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before his
baptism?

conversion?
Afterwards?

THE PHILOSOPHY OF BERGSON AND MYSTICISM.

THE spirit of the nineteenth century, especially of the middle part of it, was largely antagonistic to the spirit of mysticism. It was an age of unparalleled scientific activity, in which profound researches were made into the physical operations of Nature in every direction. And though these researches, carried over into the sphere of practical life, paved the way to a mastery over the physical forces undreamed of by our ancestors, and in this way helped to lift man more and more out of the necessities of his natural environment, on the other hand, in the sphere of speculation they gave rise to materialistic philosophies characterized above all by a deterministic view of the human mind. For the stern rigidity of those laws which the scientist found governing matter—a rigidity which enabled him to conquer space and “charm the secret from the latest moon”—was supposed to apply also to the movements of organic phenomena, so that even man's thoughts and actions were caught up into this web of necessity. The molecular changes that undoubtedly do go on in the brain were said to determine absolutely the consciousness that accompanied them, and it was maintained that if only an observer could come into possession of all the data, he would be able to predict the thought or action of a man at a given future moment as infallibly as the astronomer can predict the position of a heavenly body. In an indiscernibly distant past, the ball of the Universe

was said to have been set rolling once for all, and it had nothing to do now—in fact, *could* do nothing else—but keep on rolling in the same direction, each event following and coming out of the preceding one with absolute and fatal certainty. In such a rigidly connected world there was no loop-hole for such illusions as freedom, individuality, and moral responsibility:—

“The moving finger writes, and having writ
Moves on, nor all thy piety nor wit
Can lure it back to cancel half a line,
Nor all thy tears wash out a word of it:”

Yet, in spite of everything the scientists and philosophers said, the main mass of humanity, which feels and acts rather than reasons, had always been certain in the depths of its being of the fact of its own freedom. In art, poetry, and religion, which take their rise from just this deeper layer of our being, continual protests had been forthcoming against the deterministic view of life. But art, poetry, and religion are pre-eminently things, as we say, of the heart, while science is a construction of the intellect; and, though these three have helped to confirm us in our instinctive belief that the scientific view of life was merely provisional, they have not been able to challenge this view in any very definite and clear terms. Nor was it really to be expected that they should do so, for they and science speak in different languages. It is just here where the importance of Bergson comes in. He pays back science in her own coin. Possessed of an unusually wide and profound knowledge of the scientific facts, and gifted with logical and intellectual powers singularly acute, he turns just this very knowledge, and this penetrating logic, as it were, back on itself, to show its own limitations. By thus showing the limitations of the intellect, by means of the intellect,

he frees the human mind from the nightmare of determinism, and introduces once more the belief in freedom, creative activity, and the infinite possibilities of personal development—in a word, to use his own phrase—“Philosophy thus introduces us into the spiritual life.”

One of the chief charms of M. Bergson's philosophy is the fact that it does not form a closed system, as is the case with the works of most philosophers. This does not mean that Bergson's philosophy is made up of detached aphorisms and essays, which, as with Nietzsche, sometimes contradict each other. On the contrary, the earliest of Bergson's works to the latest form a coherent whole, each part supplementing and completing the others in a unified system. But it is an *open* system, like that of a living organism, which, though all its parts cohere and involve each other, is capable of continuous growth.

There is one principle which lies at the root of Bergson's philosophy, and which gives it its dynamic force. It is this—that *Life transcends the Intellect*. This is the master-key to Bergson's “*Weltanschauung*.” It is the melody which is played again and again in all his works, each time with new and surprising variations; or, to change the metaphor, it is the Ariadne thread which guides us through the sometimes intricate labyrinth of his argument.

From the days of Aristotle to the present time, says Bergson, the weakness of philosophical systems has been in the fact that they have, openly or implicitly, regarded the intellect as the highest form of knowledge, *i. e.* the best means of bringing us into touch with Reality itself. And it is very natural, continues Bergson, that they should have done so: for the debt which man owes to his intellect is incalculable. Through it, primitive man

was able to lift himself up, step by step, out of the narrow groove, which characterizes the stereotyped and largely determined actions of the animal species, into an ever-widening freedom of individual choice. Through the intellect, too, man has been able to erect the wonderful palace of science, and to conquer and direct the forces of Nature according to his will. But in the present connection we are not so much concerned with what the intellect has done and can do, but rather with the limitations of the intellect, and what it *cannot* do.

In a long argument Prof. Bergson points out how, in the evolution of man's faculties, the intellect arose primarily as a *means to action*. Its original function was to help man in dealing with the external objects in the world around him.

Out of the continual flux and "Durcheinander" of the physical world about him, it enabled him to cut out definite objects with definite names; and, out of the continuous flowing stream of his own consciousness, it enabled him to cut out definite ideas and concepts, and by this twofold activity make social life with its concerted action possible. Again and again, with tireless insistence, Bergson emphasises this point, that the *intellect is practical in its origin and directed towards action*. And just because the intellect, by its very nature, is subservient to the exigencies of action, it takes hold of only certain parts or aspects of Reality, to wit, those aspects which it will be useful for us to know, in directing our actions in any given circumstance. For the purposes of action in dealing with the objects of the material world, it is not necessary that we should know their inner nature, but merely just that about them which is useful for us in our manipulation of them. And it is just these external and practical aspects of Reality that the intellect is

able to bring to us. But of the inner nature of things — their real essence, "that which makes them go," their *élan vital*—the intellect can tell us nothing. If man were simply and solely a practical being, content with a surface view of things, happy alone in his intellectual prowess and his command over the forces of Nature, then his intellect would suffice for his needs. But man is not such a being; he is for ever haunted by

" . . . those obstinate questionings
Of sense and outward things,
Fallings from him, vanishings;
Blank misgivings of a creature
Moving about in worlds not realized . . ."

and wherever he goes, and whatever he does, he cannot wholly

" . . . forget the glories he hath known
And that imperial palace whence he came."

Hence it happens that, in all ages and lands, man continually strives to get beyond the surface view of things and see into their inner nature. In this quest he is seeking now for knowledge, not to turn it into action but for *its own sake*. This is true speculation. So long, says Bergson, as the intellect confines itself to the pursuit of the first kind of knowledge, that which is directed towards action, it is successful to a wonderful degree; but as soon as it tries to grasp the inner nature of things as they really are, it fails at once and completely.

In what is bound to become a classic analysis of the idea of movement, Bergson points out how utterly impotent the intellect is to comprehend so simple a movement as that of a hand across a piece of paper, or a falling stone. It is impossible to go into the argument here, which has already been made familiar to many by the writings of Prof. James and others. Suffice it to say that the in-

tellec can only regard movement as an infinite series of immobile points, placed side by side on the path of the moving body which occupies each point in turn. But of the actual passage of the moving body from one of these points to the one immediately next to it—though only an infinitely short distance away—the intellect can form no idea whatever, which amounts to saying that the real movement slips through its fingers, and “nothing remains to the intellect, when it regards movement, but immobility!”

If then the intellect is unable to grasp what really takes place in the simplest kind of movement, what chance will it have of penetrating to the inner meaning of life, whose very essence is continuous movement and change of the utmost complexity? According to Bergson it has no chance, and never will have. It is true, he points out, that the biological sciences have discovered many wonderful facts about living organisms, and will certainly discover many more; but that inner unity which animates all the cells in the body, and makes them work in unison, that unity in multiplicity, in short, the *élan vital* of the organism, that unity the intellect can never grasp; for, as Bergson sums up this part of his argument, “the intellect is characterized by a natural inability to comprehend life.”

But if the intellect is thus by its very nature incapable of understanding life, must not life's secret remain for ever dark to us? Is it not in itself an admission that that problem is insoluble at least for us? No, answers Bergson; but it would indeed be insoluble if our only way of obtaining knowledge was by means of the intellect. Happily it is not our only road to knowledge. The intellect is not co-extensive with our consciousness. “Round our intellectual concepts there is an indistinct fringe

which fades off into darkness.” Our clearly formed intellectual ideas are, as it were, only crystals which have separated themselves out from a larger mind-stuff, of which a certain amount still remains and exists as an indistinct fringe around and beyond these definite concepts.

“A beneficent fluid bathes us, whence we draw the very force to live. From this ocean of life in which we are immersed we are continually drawing something, and we feel that our being, or at least the intellect, has been formed by a kind of local concentration.” Or, again, in another place he says, “Our understanding is cut out from a more vast something from which it has detached itself.” In order to get back into this larger life, of which the intellect is only a “local concentration,” we must *transcend our intellect*. “We must thrust our intelligence outside itself by an act of will.” This, it must be admitted, sounds at first as impossible as the gymnastic feat of lifting oneself up by one's own boot straps. It is at once objected: “You are moving in a vicious circle. In vain do you claim to go beyond intelligence, for how can you do so except *by* your intelligence! All that is clear in your own consciousness *is* intelligence. You are inside your own thought, and you cannot get out of it.”

But, answers Bergson, the same objection would apply to the formation of any other new habit. “It is the essence of reasoning to shut us up in the circle of the given. *But action breaks the circle*. If we had never seen a man swim, we might say that swimming is an impossible thing, inasmuch as to learn to swim we must begin by holding ourselves up in the water and, consequently, know how to swim. But if, quite simply, I throw myself into the water without fear, I may keep myself up well enough at first by merely

struggling and gradually adapt myself to the new environment: I shall thus learn to swim." . . . "So, in theory, there is a kind of absurdity in trying to know otherwise than by the intelligence; but if the risk be frankly accepted, action will perhaps cut the knot that reasoning has tied and will not unloose." "Thousands and thousands of variations on the theme of walking will never yield a rule for swimming: come, enter the water, and when you know how to swim, you will understand how the mechanism of swimming is connected with that of walking." . . . "So you may speculate as intelligently as you will on the mechanism of intelligence: you will never by this method succeed in getting beyond it. . . . *You must take things by storm; you must thrust intelligence outside itself by an act of will.*"

This it will be seen is no arm-chair kind of philosophy. It calls for the most strenuous and most unusual effort on the reader's mind; nothing less than a "leaping out of its own environment!" It is extremely difficult to get a clear idea of what Bergson means by this thrusting of intelligence outside itself by an act of will (which he calls Intuition); and it is even harder to write a description of it. But unless the mind is capable of performing this feat, it must remain for ever in the outer court of things; for only by learning this act of intuition can it penetrate behind the surface-phenomena of things and come into contact and sympathy with the generative forces of Life. Just because this operation is so important, we venture to quote still another passage describing it:—

"Let us try and see, no longer with the eyes of the intellect alone, which grasps only the already made and which looks from the outside, but with the spirit; I mean with that faculty of seeing, which

is imminent in the faculty of acting, and which springs up, somehow, by the twisting of the will on itself, when action is turned into knowledge, like heat, so to say, into light."

Hostile, and even repugnant, as this idea of knowing by other means than the intellect may seem to us at first, it is nevertheless, in a certain form, a process not entirely unknown to any of us. There are two ways, for instance, of listening to classical music. One way is to listen, so to say, from the outside; with our attention more or less slackened and directed to the more external aspects of the music. This will then come to us as a succession of sounds, of which each seems to be outside the other, like a shower of glistening drops. Each note will then seem to exist more or less for itself, so that we can pause and think of its pitch, or the length of its duration. We can admire the complexity of the music, and notice the different instruments that are playing it. But the more we look at external aspects of the music, thus dividing it up as it were into separate parts, the less do the notes in their totality convey to us a special meaning. Persons of little or no musical susceptibility or training never get beyond this outside view; hence their dislike of all music which "hasn't got a tune in it."

If we tighten our attention, however, and make an effort to follow the music, what happens? The notes, which seemed at first to be flowing along more or less independently of each other, now melt into one another; and the heterogeneous multitude of sounds resolves itself into a few phrases and counter-phrases; and the deeper and more perfect our appreciation, the more does the whole piece tend to simplify itself into the expression of a single emotional state—which splits itself up into these phrases

and notes as the only means of obtaining full expression of itself.

So, too, with poetry. If someone is reading verses aloud to us, we can listen again in two kinds of ways. If we let our attention slacken, we lose the inner meaning of the words. But, on the other hand, the further we go away from this inner significance of the poem, the more can we notice and admire, as though from outside, the beautiful arrangement of its parts—its peculiarities of rhyme and rhythm, for instance, and even the separate words and letters. But if we pull ourselves together again, and by an act of will strain our attention to follow the meaning once more, what do we find? In proportion as we live ourselves, by a stroke of sympathy and inspiration, back into the simple emotional state which gave rise to the poem, the more do we find that the particular sounds and syllables and other details of the poem, which were individualized and separate on the lower plane of attention, melt into each other and vanish; being swallowed up, as it were, by the continuous living movement of thought, which is the poem itself.

And, similarly, with all other kinds of works of art, in painting, sculpture, architecture and so on—in fact, wherever creative activity has been displayed, we can always trace these two ways of looking at things. The one is to look with the eyes of the intellect, taking notice of external details and particular features, and wondering and admiring, it may be, the arrangement and technique; and the other is to look with the eyes of the spirit, which, by a stroke of sympathy and intuition, places the observer, as it were, inside the work of art, and puts him in possession of that elementary emotion which was its origin.

Just so, says Bergson, is it with the greatest of all

works of art—the creation of Life and Nature. If we look at Nature from the first or external point of view with the eyes of the intellect, we trace everywhere a marvellous order and arrangement, which extends from the smallest object which the microscope can show us to the farthest bounds of space. It is the delight and duty of science to describe this order and arrangement. But we must not forget that this beauty of external form and arrangement is only one aspect of things, and not the most important. It is a result of a particular way of looking at things. If we strain our attention and make that peculiar effort of will, which Bergson calls looking with the eyes of the spirit or intuition, we shall see the same world of Nature with a new and deeper meaning. For, just as the onward movement of the poet's creative activity, falling back, expresses itself in words and sentences, which, looked at externally, present an admirable order and arrangement of rhyme and metre, phraseology, alliteration, and so forth; so the Spirit of Life, which is unceasing creativeness, falls back, in expressing itself, into the far grander and more wonderful order of Nature—falls back, that is to say, in stupendous works of art, of which each is a world.

And just as, starting from the apparently dead and lifeless arrangement of the poet's words on the printed page, we can, by a stroke of will and sympathy, live ourselves back into the living, creative thought which gave rise to the poem, so, in a similar way, starting from the apparently dead and mechanical order of Nature around us, we can, by a stroke of sympathy and intuition, bring ourselves into direct contact with the sustaining and generative forces of Life, and obtain glimpses of that inner creative unity, from which all things proceed, that great Life—

" Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round earth, and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man ;
A motion and a spirit that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things."

We have headed this article Bergson's Philosophy and Mysticism ; but after having described at considerable length Bergson's idea of intuition, not much space is left us for pointing out how closely akin is this intuition to certain types of mysticism. The resemblances, however, are so striking that they scarcely need pointing out, and will have occurred to almost every reader. Bergson agrees, for instance, with the mystics in declaring that the intellect alone is powerless to give us insight into the deeper nature of reality. Both Bergson and the mystics (and in speaking of mystics I refer to what Rufus Jones calls the "positive as opposed to the negative mystics") lay emphasis on *action* as a means to insight. "There are many problems," says a modern mystical writer, "which are insoluble except in active life." Action, says Bergson, as we have seen, liberates us from the vicious circle of the intellect. "Do the will," said the ancient mystic, "and thou shalt know of the doctrine." Both Bergson and the mystics agree, too, that our thoughts are continuous with a wider consciousness from which they take their rise, and by which they are unceasingly sustained. "We lie," says Emerson, "in the lap of an immense Intelligence." Bergson says our lives are bathed in a "beneficent fluid," whence we draw strength to live. Whitman calls it "the float of things"; and Rufus Jones says that our lives are continuous with a vaster life, which floods into our personalities as the ocean floods the inlet. But the most important point of similarity between Bergson and the mystics is this—that both declare that, after painful and

continued effort, after a constant straining of the will and a sharpening of the sympathy, it is possible for the human spirit to catch glimpses into the inner soul of Nature, to feel about him—"nearer to him than breathing, closer than hands and feet"—the august and wonderful presence of that great current of creative activity which is immanent in matter, that larger Life from which his individuality has been born, by which it is guided and sustained, and to which he must look, if anywhere, for its continuance when, after physical death, his spirit "turns again home."

Hence—

" . . . In a season of calm weather,
Though inland far we be,
Our souls have sight of that immortal sea
Which brought us hither ;
Can in a moment travel thither—
And see the children sport upon the shore,
And hear the mighty waters rolling evermore."

EDWIN M. STANDING.