

## Anti-Intellectualism: Bergson and Contemporary Encounters

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The term ‘anti-intellectualism’ is what is sometimes called “polysemic”—it is a term with many meanings. Perhaps best-known is its meaning in the social and political spheres, where it denotes a lack of regard for expertise and rigorous thinking, in favour of non-intellectual forms of authority—whether one’s own, that of one’s community, or that of a leader.<sup>1</sup> The term has related but importantly distinct uses in philosophy. Most generally, it denotes any philosophical view that stands against the over-valuing or over-positing of human intellect, specifically in theorising about human mind and action. But as such over-valuing and over-positing can take various forms, the result is various more specific forms of philosophical anti-intellectualism.

To see this, consider some of the most common philosophical views that currently go by the name ‘intellectualism’:<sup>2</sup>

- the view that all human activity is conceptual activity;<sup>3</sup>
- the view that knowing how to do a thing is simply a matter of knowing facts;<sup>4</sup>
- the view that only truth-related factors (rather than, for example, practical factors or considerations) figure in whether a person has knowledge.<sup>5</sup>

Each of these is thought, by the anti-intellectualists who oppose them, to give undue standing to the intellect. The first is seen as over-positing intellect in human activity in general (in requiring that it always be *conceptual* activity); the second is seen as over-positing an intellectual kind of knowledge (knowledge of *facts*) in understanding distinctively practical knowledge; and the third is seen as over-valuing intellectual factors (in particular, *truth*-related factors) in theorising about what constitutes human knowledge in general.

While the third of these views bears little resemblance to the kind of intellectualism opposed by Henri Bergson in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the continued thriving of the other two would likely have surprised and disappointed his advocates, amongst them William James. James was aware that intellectualism would die only slowly, but he was nonetheless convinced that the “magician” Bergson had inflicted “an irrecoverable death-wound” upon it.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The seminal study of anti-intellectualism in this sense is Richard Hofstadter’s (1963) *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*. More recently, see Motta (2018).

<sup>2</sup> Of course, those who adopt any of these views, and hence the name ‘intellectualist,’ only admit to the descriptive aspect of the views. They do not admit to *over-valuing* or *over-positing* human intellect.

<sup>3</sup> Dreyfus (e.g., 2006 and 2007) is the philosopher best-known for his arguments against this first kind of intellectualism.

<sup>4</sup> This second kind of intellectualism is plausibly a more particular instantiation of the first. The seminal arguments against it are offered by Ryle (1945, 1949). The most influential (recent) arguments for it are offered by Stanley and Williamson (2001).

<sup>5</sup> Stanley (2005) offers the best-known (recent) arguments against this kind of intellectualism. (He is thus an anti-intellectualist in this third sense but an intellectualist in the previous sense.) See also Grimm (2011) on this third sense. If Dewey (1910) is correct, philosophers have often slipped between this and the above senses.

<sup>6</sup> From a letter to Bergson, from James (1920: 291).

Not only does intellectualism still thrive, however, but Bergson has largely been left out of philosophical discussions of it. If one were to list the most influential anti-intellectualists in recent history of philosophy, one might hear the names of Gilbert Ryle, Martin Heidegger, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, but not Bergson, and this despite the latter's direct or indirect influence on each of them.<sup>7</sup> In this chapter, I hope to begin to remedy this situation by reflecting on the central concept of Bergson's anti-intellectualism—namely, intuition—alongside the concept at the centre of much current anti-intellectualism—namely, know-how, or skill.

In doing so, I focus on perhaps the most common objection to both Bergson and contemporary anti-intellectualists: that their anti-intellectualisms are rather forms of *irrationalism*. As James worried in his 1908 Hibbert Lectures, Bergson's critique of intellectualism can seem to encourage a return to a pre-human state of irrationality, to what James refers to there as a "molluscoid state of mind."<sup>8</sup> Bertrand Russell and other influential thinkers of the time took up this view of Bergson and made it stick<sup>9</sup>—and it has not yet been completely shaken off. As we will see, similar arguments have been made against recent anti-intellectualists who invoke non-conceptual skill in their descriptions of human activity. In what follows, I explore this accusation as it relates to Bergson in particular and ask whether the responses of recent anti-intellectualists might be of use to him as well.

I begin in Section 1 with a presentation of Bergsonian intuition. In Section 2, I then discuss the related cases for and against thinking of Bergson's anti-intellectualism as a form of irrationalism. I argue that it is far from whole-heartedly irrationalistic, though it is perhaps more so than Bergson would like to admit. In Section 3, I then discuss the very same accusation as levelled against contemporary anti-intellectualists, and I describe how some have attempted to respond to it. And, lastly, in Section 4, I discuss whether a similar response is available to Bergson. I suggest that even if strictly speaking it is not, there are enough commonalities between Bergson and recent anti-intellectualists to warrant further dialogue in this direction.

### 1. *Bergsonian Intuition*

Bergson's anti-intellectualism manifests most clearly in his demotion of "intellect" and his promotion of what he calls "intuition." It is the latter which Bergson takes to be of most value, both in philosophy and in life in general. In philosophy, he most often touts intuition as a method for doing metaphysics and, after Kant's critique of metaphysics, as perhaps the *only* method for doing metaphysics. He takes Kant to have shown that if metaphysics is possible,

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<sup>7</sup> Merleau-Ponty is the most acknowledging of his intellectual debt to Bergson. Heidegger gives only short shrift to Bergson in *Being and Time*, but, as Sinclair (2020: 256) notes, he had previously heaped praise on Bergson in a private letter to his wife: "I'm learning much from studying Bergson... [P]roblems that often Husserl in present conversation [considers] as amazing novelties have been clearly defined and solved by Bergson 20 years ago" (Heidegger 2008: 71). Ryle only ever mentions Bergson in passing, but Kremer (2017) argues that he would have been well aware of Bergson's project and would have seen his own as in a similar vein.

<sup>8</sup> James (1909: 256)

<sup>9</sup> See Russell (1912; 1946); and see Kremer (2017) for an account of some of the other thinkers (in and outside of philosophy) who held this view of Bergson.

it is so only by means of “vision” and not “dialectic” (CM 164). Intuition, then, is a kind of vision, opposed in some sense to dialectic.<sup>10</sup>

In *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, originally published in 1903, Bergson introduces intuition by way of a distinction between two ways of knowing an object. The first implies “going all around” the object and the second “entering into it” (CM 187).<sup>11</sup> He calls the latter “absolute knowledge” and claims that it is achievable only through exercises of intuition. Knowledge in which we merely move around an object, on the other hand, he calls “relative knowledge” and claims it the only kind attainable by intellect. In later work, he amends this understanding of intellect such that it is capable of its own *kind* of absolute knowledge (namely, knowledge of matter), but he continues to think of intuition as uniquely capable of seeing what is most basic to a thing’s reality: what he chiefly calls “duration,” but describes variously as “consciousness,” “spirit,” “life,” “will,” and “love.”

If there is an idea more central to Bergson’s thinking than intuition, it is duration. And though the idea has no doubt been explained numerous times in this collection, it is worth explaining again. In Bergson’s eyes, duration is *real*, “non-spatialized” time. He thinks that Kant got it right when he connected time to “inner sense,” but that he got it wrong when he went on to think of time on the model of the form of outer sense: that is, space. Time, in Kant’s way of conceiving of it—the intellectual way of conceiving of it, according to Bergson—is a non-continuous but homogeneous medium, understood spatially—it is represented as an infinitely divisible *line*, reaching into the past and proceeding into the future. But real time, duration, according to Bergson, is rather unquantifiable, *lived* time. It is inner, non-spatial sense, continuous but heterogeneous. Unlike the non-continuous, it is indivisible, since the past, present, and future in lived time are not separate but *meld* into one another. And unlike homogeneous time, duration is continuous, heterogeneous *becoming*—not because the future becomes the present becomes the past but, rather, because duration is “change itself” (CM 13; 173).<sup>12</sup>

Bergson holds that duration is most readily graspable in self-consciousness, in seeing ourselves indivisibly and constantly becoming something new (CM 191-192).<sup>13</sup> But he takes duration to exist in other living organisms as well, and even in reality in general. And he thinks we can grasp this duration by a kind of “intellectual sympathy”—“in the etymological sense” of ‘sympathy’<sup>14</sup>—with ourselves and other things. This possibility of intellectual sympathy does not assume that other living and non-living things have intellect but, rather, that they have consciousness, at least of a sort. Duration, Bergson says, “for lack of a better word,” *is*

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<sup>10</sup> I will not discuss the point here, but it is fairly clear that Bergson intends intuition to be *something* like the intellectual intuition which Kant ascribes to God and denies of us. Bergson’s intuition, too, is meant to be in some sense “creative,” and he claims that through it, we might even “lift ourselves up, masters associated to a great Master” (CM: 106). Again, I do not discuss it further, but this can be kept in mind in what follows.

<sup>11</sup> Riquier (2016) offers an especially interesting presentation of the understanding of Bergsonian metaphysics as a recommencement of metaphysics in a Kantian spirit. See also Pearson & Mullarkey (2002).

<sup>12</sup> Notice that this is a reversal of the Platonic (and dominant ancient Greek) understanding of reality, on which the most real is the most unchanging.

<sup>13</sup> This does not mean that the self is *easy* to intuit. Bergson in fact holds that human consciousness is *usually* intellectual and that intuitive consciousness requires the exertion of unnatural effort (see, e.g., CE 282).

<sup>14</sup> CE 183.

consciousness.<sup>15</sup> As Sinclair (2020) has noted, Bergson thus qualifies as a kind of panpsychist, but it is crucial to note that this is no ordinary panpsychism; for him, ‘consciousness’ denotes not a sensory *state* but a *vital process*. And this explains why he sometimes treats “spirit,” “life,” “will,” and “love” as more apt descriptions of it.

The intellectual sympathy by which we grasp absolutely and even coincide with this vital process is intuition. As contrasted with intellect, it is unique in that it enables *unmediated* knowledge of objects. In exercises of mere intellect, as Bergson understands them, we can know objects only mediately—that is, via symbols or concepts—which amounts to treating them as mere kinds, rather than seeing them in their particularity. Bergson expresses this view of intellect in various ways. He says that the intellect in its natural state is “*incapable of anything but Platonizing*...of pouring the whole of possible experience into pre-existing moulds” (CM 233); that conceptual thinking can only “express a thing as a function of something other than itself” (Bergson 1912: 24); that intellect never perceives, only conceives (CE 165); that it revolts against “the absolute originality and unforeseeability of forms” (CE 30); and that its essence is “to shut us up in the circle of the given” (CE 202-203). Intuition, on the other hand, enables us to break out of the circle of the given, by enabling us to grasp the change itself of things: “[i]n order that our consciousness shall coincide with something of its principle, it must detach itself from the *already-made* [i.e., concepts] and attach itself to the *being-made* [i.e., objects themselves and, more specifically, their duration]” (CE 250). Intuition is thus creative, in coinciding with the creative.

It is worth noting, finally, that *as* unmediated by concepts, Bergson holds that the findings of intuition are inexpressible. That is, he holds that the absolute knowledge of a thing which one achieves in an exercise of intuition cannot be put into words, at least not without partial distortion. And this draws Bergson’s anti-intellectualism close to a form of mysticism. It is not, in Bergson as it was for Kant, that we do not have access to things in themselves. We do, at least in a sense. But for Bergson, as for Kant, the reality of things themselves is inexpressible. Thus, intuition can, as Bergson expresses it in his late work, be described as a kind of “mystical experience,” possible but inexpressible.<sup>16</sup> It is direct vision of a thing, unmediated by any concepts, where the thing seen is not a static, spatial object but a creative process.

## 2. *For and Against Irrationalism*

Understanding intuition as mystical experience, as inexpressible, as coincidence with the consciousness or spirit of what is intuited, and as a kind of grasp of an object without recourse to concepts, can each seem to suggest that Bergson’s version of anti-intellectualism, centring on intuition, is indeed a form of irrationalism. If, as the *OED* understands it, irrationalism is

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<sup>15</sup> CE 250.

<sup>16</sup> TS 238. See also Anderson (2015) and Sinclair (2020: 243). The general connection between philosophical anti-intellectualism and mysticism is not often discussed, but the latter is at the root, in one way or another, of various anti-intellectualist philosophies. Ryle’s anti-intellectualism, for instance, was greatly influenced by Wittgenstein’s mysticism (Dougherty 2020), though Ryle himself was an anti-mystic, as his irresolute reading of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* suggests. Heidegger’s anti-intellectualism, on the other hand, was directly influenced by his study of the medieval mystics (McGrath 2006).

any “system of belief or action that disregards or contradicts rational principles,”<sup>17</sup> Bergson’s anti-intellectualism is pretty straightforwardly irrationalistic, at least in part. For in promoting intuition, Bergson is proposing that we do away with the rigidity of our reason and concepts, in favour of a non-rational, non-conceptual mode of thinking and acting.

Yet, as Bergson’s phrase ‘*intellectual sympathy*’ implies, Bergsonian intuition is not simply or completely independent of intellect. Before turning in more detail to the case for irrationalism, then, I first want to address the sense in which intuition is meant to be intellectual and, in doing so, show the limits of accusations of irrationalism against Bergson.

We have seen that in *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, Bergson mostly describes intellect and intuition in stark opposition to one another. Whereas the former merely conceives, the latter perceives; and whereas the former cuts objects up into manageable static bits, the latter keeps them whole in knowing them. If not for the phrase ‘intellectual sympathy,’ we would likely have thought that they are completely unrelated. In *Creative Evolution* (1907), however, Bergson does much more to present intellect and intuition as importantly connected. And he does so, in the first place, by presenting the relation of intellect to *instinct*.

He presents each of intellect and instinct as having arisen because of its practical usefulness to life. Whereas the function of intelligence is to “see the way out of a difficulty in any circumstances whatever,” instinct is “innate knowledge” of a particular object or set of objects (CE 158). And, thus, whereas intelligence is purely formal, being able to adapt to limitless difficulties and circumstances, instinct is all content and no form; it is “moulded on the very form of [its object’s] life” (CE 174) and is “sympathy” with its object (CE 186). In calling intuition “intellectual sympathy,” then, Bergson is in fact expressing that intuition is a kind of *hybrid* of intellect and instinct.

That intuition is a hybrid involving intellect, however, does not mean that intuition involves conceptual thinking or expressibility. It means, first of all, merely that intuition shares *some* qualities with intellect. Bergson says here that by ‘intuition’ he means “instinct that has become disinterested, self-conscious, capable of reflecting upon its object and of enlarging it indefinitely” (CE 186). The first of these features, disinterestedness, is not to be understood as complete apathy but, rather, as interest without practicality or utility in mind; it is “speculative” activity.<sup>18</sup> According to Bergson, neither instinct nor intelligence speculates on its own, so this feature must emerge only *in* intuition. Self-consciousness, on the other hand, and the ability to reflect on objects, are features of intelligence but not of instinct and, so, must be borrowed from the former. To be able to *find* the way out of any difficulty, intellect must be able to reflect, not only on itself but also on other objects, unlike instinct alone which simply either *has* the way out of a difficulty or lacks it.<sup>19</sup> And, finally, when Bergson says that intuition “enlarges its object indefinitely,” he seems to mean both that intuition is not fixed on a single object—a feature borrowed from intellect—and that it can know its object in all its particularity—a feature unique to intuition. Intuition, then, is instinct that has borrowed

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<sup>17</sup> “irrationalism, n.” *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, March 2020. Web. 20 April 2020.

<sup>18</sup> See also, e.g., CE 288 and 348 for this use of ‘disinterested.’

<sup>19</sup> Though the ability to reflect can seem a conceptual ability, Bergson is committed to denying that view.

from intellect its ability to reflect and its limitlessness in terms of the objects to which it can be applied.

Neither of these qualifies intuition as rational; but there are two further connections between intuition and intellect that, in a sense, do. We notice them by noting that, for Bergson, knowledge of objects-in-all-their-particularity is not acquired by a simple *leap* or *bound* from complete unknowing to complete knowing. Rather, we must move toward such knowledge *from* relative knowledge and its concepts—those that we have formed and that others have handed down to us—and we must also *return* to the conceptual after exercises of intuition—and from there test our intuitive findings. As Bergson admits, we cannot sustain intuitive activity for long.<sup>20</sup> We thus enter into objects intuitively from a place of intellect and return afterward to a place of intellect. As we will see, each of these points connects intuition to the intellect in a way that more plausibly constitutes a kind of rationality.

The first point, again, is that we enter into objects intuitively from the standpoint of intellectual activity. Intuitive activity relies on the concepts with which one has found oneself or, within a discipline or activity, with which the practice has found itself. Speaking of philosophy, for instance, Bergson says that, even undertaken intuitively, it is both “collective and progressive” (CE 202). That it is collective means that it is a group effort, relying on public concepts which give the activity structure. So, for instance, just as Bergson’s philosophical insights rely in a sense on Kantian and other concepts that came before, so intuition in general relies on what has come before.<sup>21</sup> Next, that such an activity is progressive means that intuitive findings, though they go beyond the rigid and ready-made concepts that give the activity structure, are understood as successful in the light of those concepts. Intuition can be seen as building on the past, can be deemed a successful extension of past activity, despite itself going beyond what, strictly speaking, was possible for or contained in the past.<sup>22</sup> Looking *from the past*, that is, intuition’s findings can be deemed rational. This first point gives intuition what we could call a “forward-looking” rational respectability. It is respectable understood as a continuation of previous intellectual endeavours.<sup>23</sup>

And Bergson seems to understand intuition as having a “backward-looking” rational respectability as well. For the second of the above points was that we return to the standpoint of intellectual activity after exercises of intuition, and from there assess its success. The findings of intuition, then, can be respectable not only in the light of what came before, but in the light of what follows, by having *re*-placed intellectual limits. Bergson makes this kind of respectability clear by invoking an analogy with the development of genuinely new abilities, such as the ability to swim:

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, already know how to swim. Reasoning, in fact, always

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<sup>20</sup> CE 251

<sup>21</sup> See, in particular, Bergson’s ‘Philosophical Intuition.’

<sup>22</sup> For a much-expanded treatment of this theme in Bergson, see Sinclair (2014).

<sup>23</sup> This echoes a point made by Massey (2014: 171): “The problem with calling Bergson an irrationalist is that it invites the misconception that he considers intuition a substitute for reasoning, when the truth is that he proposes intuition as a means of renewing or revitalizing it.” Intuition is, nonetheless, *at times* a substitute for reasoning.

nails us down to the solid ground. 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... So, in theory, there is a kind of absurdity in trying to know otherwise than by intelligence; but if the risk be frankly accepted, action will perhaps cut the knot that reasoning has tied and will not unloose. (CE 203)

The idea here (perhaps amongst others) is that if we just *try* to exercise intuition (e.g., in engaging in intuitive philosophy), it may be shown to work—just as if the individual in the above example just *tries* to swim, they may find that they can learn. Intuition, in that case, will have found something true; it will have succeeded and, thus, have re-placed the intellectual boundaries. And though there is no guarantee that an exercise of intuition will succeed, when it does, it will be rationally respectable.<sup>24</sup> As Bergson says, though “[r]easoning, reasoning on its own powers, will never succeed in extending them...the extension would not appear at all unreasonable once it were accomplished” (CE 203-204). In returning to our conceptual ways of thinking after an exercise of intuition, we may find that the exercise was successful, even by the standards of intellect. Indeed, Bergson claims that “[d]ialectic must put intuition to the proof...” (CE 251).

We thus seem to have two senses in which intuition can be deemed rationally respectable: a forward-looking sense and a backward-looking sense. Intuition can push previous forms of activity forward, and it can also re-place intellectual limits, as it does when its findings are judged to have been true. Bergsonian intuition, then, though it plays its own non-conceptual game, can contribute to the intellect’s game as well. To a significant extent, then, Bergsonian anti-intellectualism can be defended against claims of irrationalism.

The trouble with stopping here, however, is that if Bergson intends for intuition to be a kind of *vision* of a thing, he may require more than mere forward- and backward-looking rationality. To begin to see this, compare the above defences of the rationality of Bergsonian intuition with a defence of “imagination” and “wish” offered by Kant in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*:

[A] person may desire something in the most lively and persistent way even though he is convinced that he cannot accomplish it or even that it is absolutely impossible...[But] we commonly learn to know our powers only by trying them out. Nature has therefore combined the determination of our power with the representation of the object even prior to knowledge of our capacity, which is often first brought forth precisely by this striving, which initially seemed to the mind itself to be an empty wish. Now wisdom is obliged to set limits for this instinct, but it would never succeed in eradicating it... (CPJ 20:230-231)

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<sup>24</sup> Chief amongst measurements of success of philosophical intuition, in Bergson’s work, is showing the disagreements between the “schools” of philosophy to be based on confusions. Successfully doing so would thus be the main test of intuition. Such a defence of intuition (*viz.*, showing its results to be good ones) in turn makes for a connection between Bergson and Ryle. Ryle held that Wittgenstein’s claim in the *Tractatus* that *it* is nonsense was itself nonsense, because, according to Ryle, the *Tractatus* cleared up confusion, and whatever does that, cannot be nonsense. See Dougherty (2020: 5-6) on this point of Ryle’s.

Commenting on this passage, Jane Kneller says that Kant is depicting “imagination goading reason into a development that rational critique would only stymie”—championing, surprisingly for Kant, a kind of “unrational rationality” (Kneller 2007: 118).

The problem that this makes evident for similar “unrational rationality” defences of Bergsonian intuition is that Bergsonian intuition is not supposed to be mere imagination. It is supposed to be a *seeing*, not a mere *wishing*.<sup>25</sup> Unlike imagination of the above kind, which is responsive merely to our desires, intuition is meant to be responsive to the things themselves of which it is a vision. And that seems to require not merely forward- or backward-looking rationality but, rather, rationality *in* the exercise of intuition itself. The intuition itself needs to be answerable to the things of which it is a vision; but without being in some respect conceptual, it is unclear how it could be so-answerable.<sup>26,27</sup>

Bergson, of course, would have been familiar with this kind of objection. It is an objection at least implicit in Kant’s dictum that intuitions without concepts are blind and is taken further by Hegel who argues that intuition itself must be conceptually structured.<sup>28</sup> The standard interpretation of these claims, which we will discuss more in the next section, is that a seeing can only be a grasp of an object if it risks a mistaken view of the object and, also, that the only way to risk a mistaken view of an object is to conceptualise it. If I do not, for instance, conceptualise an animal at least *as* an animal in seeing it, there is no sense in which my perception could be mistaken, for I do not commit myself to its *being* anything. If Bergsonian intuition is not similarly conceptual, then, it would seem that it may be indistinguishable from mere imagination or wish—the “findings” which have lent it rational credibility, in that case, would themselves be akin to dumb, or simply imaginative, luck.

### 3. *Contemporary Anti-Intellectualism and Irrationalism*

As I noted in the introduction, proponents of one form of contemporary anti-intellectualism hold, like Bergson, that not all human activity is conceptual activity. And while they sometimes present the distinction between the conceptual and the non-conceptual rather crudely—namely, as the claim that all thinking *is* conceptual, while non-thinking activities need not be—more sophisticated versions hold that conceptuality is pervasive neither in thinking nor in

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<sup>25</sup> Bergson says that in intuition “the faculty of *seeing* should become one with the faculty of *willing*...” (CE 250), but intuition is not *merely* the faculty of willing.

<sup>26</sup> It can seem that Bergson’s notion of “fluid concepts” (in contrast to “rigid and ready-made concepts”) can do the required work here, but Bergson seems to think of fluid concepts not as at work *in* intuition but, rather, as the proper *result* of intuition. See, e.g., CM 198 and 224.

<sup>27</sup> One might think, as Morris (2005) argues, that Bergsonian intuition is analogous to Peircean abduction. Abduction is often understood as “inference to the best explanation”, but as Menary (2016) notes, in Peirce it refers also to the (creative) proposal of explanatory hypotheses. The difficulty with this analogy for Bergsonian intuition, however, is that when abduction is *not* pure imagination, it is understood as drawing (*in* the abductive thinking) on an array of other knowledge in generating hypotheses. In that crucial respect, it is unlike intuition.

<sup>28</sup> Hegel’s argument, in fact, can seem aimed directly at Bergson. Much like Bergson, Hegel considers conceptions of cognition as a means of “taking hold” of an object, from the outside as it were, on the one hand, and as an immediate “entering into” the object, on the other. He argues that the latter view, however, leads to absurdity. It leads to the observer trying both to coincide with and take a view of the object in question. See, e.g., Gardner’s (2013) discussion of this point. This is another objection which one might press against Bergson, but it is not precisely the one that I follow up.



human activity more generally. They thus share a descriptive aspect of Bergson's anti-intellectualism: that we are capable of more than conceptual activity. And, further, such anti-intellectualists are also at pains to show, to use Bergson's language, that thinking and acting in a non-conceptual mode can *transcend* intellect. They sometimes call such a non-conceptual mode of activity "intuitive" (e.g., Dreyfus & Dreyfus 1980: 12), but they more often call it "skillful." These anti-intellectualists thus agree with Bergson in an evaluative respect as well: that an alternative to intellect is, in a sense, to be preferred.

A first divergence worth mentioning, however, is that, unlike Bergson, these more recent anti-intellectualists tend not to justify their claims by means of a positive metaphysics. They are, for the most part, quietist about the ultimate nature of reality.<sup>29</sup> When they defend the view that exercising skill is preferable to concept-use, they at most do so on the basis of the claim that reality is *not* at base conceptual or factual—hence, they are similar to Bergson in thinking of reality as ultimately inexpressible but unlike Bergson in that they do not offer anything like the notion of 'duration' to explain what reality *is*.

In Hubert Dreyfus's recent debates with John McDowell, for instance, Dreyfus does not offer a positive metaphysics in support of his anti-intellectualism but, rather, points out that the alternative view simply *assumes* that the world is conceptually structured (Dreyfus 2013: 17).<sup>30</sup> If conceptual mediation is necessary to bridge the gap between mind and world, as McDowell claims, and hence is necessary for acquiring knowledge of the world-side of that gap, the world must itself be conceptually structured. Dreyfus thinks that such a belief is dogmatic and, further, that we have good reason to doubt it. Along with Charles Taylor, he argues that in skillful activity no "space" exists between mind and world that could require mediation. The expert, exercising their skill, *merges* with the entities with which they interact, giving them *unmediated* access to and knowledge of those entities: not "cognitive" knowledge, but know-how, or understanding (Dreyfus & Taylor 2015: 82). Out of the initial metaphysical difference, then, comes another similarity: both speak of intuitive or skillful activity as a kind of merging.

A key form of argument offered for such anti-intellectualism is phenomenological: that in consulting experience, we *find* that we are not deploying concepts or reasoning when we are engaged in skillful activity.<sup>31</sup> We are all experts at various everyday activities, and when we engage in them, we find that we are not employing concepts or reasoning about what we are doing. In hammering, for instance, these anti-intellectualists argue that we generally just hammer and do not have to deploy any concepts or reasons at all. We only do so, they think, when we find that things are not going as they should. Only then do we step back and

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<sup>29</sup> Of course, there is a natural affinity between quietism and mysticism, which starts to lessen the seeming gap.

<sup>30</sup> Another example is Haugeland (2017), who in arguing for his own version of anti-intellectualism (what I below call "irresolute" anti-intellectualism), offers a critique of a metaphysical view which he calls "positivism" (the view that the world is constituted wholly of facts) but does not offer his own positive alternative.

<sup>31</sup> Though Bergson does not seem to offer this particular kind of phenomenological argument, his arguments have been thought to have a close relation to phenomenology. See Kelly (2010) and especially Jacobs & Perri (2010), for in-depth discussions on the relation between phenomenology and Bergsonian intuition. One reason to doubt that Bergson is well-understood as a proto-phenomenologist would be if, for instance, Crowell (2013) is correct that the phenomenologist investigates the "*as*-structure" of experience, which I have mentioned above and discuss more below. For another perspective against assimilating Bergson and phenomenology, see Worms (2010).

conceptualize or reason through the difficulty—only when we are trying to hammer but the hammer is not doing its job, for instance, do we think about what this is in our hand, how it ought to be operating, and how we ought to be operating with it. When things are going well, on the other hand, we just hammer. The concepts are not there; skill supersedes intellect.

A second key argument, which more directly mimics a Bergsonian thought, concerns the rigidity of concepts and the creativity of expert performance. Dreyfus, for instance, argues that if experts *were* mere concept-appliers, reasoners, or rule-followers, then, like novices, they would behave mechanically and would not be able to adapt to genuinely novel situations, or create, do, or see genuinely new things. Since concepts, reasons, and rules are themselves rigid, the expert's thought and activity, if it relied on them, would be as well. The expert would be fitting all their activity into pre-existing moulds, as Bergson would express it, rather than acting truly creatively. Since, on the contrary, skillful performers *do* adapt to genuinely novel situations, *do* create, and *do* act and see genuinely new things, their activity must be non-conceptual.

The aim of such anti-intellectualists, then, at least in broad terms, is similar to Bergson's. Though they are often metaphysically quietist and, as a result, do not propose skill as a method for doing metaphysics, they do understand reality as basically inexpressible, and they understand exercises of skill as a form of non-conceptual activity, in which we merge with reality, in a way that transcends intellectual thought and action.

It is thus unsurprising that they also find themselves subject to the very same accusations of irrationalism as Bergson. Put one way, the accusation is that viewing the expert engaged in their activity as engaging in non-conceptual activity portrays their activity as mindless and their success as dumb luck. And it comes from the same Kantian *cum* Hegelian way of thinking introduced in the previous section. To be intentional at all, the objection goes, experience or activity of whatever kind must be conceptually structured.<sup>32</sup> It must incorporate standards of a sort, ways of going wrong, which it brings to bear in activity and experience. Does the hammerer not stop their hammering when things have gone wrong *because* they see that things have gone wrong? Surely they do; and if they do, the objection goes, they were applying concepts of correctness all along. If, on the other hand, they don't stop for a reason, their stopping is dumb luck, or mere mechanism.<sup>33</sup>

Some anti-intellectualists have remained resolute against this kind of objection and have continued to insist that activity can be both intentional and non-conceptual. When pressed on how the individual engaged in skilful hammering notices that things have gone wrong, for instance, such resolute anti-intellectualists often refer to mechanisms in the brain that alert the hammerer to the mistake, rather than to the hammerer having been engaging in conceptual activity all along.<sup>34</sup> What I will refer to as “irresolute” anti-intellectualists, on the other hand, rather believe that the Kantian *cum* Hegelian objection has teeth, and have thus

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<sup>32</sup> See, e.g., McDowell (1994) and (2013: 41-42) and Pippin (2013).

<sup>33</sup> For a general and fairly comprehensive critique of this version of anti-intellectualism along this and other lines, see McManus (2012: Chapter 4).

<sup>34</sup> See, e.g., Dreyfus (2013: 31). And for a similar but distinct approach to avoiding the conceptual, see Hutto and Myin (2013, esp. Chapter 5). Both understand concepts in an essentially Kantian way, as linguistic or propositional in structure.

aimed to accommodate it, at least in part. In the remainder of the present section, I discuss how they have done so. In Section 5, I then ask whether such a response would be attractive, or even available, to a Bergsonian.

The strategy of irresolute anti-intellectualists, put one way, is to reconceive of the conceptuality of experience and activity.<sup>35</sup> They allow that all properly human activity is conceptual *in a sense*, in that all such activity relies upon the possession of standards brought to bear in experience and activity more generally, but they deny that conceptual activity necessarily has judgemental, factual, or propositional shape. Faced with a birch tree, for instance, the person suitably familiar with birch trees will see it *as* a birch tree, but they will not necessarily judge *that* it is a birch tree, will not have a thought or experience of the shape ‘That is a birch tree.’ They will simply be able to treat the birch tree as a birch tree, and they will be reasonably reliable at telling when they have mis-applied that concept.<sup>36</sup>

Concepts themselves, that is, are embodied, rather than linguistic in shape. They avoid being linguistic in shape because they are most basically brought to bear *as* the exercise of a skill—a skill for telling when a phenomenon accords with the relevant standards—rather than as entities mediating between us and the world. So, for example, if I see something as a birch tree but also see it, at the same time, as broad-leaved (rather than as narrow-leaved, as birch trees are supposed to be), my ability to recognize that one or the other of these seeings must be incorrect is a matter of my exercising a *skill* for telling that they do not (both) accord with the standards for being a birch tree and, thus, that I have likely made a mistake.

In addition to being non-linguistic in shape, such conceptuality is also not a *simple* fitting of experience into pre-existing moulds. All seeing *is* “seeing-as,” on such a view, but we can still, in a sense, see the impossible. If we could not, we would not be able to tell when we have made a mistake. A wide-leaved birch is an impossibility, and our seeing a thing as having both features is having made a mistake, which we aim to correct by looking again and exercising our perceptual skills. On a second look, we may find that we no longer see the tree as wide-leaved, or we may find that we no longer see it as a birch tree. But if the seeming perception of the wide-leaved birch tree persists, it can also spur us to investigate the phenomenon more closely and, eventually, even reconceive of birch trees, discover mutations, or new species of tree, etc. We are spurred to do so when phenomena that can be understood *independently* (‘broad-leaved’ and ‘birch tree,’ for instance) persistently show up *together* but, given our prior commitments, *cannot* show up together. Progress in this direction is largely a matter of imagination, consisting of proposals (though often informed by prior knowledge) aimed at understanding the phenomenon, creating a workable conception of it, with which to see it as what it is.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Some, indeed, drop the language of ‘concepts’ but make the substituted ‘categories’ do the non-judgemental work of concepts. See, e.g., Crowell (2010) on Emil Lask’s anti-intellectualist move of this sort, in connection with the kind of objection I’ve been discussing.

<sup>36</sup> This can alternatively be understood as a way of taking a stand on the rule-following debates found in Wittgenstein (as well as Kant and others). The rules of the activity, on this view, are being followed *in a sense* but *not* in the way that leads to the regresses that Wittgenstein discusses in the *Philosophical Investigations* (1953)—also that Ryle (1945, 1949) discusses in connection with intellectualism. I take it that Ryle’s view is generally of the irresolute kind I am describing, but in expounding it here, I draw mostly on Haugeland (1998), who goes well beyond Ryle.

<sup>37</sup> Unlike intuition, then, this clearly *is* the beginning of an abductive account of intellectual progress. (See n.27 above.)

In spelling out the irresolute anti-intellectualist position, I am not aiming to evaluate it but simply to have spelled it out sufficiently completely to compare it to Bergson's anti-intellectualism—and, more specifically, to ask whether the irresolute anti-intellectualist notion of conceptuality might hold any appeal for a Bergsonian.

#### 4. *Bergsonian Conceptual Intuition?*

We came to discuss irresolute anti-intellectualism in hopes of responding to a charge of irrationalism against Bergson. We saw in Section 2 that given Bergsonian intuition's forward- and backward-looking rationality, only a fairly narrow version of that charge is in fact applicable: that if Bergsonian intuition is non-rational in the sense of being non-conceptual, it is not really a kind of *vision*. Human vision, the thought went, is an act answerable to the things it is a vision of, and yet, without the application of concepts to those things, it is unclear how intuition could be so-answerable. To overcome this worry, could a Bergsonian adopt the conceptuality invoked in irresolute anti-intellectualism?

There are various interesting similarities between irresolute and Bergsonian anti-intellectualism. Nevertheless, it might seem that even if the irresolute anti-intellectualist's notion of conceptuality is accepted by the Bergsonian, such a view will not do for Bergson's main purposes. For, first, in explaining access to objects, irresolute anti-intellectualism makes no mention of "absolute" knowledge of them, and, second, it does not understand such access in terms of coinciding with the objects' "duration" or "consciousness." Thus, even if the type of conceptuality invoked by irresolute anti-intellectualists could be adopted by Bergsonians, the proposal may seem to leave certain central ideas unaccommodated. As we will see, however, there are important similarities even here, which warrant further dialogue.

The kind of conceptuality invoked in irresolute anti-intellectualism should appeal to Bergsonians in at least two respects. First of all, it is a non-discursive form of conceptuality. Unlike the Bergsonian, the irresolute anti-intellectualist allows that the findings of perceptual skills *can* (at least sometimes) be expressed but, also, that they need not be expressible. The skilled individual need not be able to express *how* they are doing what they are doing nor, when the skill is a perceptual skill, *what* is seen in the exercise of the skill. Irresolute anti-intellectualists thus express something similar to Bergson when he says that intuition is vision, not dialectic. Since the connection between skill and expressibility is inessential on such a view, the kind of conceptuality invoked by the irresolute anti-intellectualist, as vision but not dialectic, may appeal to the Bergsonian as well.

Second, in irresolute anti-intellectualism, concepts are not *entities* which mediate between an agent and a reality. Rather, they are *ways* of seeing reality, in the sense of being *abilities* to see certain things, and to see them as possible or impossible. This does constrain action and vision in a sense, but, as we have seen, these constraints are nonetheless compatible with seeing the impossible and, in turn, creating new possibilities. Though Bergson, unlike the irresolute anti-intellectualist, often seems to want *no* constraints on exercises of intuition, he similarly claims that intuition enables us to see and do the impossible and, in turn, to create

new possibilities.<sup>38</sup> In this respect, too, then, the kind of conceptuality invoked in irresolute anti-intellectualism would be amenable to him.

If the Bergsonian is not open to such a notion of conceptuality, then, it may be because of the seemingly more substantial, aforementioned differences between the two: that the irresolute anti-intellectualist makes no mention of absolute knowledge of objects and that they do not understand access to objects in terms of coinciding with their duration or consciousness. These differences can seem to make for an unbridgeable divide, but there are connections even here, which encourage further dialogue concerning the conceptuality of Bergsonian intuition as well.

Taking the problem of absolute knowledge first, where Bergson has ‘absolute knowledge’ (distinguished from relative knowledge), the irresolute anti-intellectualist has ‘understanding’ (distinguished from mere knowledge). Absolute knowledge, we have seen, is knowledge of a thing in coinciding with it, rather than knowing it via symbols or representations. Understanding, we might say, is rapport with a thing such that one sees it in the light of its possibilities and impossibilities. According to the irresolute anti-intellectualist, such rapport accompanies all perception. All seeing is “seeing-as,” as we have seen, and seeing a thing *as* something is seeing it in the light of what is possible and impossible for it—we have seen this above by reference to birch trees. Understanding, then, is the very ability to bring conceptions to bear in experience, perceptual or otherwise, that we have been discussing.

Such understanding is clearly distinct from absolute knowledge as Bergson conceives of it: understanding admits of degrees and it is, in a sense, conceptual. But understanding does intend what Bergson thinks absolute knowledge achieves: the ability to “follow[ ] reality in all its windings” (CM 224) . Consider, for example, what he says concerning absolute knowledge of a fictional character:

[An] author may multiply the traits of his hero’s character, may make him speak and act as much as he pleases, but all this can never be equivalent to the simple and indivisible feeling which I should experience if I were able for an instant to identify myself with the person of the hero himself. Out of that indivisible feeling, as from a spring, all the words, gestures, actions of the man would appear to me to flow naturally. (Bergson 1912: 22)

Rather than a sharp contrast, such a conception of absolute knowledge shows a close coincidence with understanding. Understanding a character, seeing him in terms of what is possible and impossible for him is, ideally at least, for it to be the case that all of his words, gestures, and actions appear to flow naturally from him. To have such rapport is to be surprised by nothing. Absolute knowledge and understanding, at least in this respect, then, are not far apart.

What is further needed to make the divide between them seem bridgeable, however, is that absolute knowledge and understanding be knowledge and understanding, respectively, *of the same things*. We thus return to the notion of duration. In one sense, absolute knowledge is knowledge of an object, just as understanding is; but more specifically, as we have seen,

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<sup>38</sup> For more on Bergson’s view of possibilities and how they can be created, rather than just realized, see ‘The Possible and the Real’ (CM 107-125) and Sinclair (2014) and (2020: 187-191).

absolute knowledge is coincidence with the *duration* of a thing—technically, that is, what is known is the duration of the thing. And in this respect, understanding would seem to be substantially disanalogous to absolute knowledge.

Even this difference, however, belies a deeper similarity. For, properly speaking, the “understanding” of the irresolute anti-intellectualist is not an understanding simply of *objects* either but, more specifically, of their *being*: that in virtue of which they are intelligible *as* what they are. Following Heidegger, that is, irresolute anti-intellectualists make use of “the ontological difference”—the difference between entities and their being—and tie understanding especially to the latter.

This may seem a dead-end for drawing absolute knowledge and understanding together until we remember that the *meaning* of being in *Being and Time* is set up to be what Heidegger calls *temporality*. Not only are the notions of temporality and duration *prima facie* related, but, as many Bergson and Heidegger interpreters have shown, Heidegger’s ‘temporality’ was importantly influenced by Bergson’s ‘duration.’<sup>39</sup> The extent to which they diverge is an ongoing matter of debate, but their *prima facie* relation shows that even in this respect, irresolute anti-intellectualism is rather close to Bergsonian anti-intellectualism. Along with the foregoing, it suggests that Bergson deserves to be a more central figure in the ongoing discussions of anti-intellectualism than he currently is.<sup>40</sup>

#### *Abbreviations*

- CE *Creative Evolution (L’Evolution créatrice, 1907)*, trans. A. Mitchell (London: Macmillan, 1911)  
TS *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion (Les Deux sources de la morale et de la religion, 1932)*, trans. R. Ashley Audra and C. Brereton (New York: Henry Holt, 1935)  
CM *The Creative Mind (La Pensée et le mouvant, 1934)*, trans. M. L. Andison (New York: Philosophical Library, 1946)

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<sup>39</sup> See, e.g., Blattner (1999), Massey (2015), and Sinclair (2020: 256ff.).

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