

Philosophy and the New Left

Part 2 of 5

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Let us now turn to the particular position defined by Henri Bergson. Preliminary to the consideration of his contribution to thought, I would like to make a statement concerning my own perception of him. In the year that I was at Harvard University, he visited the college. He gave, first, a lecture in French on the subject of *philosophie du changement*, or the philosophy of change. This I could not understand since I was not acquainted with the French language. But afterwards, he met with the philosophic faculty and the graduate students in the Harvard Graduate School of Philosophy, and there the discussion was carried out in English. Now, my impression of the man was of a person of high polish; he was well groomed and had the manners of a gentleman. He was a good master of the English language and a dialectician of parts. The spirit was that of polish, not of inarticulateness and of a general let down of presence and costuming, which is so characteristic of the New Left today. One might be inclined to say that Henri Bergson formulated a theory of Vitalism, but was not in his own person a Bergsonian. And this brings up a point that has pertinence in a more general way.

Every one of the Pragmatists that I have known, either personally or through their writings, was very competent intellectually; were preeminently men of parts and essentially gentlemen; that they were not persons that would outrage the milieu, and, thus, very unlike the New Left in its present manifestation both on and off the campus. These men were in their own identity, in their own being, products of the milieu, of that which had gone before, but in their thought formulated a position that could lead to changes and could make the milieu different from what it was. Is that change to something better, as we see its present manifestation, or would these men be outraged if they could glimpse what has come forth from their thought, just as Spengler was outraged when he saw the Nazi development under Hitler as an expression of the thought he had given to us in his *Decline of the West*? This is something to think about, and it also gives one pause, for though one thinks and produces with the intention of bringing about a good in the world, yet it may so happen that that which he actually achieves in the transformations that can take place in life, that he has brought forth, actually, an evil. Was, for instance, the murderous Stalin that which Karl Marx had envisaged or would he turn in his grave if he knew what his theory became in practice. Yes, indeed, it makes one pause. We have seen how the movement started by Christ produced, among other things, witch persecution and the Spanish Inquisition. There seems to be a perverseness in Nature so that the effort to produce good has to face that which would turn it into a force of darkness.

But coming now to the thought of Bergson, I would like to read out of Ralph Barton Perry's book a certain introductory paragraph or two. This is in the chapter called "Immediatism *versus* Intellectualism."

The pragmatist theory of knowledge, in the limited sense, is an analysis and description of the concrete process of intellection or reflective thought. It is an account of *mediate* knowledge, or knowledge *about*—of that knowledge in which ideas *of* things are entertained, believed, or verified. Pragmatism finds intellection to be essentially a practical process, or operation. But in the course of his exposition, the pragmatist is perpetually attacking what he calls ‘intellectualism;’ by which he means the uncritical use of the intellect. The pragmatist describes the intellect, and because he understands it, he can discount it; the “intellectualist,” on the other hand, reposes a blind confidence in it. The pragmatist sees *around* the intellect, and construes reality in terms of its process and circumstances; while the horizon of the intellectualist is bounded by the intellect, and he can only use it and construe reality in terms of the results. Whereas the pragmatist vitalizes the intellect, his opponent intellectualizes life.

It is the old issue between the intellectualistic and [the] voluntaristic views of the soul, revived in a new form; and it appears at first as though it were merely a question as to which of the two parties shall have the last word. The intellectualist asserts that the will is a case of knowledge; it is what you know it to be; it must be identified with your idea or definition of it. The voluntarist or pragmatist, on the other hand, protests that knowing—the having of ideas or the framing of definitions, is a case of willing. And we seem to be launched upon an infinite series of rejoinders.¹

I would call your attention, here, to something I regard of particular importance, namely, the similarity between Vitalism and Voluntarism; they both ultimately arrive at the same moral dilemma. Vitalism may be, I think, identified with Schopenhauer’s autonomous will-to-live. Now, the dilemma is this: that whenever the action of life or the will produces some result, and we face the question of evaluation of that result, there is no modulus save that of sheer success. Whatever the will or the life effects and can successfully maintain is justified for that reason; there is no higher tribunal to judge it. This was the dilemma that was apparent to Jacob Boehme, the great German mystic whose primary orientation was to the will; but he saw this difficulty and in trying to meet it, Brunton has pointed out that Jacob Boehme, at such times, talked very much like a rationalist. Since Hitler was the natural expression of the vitalistic or voluntaristic point of view, the only criterion from either the vitalistic or the voluntaristic point of view by which he could be judged, was his success or failure. If he had successfully established the empire he had in mind, then he would have been historically justified. And from the standpoint of the will or of life, no counter-judgment was possible. Only from the standpoint of a rational or a spiritual criterion, which stood above life or will, could there be any possibility of a judgment that it was wrong, even though successful. Failure is the only possible condemnation that life or the will recognizes; success is absolute approval.

¹ Ralph Barton Perry, *Present Philosophical Tendencies* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1912), 222.

Let me draw your attention now to the consideration of two quotations from Bergson. Speaking of the intellect, he says, quoting:

Created by life, in definite circumstances, to act on definite things, how can it embrace life, of which it is only an emanation or an aspect? Deposited by the evolutionary movement in the course of its way, how can it be applied to the evolutionary movement itself?²

I would like, at this time, to direct your attention to the conception that the fact that the intellect, as here conceived, is viewed as something produced out of life, and therefore only a partial aspect of life, it, therefore, cannot comprehend life, since the part cannot comprehend the whole. In this connection, I would draw your attention to a certain principle that is true of the logic of the infinite, as it has been developed in the mathematics of Dedekind and Cantor. It is there pointed out, very clearly, that the logic of finite aggregates, where a proper part, manifestly, cannot be equal to the whole, no longer applies in the case of infinite aggregates. And I now can use the figure which I have used before: consider the natural number system from one to infinity and put that down as a series, and then take from that system a selection of a part, namely, all of the even numbers considered as in the relationship to the original series as being 2 times each one of the elements. Thus, corresponding to 1 there would be 2; to 2 there would be 4; to 3 there would be 6; to 4 there would be 8; and so on. There would be as many parts, as many elements, in the second series as there was in the first series because a reciprocal one-to-one relationship was set up between the two sets of elements, and that is proof of equal cardinality. Secondly, every element in the second series is to be found in the first; but in the first, there's an infinite number of elements not to be found in the second, namely, all the odd numbers. Therefore, the second series is a proper part of the first series. Now, let the relationship, which we call the reciprocal one-to-one correspondence, be thought of as the cognitive function; then the second series, though only a proper part, could cognize the whole of the first series. It does not logically follow, therefore, that a part cannot know the whole.

Let us direct our attention to the second sentence of the above quotation from Bergson as follows: "Deposited by the evolutionary movement in the course of its way, how can it [the intellect] be applied to the evolutionary movement itself?" This introduces the conception of evolution which originally, as is well known, was introduced by Charles Darwin for the interpretation of the biological facts he had observed so carefully. The conception, as it left his hands, was extended later to the notion of a cosmic evolution involving galaxies, stars, planets, and other bodies in the heavens; ultimately reaching to the development of conditions on our earth until the moment is reached where life emerges; and then, developing from earliest forms, which at first appear as uni-cellular, through colonial forms, vegetable, and animal, and ultimately reaching to man. The general tendency of Western interpretation is of a blind process—something that just simply happens of itself, almost mechanically. The assumption is generally made that that which we call higher, the latest to emerge, comes out of the lower base. And in the thinking of Bergson, we have the assumption that that which

² Ibid., 223.

emerges cannot comprehend the root from which it comes. But let us look back at this conception of evolution. Life is not given in it as the root, but rather matter in an inorganic form; and, therefore, life is an effect or an emergence out of the inorganic. Therefore, if we apply the principle that Bergson has employed to denigrate the intellect, and apply it consistently, would it not follow that life is only a part of something still more basic, namely, matter; and would it not also follow that, proceeding on the same line of argument, that life could not comprehend matter; that we would have to go back to a materialistic philosophy to find our most basic interpretation of all?

But let us look at the total meaning of evolution. The conception that has evolved since the time of Darwin is not the only conception of evolution that exists. There was a great thinker, whose name I forget, who had, in those early pre-Socratic days, a conception of evolution. But let us look at certain other conceptions that are current in the present time. I refer to the conceptions given in Theosophical literature and in the writings of Sri Aurobindo, which in their broad outlines are in agreement. Evolution is there not conceived as something simply emerging blindly out of a material base, but rather is preceded by an *involution* from the most exalted into the most humble, in which that most exalted is *involved*, in other words, hidden. And then the evolutionary process is a process of unfolding, exfoliating. The first to appear, that which seems to the superficial vision as the base, namely, matter, is actually the last thing that has been projected, the lowest term; then out of that, by exfoliation, comes life, mind in its many gradations, ultimately up to that which transcends mind. I might take here the picture of Sri Aurobindo, and returning to the state of the emerged Life; then emerges Mind, in several steps, from Vital Mind, to Essential Mind, to Overmind,³ to Illuminated Mind, to fundamental Intuition, to Overmind; and then in the upper hemisphere, as the source of all this, Supermind; and above that, *Satchitananda*. Life and the forces that support, or energies that support the universe are viewed as “Consciousness-Force,” but with the element of consciousness involved, so that the force seems blind and the life seems blind, but, in fact, in the last analysis, is not so. With this conception of evolution the latest to emerge is not, therefore, the most partial, the most inadequate, but rather that which is higher than that from which it emerges. In this case then, mind emerging from life would be viewed as the emergence of a more comprehensive principle than life itself.

This is just a brief sketch to show that the bare conception of evolution does not of itself support the thesis of Bergson; it depends upon how evolution is conceived. In the

³ Wolff apparently meant to say “Higher Mind” here. See the audio recording “Perception, Conception, and Introception,” part 2, for further clarification:

Now, another schema that I have found useful is that employed by Sri Aurobindo. He classifies this way—that there is an entity which has three instruments. These three instruments are Mind, Life, and Body, in descending order. These three instruments have two phases or aspects—the gross phase, that which is, functions in the external world, and a subtle phase known as the subtle world, the subtle vital, and the subtle mental. Then in addition to the correlation of mind with matter and with life and on its own intellectual plane, he classifies certain steps in mind above the head, as he calls it. These are Higher Mind, Illuminated Mind, Intuition in its own proper sense, Overmind, and then, in the upper hemisphere, Supermind, which is not regarded as truly mental but from which the mental organs or instruments are derived and is defined as the activist principle of *Sachchidananda*.

conception I have just slightly developed, there is a governing principle of a kind of intelligence operating in the process, not what we mean by conceptual intelligence, the intellectual form of it. In fact, nature without the guidance of this intelligence produces failures, monsters. The heading of the second chapter of the second volume of *The Secret Doctrine* is “Nature Unaided Fails.”

I shall consider the more important quotation, the one that is most critical to the whole discussion from Bergson, by dealing with it in the context of Perry’s book. This is as follows:

The real question is this: Is there a *special variety* of knowledge, namely mediate or reflective knowledge, the nature of which as a process can be apprehended only by another more general variety of knowledge, namely immediate knowledge? In these terms it is possible to distinguish two theoretical opponents and adjudicate their quarrel. The pragmatist, on the one hand, finds that reflective thought needs to be supplemented by some variety of non-reflective experience. Reflective thought, for example, implies sensible facts, which are simply sensed, and no more. Or, reflective thought itself is a process, which as such is directly felt. Again, certain things, such as time, cannot in their native character be grasped by thought at all, but must be apprehended by instinct. The intellectualist, on the other hand, insists that all things must be identified with what we know of them, and that there is but one way to know, namely, by reflective thought. In short, *the real support of the pragmatist polemic against intellectualism is insistence on a non-intellectual variety of knowledge*, which is more fundamental and more comprehensive than intellection; which affords, as James expresses it, real “insight” as distinguished from the superficiality and abstraction of intellection.

Pragmatists offer different versions of this non-intellectual or non-reflective experience. With Bergson it is “the fringe of vague intuition that surrounds our distinct—that is, intellectual—representation.” If he hesitates to call it knowledge, it is only because it has more rather than less of cognitive value than knowledge in the usual sense. “The feeling we have of our evolution and of the evolution of all things in pure duration is there, forming around the intellectual concept properly so-called an indistinct fringe that fades off into darkness.” And intellectualism forgets “that this nucleus has been formed out of the rest by condensation, and that the whole must be used, the fluid as well as and more than the condensed, in order to grasp the inner movement or life. Indeed, if the fringe exists, however delicate and indistinct, it should have more importance for philosophy than the bright nucleus it surrounds. For *it is its presence that enables us to affirm* that the nucleus is a nucleus, that pure intellect is a contraction, by condensation, of a more extensive power.” In short, intellectual knowledge is surrounded and corrected by intuitive or immediate knowledge. The former is defined and assigned limits by the evidence of the latter.

James alone of pragmatist writers is always willing to refer to the non-intellectual experience as a species of knowledge. As he expresses it in his exposition of Bergson, there is “a living or sympathetic acquaintance” with things, distinguished from the knowledge *about* them that “touches only the outer surface of reality.” “The only way in which to apprehend reality’s thickness is either to experience it directly by being a part of reality one’s self, or to evoke it in imagination by sympathetically divining some one else’s inner life.” If you are to really “*know* reality,” you must “dive back into the flux itself,” or “turn your face toward sensation, that fleshbound thing which rationalism has always loaded with abuse.”⁴

At this point let me make perfectly clear that I do not have any basic quarrel with the idea that immediatism, in at least some forms, takes primacy over mediate knowledge. My quarrel is with the idea that this immediatism is merely a function of life. There are other forms of immediatism, with which I am acquainted, that are not functions of life. This is the crux of the matter. That there is an immediatism connected with life, there can be no doubt; all of instinct is such. But, the immediatism that opens the Door to the higher knowledge, namely, that of Fundamental Realization, is of a very different sort. This is the immediatism, and the only immediatism, that answers the ultimate questions—the metaphysical type of questions. It is crowned in that form which I have called “knowledge through identity” and which Aurobindo has called “knowledge *by* identity”—something that is not simply identical with intuition, but rather something more. For, intuition in the strict sense of the word, as used by Dr. Carl G. Jung, is unconscious perception, where something emerges into the consciousness out of the dark depths. In contrast, knowledge through identity is an illuminated state in which the roots are luminous as well as the product of the knowledge.

Bergson’s description of a “fringe” has a basic validity. There is a direct or immediate cognition of the flow, something which we have called the “Current,” something which occupies a place in the depths that are analogous to that of thinking.⁵ But this is something very different indeed from the vital intuition—the intuition associated with the needs of a living organism. The latter includes, in addition to all that we know of instinct, the intuition of the mother who knows what the child needs who is weeping and can express himself in no other way; that is vital. We might include that peculiar geographic sense, of which I have had experience, as belonging to this order of intuition. It is such that one can with assurance, in the night, walk on an overgrown trail without any doubt, and turn off at the right place, knowing that he is right only step by step, and knowing nothing of the experience of the actual trail before. This has been called a geographic sense, a kind of intuition, and since it is related to the gut good of a living organism, it may be called a form of vital intuition. But vital intuition is by no means the same as the inner organ of Fichte, the intellectual intuition of Schelling, the *samadhindriya* of the Hindus; these are higher functions entirely.

⁴ Ibid., 223-225.

⁵ For further elaboration, see the audio recording “Abstract of the Philosophy,” part 14.

To bring the issue out into the clearest possible perspective, I shall quote a paragraph from Sri Aurobindo's chapter "The Methods of Vedantic Knowledge" to be found in his volume *The Life Divine*. The quotation is as follows:

But always mental experience and the concepts of the reason have been held by it [the Vedanta] to be even at their highest a reflection in mental identifications and not the supreme self-existent identity. We have to go beyond the mind and the reason. The reason active in our waking consciousness is only a mediator between the subconscious All that we come from in our evolution upwards and the superconscient All towards which we are impelled by that evolution. The subconscious and the superconscient are two different formulations of the same All. The master-word of the subconscious is Life, the master-word of the superconscient is Light. In the subconscious knowledge or consciousness is involved in action, for action is the essence of Life. In the superconscient action re-enters into Light and no longer contains involved knowledge but is itself contained in a supreme consciousness. Intuitional knowledge is that which is common between them and the foundation of intuitional knowledge is conscious or effective identity between that which knows and that which is known; it is that state of common self-existence in which the knower and the known are one through knowledge. But in the subconscious the intuition manifests itself in the action, in effectivity, and the knowledge or conscious identity is either entirely or more or less concealed in the action. In the superconscient, on the contrary, Light being the law and the principle, the intuition manifests itself in its true nature as knowledge emerging out of conscious identity, and effectivity of action is rather the accompaniment or necessary consequent and no longer masks as the primary fact. Between these two states reason and mind act as intermediaries which enable the being to liberate knowledge out of its imprisonment in the act and prepare it to resume its essential primacy. When the self-awareness in the mind applied, both to content and content, to own-self and other-self, exalts itself into the luminous self-manifest identity, the reason also converts itself into the form of the self-luminous intuitional knowledge. This is the highest possible state of our knowledge when mind fulfills itself in the supramental.⁶

There is a significant footnote here:

I use the word "intuition" for want of a better. In truth, it is a makeshift and inadequate to the connotation demanded of it. The same has to be said of the word "consciousness" and many others which our poverty compels us to extend illegitimately in their significance.⁷

⁶ Aurobindo Ghose, *The Life Divinem* vol. 18 of the *Sri Aurobindo Birth Centennial Library* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Birth Centenary Library, 1970), 65-66.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 66.

On this latter point, I will say that I too, quite independently of Sri Aurobindo and before I even knew of him, felt this problem and ultimately developed the conception of introception to represent it. Introception is immediacy, but not what is usually meant by intuition. It defined itself as the power whereby the light of consciousness turns upon itself toward its Source. I had to study the definition to understand what it meant; therefore I say the conception defined itself rather than that I defined it.