtaposes them, forgetting that the field in which these facts are juxtaposed and are distinguished from each other, is of necessity space and not duration any more” (311–312).

In other words, real duration is not outside us. It is not a field outside us, where psychological facts are lined up externally, each one next to the other. It is that which concerns and characterises our inner world. It is that which, according to Bergson, exists in the depths of our consciousness, inside us, in our real self itself; that which we experience internally inside us, and not that which constitutes a representation for the others, when they see us in external space. That is to say, this duration concerns and characterises anything that comes within that which we would call our psyche, our states of consciousness: our psychological moods, our emotions, our desires, our memories, our perceptions, etc. It has to do with all those things which Bergson describes precisely as the “immediate data of consciousness”. The real duration is the duration of the immediate data of our consciousness. That is the truly “*lived*” (265) time of our life. And as such, it cannot be confused with space, nor can it be perceived as placed within space. And therefore, it cannot have any homogeneity either.

Since this, the real time, is internal, it must indeed of necessity be different for each person; and therefore, there is no one time, the same for all.

Heterogeneity

In addition, not only is this time not a homogenous field for all people together, but it is not even homogenous for the internal life of each one of us either. This time, as an internal experience, is a continuous incessant process. Besides, that is why Bergson prefers the term “duration” to the term “time”, in order precisely to stress this continuity, the uninterrupted succession. The succession itself, on its part, means constant change: from the one to the other, from the same to the different. Succession means unceasing mobility. It means what is implied by the term *γίγνεσθαι* (*becoming*). Time, the real duration, is the continuous, pure becoming. This should, consequently, in no way be correlated with homogeneity. As real duration, time is by definition pure “heterogeneity” (315).

Nonetheless, we attribute homogeneity to time, because we commit precisely the error, according to Bergson, of perceiving time only within terms of spatialisation:

That is to say, because, more specifically, we perceive time as a series of similar sections, – those that we call “moments” – which we consider as if placed one after the other, just like a numerical series, or exactly in the same way as material things, which are extensible and occupy space, can be precisely juxtaposed in external space. In other

words, we perceive the moments of time as each one external to the other, just as external to each other are the juxtaposed points in space, in which we are able to place extensible things. These material extensible things fill each of the points of space just like a content of a container.

In the same way, we consider that our time is as if it is there, as if it is an external and homogenous landscape, indifferent to us, whose parts – which we call “moments” – we fill, according to what we are doing and what is happening to us, having in this case also the perception once again of a relationship between a container and a content. In general, we perceive time as a numerical row or series of similar, spatially juxtaposed with each other, points or sections, which are filled up with our actions.

But real duration, our internal “lived duration” (320), is *duration*. It is a ceaseless, continuous phenomenon. Consequently and above all, this cannot be divided into sections, into parts discrete from one another. Real time, Bergson maintains, is not divisible into moments and hours, because division implies interruption, distinction, and real time is an uninterrupted continuous succession. And therefore, since real time is not divisible, it is not measurable either. We cannot measure time. It is *lived-time*, it is unceasing flow, it is pure continuity, pure duration.

Multiplicity

The fact that lived-time is not divisible and measurable does not mean of course, on the other hand, that this does not have multiplicity. It has multiplicity; and it has multiplicity par excellence, because it is change itself; it is the becoming, the heterogeneous. However, this multiplicity of real duration, as Bergson points out, is not a “distinct multiplicity” (304). “Distinct multiplicity” is numbers (304). Real duration does not have a numerical nature; it is not a quantitative multiplicity. It is pure quality, and not quantity.

The fact that real duration consists in qualitative and not quantitative multiplicity can be understood only if – in the case of this lived inner life of the psychic states of our consciousness – we comprehend multiplicity, continuous change, modification, not as modification of magnitude, but as alteration of that which Bergson calls “intensity” (11–104). Magnitude and its divisions, what is *less* and what is *more*, these are what imply quantity, because they refer to something extensible which is able to occupy less or more space. However, a psychological state, an experience, a mood, an emotion, an effort, a sensation, a perception, all the things which constitute the immediate data of our consciousness, these are not extensible things: they are not material things, which could be placed in space and occupy less or more space. Therefore we should not attribute to them magnitudes, describe them by the characterisation of less or more, as if they were extensible things. These are pure intensities.

Intensity

“Intensity”, in this case, does not have the meaning of the intense, but of the internal, of that which is inside us. Our internal data of consciousness, our “intensive” data, are not extensive; they have no material extent, as external extensible things have in space, and therefore they do not have a divisible nature either, receptive to additions, increases or decreases. These are, that is to say, continuous states that have constant changeableness, which is equivalent, not to a constant modification of magnitudes, but exclusively and only to what Bergson himself perceives as a kind of continuous *internal development*, of continuous internal “qualitative progress” (43).

Besides, that is why it always makes one wonder “why an intensity can be equated with a magnitude” (13), Bergson observes. This equation is that, which *language* makes, when it precisely characterises the inner data of consciousness as magnitudes. “We speak” (11), for example – erroneously, according to Bergson – about greater or lesser joy, less or more desire, about a sensation which is stronger than another, about an effort which is greater than another, about the increase or reduction of feelings, about the increase or reduction of emotion, of anger, of fear, of pain, etc (e.g. 11–12).

“Before”, “Now” and “Later”

Given that inside us in reality there are indeed no magnitudes which increase or decrease in size, but only qualitative progress, it follows that our internal duration does not in fact have any analogy with quantity and number. Consequently, neither is the terminology of “before” and “later” appropriate to real duration. In order for our states of consciousness

to really have had a before, a now and a later, it would have been necessary, in the Bergsonian view, for all these states, to have been juxtaposed, as elements distinct from each other, one next to the other, in such a way as to form something like a chain or line, a uniform field, as is that of space. However, duration, as pure duration, is not precisely ever for Bergson a chain, with its elements lined up externally one after the other: before in first position, now in second position and later at the end. It is a pure heterogeneous qualitative succession, whose elements are not precisely juxtaposed, but are in fact “interpenetrating” (149) each other. This inter-penetration does not allow any gaps, and so it implies unceasing movement, while the external juxtaposition, on the contrary, contains interruption or lack of continuity. Therefore, the external juxtaposition cannot indeed, according to Bergson, be equated with real duration.

Difference and Freedom

As qualitative multiplicity, this uninterrupted duration of our real self, it should also be noted, has at its centre, the *difference*. In essence, Bergson perceives life as a constant process of differentiation. Life, for him, is a continuous vital impetus towards what is different.

As such, as a continuous difference, duration, according to the Bergsonian view, constitutes at the same time, for man, that which is also defined as “freedom” (295). Our self, our true self, that of real duration, is free, because that self is precisely a pure and continuous possibility of changes, possibility of progress, possibility of evolutionary

creation. On his part, Kant, Bergson notes (312–313), because he precisely confused duration and space, he was not able to perceive what the freedom of the self is, and therefore raised freedom outside real duration, as well as outside space. He placed it in the sphere of the noumenal, and considered it inaccessible to our ability to obtain knowledge. However, freedom, according to Bergson, is not inaccessible.

Nonetheless, it is not of course at all easily attainable. That is why it is necessary that we continuously seek to regain possession of it.

Intuition

How though precisely are we to achieve this necessary repossession of our truly free self? Bergson's answer to this question is that the only means that exists is *intuition*. Since the truth cannot be grasped through the concept, since it cannot be conceived and spoken, it must be grasped in a more immediate way. And since the truth is the duration itself of immediate consciousness, it is consciousness itself which should look into itself and view immediately the inner depths of itself.

Intuition, in this particular case, is not, that is to say, understood as a means for the possibility of grasping an eternal principle which transcends the human consciousness and is outside and beyond it. Bergsonian intuition is understood only as an immediate and more precise viewing of the inside itself of consciousness by consciousness itself.

Conclusion

That which in effect is required in other words, according to Bergson, is for us to make the effort to learn precisely to grasp immediately the data of our consciousness: in the moment of their creation, before they manage, somehow, to receive the formalised and static form, which logical thought attributes to them.

¹ Henri Bergson, *The Immediate Data of Consciousness*, translated in Greek by Costis Papagiorgis (Editions Castanioti, Athens, 1998), 9.