

The defects of Bergson's epistemology and their consequences on his metaphysics

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Abstract This is a translation from the Russian of Nikolai Lossky's "Недостатки гносеологии Бергсона и влияние их на его метафизику," (The Defects of Bergson's Epistemology and Their Consequences on His Metaphysics), which was published in the journal *Вопросы философии и психологии* (Questions of Philosophy and Psychology) in 1913. In this article, Lossky criticizes Bergson's epistemological dualism, which completely separates intuition from reason, and which rejects reason in favor of intuition. For Bergson, reality is continuous, indivisible, fluid, etc., and reason distorts it through its acts of division, abstraction, extraction, and so on. Lossky argues that this conclusion does not follow. Reason does not distort the living flow of reality; it rather provides a window unto aspects of the otherwise undivided seamless flowing organic whole. In fact, reason is itself a species of intuition in its own right, namely an intellectual intuition, the object of which is the atemporal facet of the world (the Platonic ideal realm), which is necessary for the existence of its temporal facet. Lossky thus challenges Bergson's one-sided and self-defeating reduction of being to a flux of changes devoid of changing things. (*Frédéric Tremblay*).

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<224> Bergson's philosophy is an intuitivism applied to the construction of a metaphysics. Nowadays, when undertaking to develop a metaphysics, it is necessary to provide an epistemological justification for it, and that is what Bergson does in his theory of intuition as a source of absolute knowledge. However, Bergson's intuitivism contains major defects that seriously affect his metaphysical theories. I will subject to critical examination these defects of his epistemology and their consequences on his metaphysics.

First of all, it is worth noting the methodological shortcomings of Bergson's theories: he interweaves his epistemological investigations with psychological, physiological, and metaphysical ones. It is known, however, that modern philosophy sharply distinguishes between these aspects of the problem of knowledge. It admits the necessity of investigating knowledge through all the disciplines, but it considers that the study of the psychology of knowledge, of the physiological conditions and genesis of knowledge, does not answer the question of what truth is and what its properties are. This distinction between epistemology, psychology of knowledge, and the other sciences of knowledge is not to be understood as a requirement to keep them separated from each other from without. In one and the same investigation, pages may be devoted to both epistemological and psycho-physiological issues; *such crossings cannot be* <225> *avoided even in a detailed investigation*, because in human knowledge the subjective-psychological processes, the physiological processes, and the objective content of knowledge always exist together. But the investigator must see so much more clearly with his mind's eye which aspect of knowledge he is studying at a given point in time. Otherwise, and precisely in epistemological investigation, it may turn out that, unbeknownst to the author, important aspects of the problem will elude him and remain unresolved. Thus, for instance, concerning Bergson's theory of knowledge, one must say that he in fact thoroughly worked out only the question of the role of physiological processes for cognitive activity. However much esteemed this work may be, yet for epistemology in the strict sense of the word (for the theory of truth) it has only a negative value, namely it shows that the physiological processes do not serve the cause of the objective structure of perception and judgment. This negative theory should be followed by a positive one, namely an analysis of the structure of consciousness. In contemporary epistemology, this work has led to the distinction between important concepts: the *act* of knowledge, the *object* of knowledge, and the *content* of knowledge. This analysis has led to the distinction between *subjective* and *objective* aspects of all judgments, as well as to the discovery of *logical elements in the structure of all knowledge*. Furthermore, in theories of knowledge that claim that there is an immediate givenness of the transsubjective in consciousness, has been developed a theory of consciousness as a kind of *relation* between the conscious subject and the object.¹

¹ On this, see my article, "The Transformation of the Concept of Consciousness in Contemporary Epistemology and its Significance for Logic" (Преобразование понятия сознания в современной гносеологии и его значение для логики)—*Encyclopedia of Philosophical Sciences* (Энциклопедия философских наук), vol. 1, Logic (Логика); "The Transformation of the Concept of Consciousness in Contemporary Epistemology and Schuppe's Role in this Movement" (Преобразование понятия сознания в современной гносеологии и роль Шуппе в этом движении), *Questions of Philosophy* (Вопросы философии), book 116 (1913).

There are no such analyses and distinctions in Bergson, and this explains the fact that, for instance, in his theory of perception the subjective and the transsubjective elements of consciousness are mixed and interwoven in the most <226> bizarre and contradictory manner. To verify this, let us consider his theory of sensible qualities of color, sound, etc.²

According to Bergson, all that transsubjectively occurs in a luminous, sounding, etc., material medium are only vibrations. Consequently “pure perception” of, e.g., a red ray would afford only the intuition (созерцание) of four billion vibrations *per* second, but pure perception is combined with the activity of our memory. This activity retains in consciousness the entire process of vibrations, which extends, let us say, over seconds, creating an interaction between them, as though they were condensing, with the result that we perceive not separate vibrations, but something new, namely a sensible quality—the color red.

This theory is full of contradictions. In pure perception, I intuit (созерцаю) transsubjective vibrations in the original, but does the intervention of my memory turn them into a sensation of light? Where, then, would be this light? If it were *transsubjective*, this would imply that my memory intervenes in the process of the external world such that it converts its flow. In this case, for instance, it leads to the disappearance of the vibrations and their substitution with something drastically different. Needless to say, Bergson does not develop such an absurd theory; he believes that through the activity of memory light emerges as a *subjective* phenomenon. But, even with this interpretation, hopeless contradictions crop up: we have to suppose that the vibrations continue to exist transsubjectively and that, at the same time, my memory creates out of them a subjective phenomenon of light in my mind. It is as if someone said: “I used the linen grown in this field as a material for the yarn and, while I have the yarn, the same linen continues to grow in the field at the same time.” It should also be noted <227> at this point that the theory of the creative activity of memory conflicts with the theory of memory that Bergson himself developed in *Matière et mémoire*. The mental memory, the memory of a dream (to which he refers in this case), because it is a “pure recollection,” consists, according to Bergson, in the mental vision of the *bygone original itself*, not in the creation of something novel; whereas here we are speaking about the creation of novelty out of given material.

Reflecting on why Bergson adopted the theory of the subjectivity of sensible qualities, so discordant with the rest of his theories, one may come to the conclusion that he had no choice, since the subjectivity of sensible qualities is proven by physiology, physics, etc. But this argument is invalid: in reality, this theory has not yet been proven, neither by physiology nor by any other special science. It is remarkable that Bergson himself gave, in *Matière et mémoire*, one of the most ingenious reasons for crushing the most important of arguments in favor of the subjectivization of sensations, but did not use it for this purpose. “We may ask—he says—, whether the electrical stimulus does not contain different *components*,

² Valuable remarks on Bergson's incorrect doctrine of subjectivizing sensible qualities may be found in B. Babynina's article “Bergson's Philosophy” (Философия Бергсона), *Questions of Philosophy* (Вопросы философии), book 108, 109 (1911).

objectively answering to different kinds of sensation, and whether the function of each sense is not merely to extract from the whole the component that interests it: the same stimuli would then be giving the same sensations, and different stimuli would be producing different sensations. To be more precise, it is difficult to assume that the electrification of the tongue, for instance, would not trigger chemical changes; as it happens, it is these changes that we call tastes. On the other hand, if the physicist could identify light with an electromagnetic disturbance, we may inversely say that what he calls an electromagnetic disturbance *is* light, such that it would indeed be light that the optic nerve objectively perceives when electrified”.³

<228> At the present time, the theory of the subjectivity of sensible qualities is being reviewed by a wide variety of representatives of epistemology and more or less resolutely, more or less completely rejected by them: in this respect it is interesting to compare, e.g., Schuppe’s immanent philosophy, Avenarius’ empirio-criticism, Rehmke’s theory, Lossky’s intuitivism, the teachings of the Neo-Thomists, etc.⁴

Bergson, with his ingenuous theory of the physiological aspect of perception could not contribute more to the revival of the ancient doctrine of transsubjective sensible qualities, and yet he did not use this advantageous aspect of his theory. The principal cause for this, as I see it, is that he is too focused only on the physiological side of knowledge and did not engage in the main task of epistemology—the analysis of the composition of consciousness and the development of accurate theories of the nature of this consciousness from the epistemological point of view.

Bergson cannot even engage openly in the creation of such theories, because this would require to deliberately have recourse to the assistance of reason, of its *analytical* operations, i.e., building within the sphere of general concepts, whereas Bergson considers reason unfit for the acquisition of philosophical knowledge. Herein lie the most serious defects of his epistemology. Let us turn to their examination.

In order to pave the way for metaphysics, Bergson develops a theory that can be characterized as an *epistemological dualism*; he digs a chasm between reason and intuition, between positive science and metaphysics, between the rational and the irrational content of knowledge. In his opinion, for the cognition of genuine reality, e.g., personality, life, motion, etc., the rational concepts are of no use. For example, *la durée* <229> (creative change) can be understood neither through the concept of unity, nor through the concept of plurality, nor through a combination of these concepts.⁵ All these rational concepts, Bergson thinks, afford merely *relative* and *symbolic* knowledge; only intuition can give absolute knowledge about the most genuine reality.

³ *Matière et mémoire*, transl. by A. Bauler, p. 41 (*Материя и память*, перев. А. Баулерь, стр. 41).

⁴ A rich body of literature on this issue is referred to in Frischeisen-Köhler’s article “The Doctrine of the Subjectivity of Sensible Qualities and Its Opponents” (*Die Lehre von der Subjektivität der Sinnesqualitäten und ihre Gegner*) transl. by G. Kotlyar in № 6, “New Ideas in Philosophy” (*Новые идеи в философии*).

⁵ See Bergson, *Introduction à la métaphysique*, p. 204 (Бергсон «Введение в метафизику», стр. 204с).

If we try to strictly hold to such a division of rational understanding and intuitive comprehension of reality, it immediately becomes evident that the metaphysics that Bergson prescribes is not feasible: if even the concepts of unity and plurality do not express the true nature of existence, then it is *ineffable* and Bergson's feat of having written three rather large books defending positive metaphysical theories has been in vain.

Fortunately, such a regrettable conclusion does not necessarily follow. Subjecting Bergson's epistemology to an immanent critique, it is not difficult to see that he does not at all justify the sharp dualism of reason and intuition. What is reason, according to Bergson? The activities of comparing, extracting from the objects their similar features, i.e., carrying out *analysis* and *generalization*. Such activities may be carried out only if they are directed at some kind of material *given* to them. But what can give them the material, if not intuition—that is, introspection, external perception, and mental memory (as a vision of the past itself)?—This material is the genuine being, and we must now account for where, at what moment of its activity, reason substitutes genuine being for symbols. Perhaps through its activities of analysis and abstraction? Analysis is *dividing*, abstracting—*extracting*, whereas the world is an indivisible, continuous, organic whole flux of creative changes. The more organic the system, the <230> sharper are the distortions that appear when extracting any of its aspects from it, e.g., if you separate the heart from the human organism. This reasoning contains indisputable truth, although only in the case when it comes to... the *real* division; whereas in epistemology we are talking about the *mental* extraction, about the intellectual intuition (умственномъ созерцаніи) of any of the aspects of the whole, which does not at all intervene in the composition and flux of the real process and, consequently, does not in the least distort the being of the observed part of the whole. If the extracted aspect is considered against the background of a continuing intuition of the whole, there can be no question even about a distortion in the sense of a one-sidedness of knowledge. Thus, the analytical activity of reason does not distort the knowledge of genuine being, and if Bergson insists upon this, it is to be suspected that he confuses “mental” and “real” division.⁶

This is the first major shortcoming of Bergson's theory of reason. Furthermore, speaking of a comparison done by means of reason, Bergson contends that it leads to finding *similarity* in objects, i.e., to knowledge of the *general*. At the same time, in reality knowledge of similarity always comes hand in hand with knowledge of difference: identification is impossible without differentiation and vice versa. Extraction of the general and the knowledge of it, *qua* general, is *achieved by its distinction from the individual*. In the same way, knowledge of an aspect of the whole does not annihilate knowledge of the whole, but *for the first time by contrasting parts and whole, it leads to the identification of the whole*.

But let us assume with Bergson that the analytical activity of reason produces only knowledge consisting of general concepts, and let us see whether it is true that general concepts are only symbols the <231> contents of which are not genuine

⁶ This defect of his theory is pointed out by I. I. Lapshin in his article “Bergson” (Бергсон) in the 2nd edition of the *Brockhaus and Efron Encyclopedic Dictionary* (Энциклопедический словарь Брокгауза и Ефрона).

being. Bergson's arguments in favor of his assertion are as follows: reality is an indivisible continuity, creatively variable and unrepeatable, whereas general concepts are discontinuous, immutable, and stand for something that is repeated countless numbers of times. Among these remarks about the nature of general concepts, some are false, while others, although true, do not prove the symbolic nature of concepts.

Above all, we should take note of the organic integrity of the system of concepts, especially noticeable in the higher, so-called categorial concepts. Just as in psychic life, according to Bergson's portrayal, every deep feeling, every mood, behavior, etc., contains in itself the entire *mind*, so every higher concept includes *all the other concepts*, so that having thought about its content, it turns out to be inevitable to transition to thinking about another one, and to a third concept, etc., all the way up to the obtention of the whole *system of concepts*. Thus, the concept of *quality* is inextricably bound to the concept of *quantity*,⁷ the concept of *plurality* to the concept of *unity*, etc. The most fascinating philosophical work, so successfully performed once by Hegel, and now by Cohen et al., consists precisely in investigating the organic relation between the fundamental concepts, to discover their "interpenetration".⁸

No doubt, Bergson would retort that the indivisible system of concepts contains in itself only *static logical relations*: it contains dependencies, but no *durée*, i.e., no flux of creative changes. And, indeed, the general concepts in this system are evidently of a *timeless* nature; I think, however, that <232> it does not follow from this that they distort the living flow of reality. Any such concept is an aspect, abstracted from the whole complex object. In an object of the temporal world, there is a flux, a creative change, yet this does not hinder it from having such an aspect as well, which is by no means a flux and which does not occur in time. If we call the former aspect by the expression "real being," and the latter by the expression "ideal being," it may be said of any thing in the temporal world that it is an ideal-real being. Thus, all relations, without which the organic wholeness of the world's flux would be impossible, belong to the ideal sphere. Observing the motion of the sun, the earth, and the moon, we can abstract the *position* of the three celestial bodies on one straight line during a full moon and a new moon; this abstraction is not a flux, but that does not prevent it from conveying an aspect of such a whole, in which a flux takes place. The error of the *mechanistic* worldview does not consist in attributing being to these abstract aspects of reality, but in endowing these abstractions with independent existence and attempting to interpret the whole *by means of external apposition of such abstractions* to each other. This is not an error of reason, but of people lubberly using reason. The *organic* worldview breaks loose from this mistake: beginning with the intuition of the *whole*, it turns to the *analytical* examination of its aspects, *keeping them on the foreground of the whole and without losing sight of it*. With such an examination of the world, the ideal principles of real being prove not to be, despite their timelessness, a hindrance to the process of creative change. Moreover, Bergson's most original intuitions, revealing, for

⁷ See, e.g., Natorp, *Die logischen Grundlagen der exakten Wissenschaften*, p. 53.

⁸ About this, see, e.g., N. Hartmann, "Systematische Methode," *Logos*, vol. III, n. 2.

instance, freewill, only become more vivid when we begin to examine them through the prism of general concepts, and they do not all lose their vitality because of that.

Thus, Bergson's struggle with *Platonism* turns out to be based on a misunderstanding. Distortion of the world <233> occurs only when some extreme worshipper of the Platonic world of Ideas attempts to construct *every temporal* being *solely out of the Ideas*. However, no lesser distortion occurs when someone contends that the world contains no timeless principles, *that the world is only a flux of changes*.

The easiest way to properly see to what extent such one-sidednesses are erroneous is by confronting them face-to-face. Bergson claims that timeless being is a subjective construct of reason. In contrast, his opponent with the same kind of pretense to truth may argue that change is a subjective representation, that although there is a *representation of change*, there is yet no *change of representations*. In favor of this view, he [i.e., his opponent] may cite, e.g., Kant's famous statement: "Time should therefore be regarded as real, not as an object, but as the mode of representation of myself as an object. If without this condition of sensibility I could intuitively represent myself, or be intuited by another being, the very same determinations which we now represent to ourselves as changes would yield knowledge into which the representation of time, and therefore also of change, would in no way enter".⁹ Who is right in this debate? No doubt, neither the one nor the other: it is undeniable that intuition evidently reveals the presence of the flux of creative changes, but the same intuition reveals the presence of timeless principles with equal evidence. If someone, due to some misunderstanding, were to deny one of these evidences, he would lose the right to give credence to another one of them and would arrive at a self-contradictory nihilism. Truth consists neither in one-sided actualistic realism (which acknowledges only the flux of events) nor in one-sided idealism, but in the organic combination of both of these schools—in ideal-realism. For the epistemological justification of the <234> doctrine, it is necessary to extend the theory of intuition in the aforementioned direction, namely to recognize that *reason* is nothing else than a *species of intuition*: it is the *faculty of intuition of ideas* (in the Platonic sense), it is a vision of the timeless principles lying at the foundation of the temporal world.

Such intuitivism does not reduce positive science to the level of mere technical and relative knowledge; in both the positive sciences and metaphysics, it finds knowledge of genuine being only directed at different aspects of the world, so that ideal knowledge presents itself as an organic combination of metaphysics with the positive sciences.

The impossibility to isolate metaphysics from the positive sciences is so obvious that the question arises whether we are mistaken in interpreting Bergson's views by emphasizing his epistemological dualism. Indeed, from Bergson's works, it is easy to find citations showing that, for him, as for us, the ideal development of knowledge is a combination of positive science and metaphysics. Certainly, says

⁹ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, transl. by N. Lossky, p. 52 (Кант, *Критика чистаго разума*, перев. Н. Лоецкого, стр. 52). (Transcendental Aesthetic, Section II, Time, §7 Elucidation).

Bergson, concepts are indispensable for metaphysics, “because all the other sciences most usually work with concepts, and metaphysics would not be able to do without the other sciences. But metaphysics is properly speaking itself only when it overcomes concepts, or at least when it emancipates itself from rigid and ready-made concepts to create concepts altogether different from those that we usually handle, I mean flexible, mobile, and almost fluid representations, always ready to fit the fleeting forms of intuition.”¹⁰ “A truly intuitive philosophy would realize the much desired union of metaphysics and science. At the same time that it would make of metaphysics a positive science—by this I mean a progressive and indefinitely perfectible one—, it would lead the properly called positive <235> sciences to become aware of their true scope, often far greater than they imagine. It would put more science into metaphysics, and more metaphysics into science. It would result in restoring continuity between the intuitions that the various positive sciences have obtained here and there in the course of their history, and that they only obtained by strokes of genius.”¹¹

It is noteworthy that Bergson even dared to take as model of knowledge the *most rational* of the sciences, namely mathematics, making, however, the proviso that he was specifically referring to the “method of infinitesimals.” “Modern mathematics, says Bergson, is precisely an effort to substitute to the *already made* the *making*, to follow the generation of magnitudes, to grasp motion, not from the outside and in its staggered results, but from within and in its tendency to change.”¹²

In his words, the task of metaphysics with regards to *quality* is the same as the task of mathematics with regards to *quantity*: “Let us thus say, having mitigated in advance what this formula has of too modest and ambitious at the same time, that *the task of metaphysics is to make qualitative differentiations and integrations.*”¹³

So, Bergson sees ideal knowledge in the combination into a single whole of science and metaphysics. However, even from the above citations, it is clear that he is trying to achieve this goal by expulsing from science that which makes it science: Ideas in the Platonic sense of the word. Thus, he puts forward the ideal of uniting them only in words, when in fact in his epistemology he cuts off the path for its accomplishment, since he denies the objective significance of the concepts of reason that express the sphere of ideal atemporal being.¹⁴

¹⁰ *Introduction à la métaphysique*, p. 204 (*Введение в метафизику*, стр. 204). (Note from the translator: the pagination corresponds to page 9 in the French original published in 1903 in *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*, tome 11, n. 1, pp. 1–36).

¹¹ *Ibid.* p. 230 (=p. 29 in the original).

¹² *Ibid.* p. 228 (=pp. 27–28 in the original).

¹³ *Ibid.* p. 229 (=pp. 28 in the original).

¹⁴ Note from the translator: Thanks are due to Maria Cherba, Alexandra Koshkina, and Thomas Nemeth for valuable comments on the translation.