Bergson and the Development of Sartre's Thought

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to demonstrate the importance of Henri Bergson to the philosophical development of Jean-Paul Sartre's thought. Despite Sartre's early enthusiasm for Bergson's description of consciousness, and the frequent references to Bergson in Sartre's early work, there has been virtually no analysis of the influence of Bergson's thought on Sartre's development. This paper addresses this deficit. The first part of the paper explores Sartre's analysis of the function of the imagination in his two early works on the subject, *The Imagination*, and *The Imaginary*. I argue that many of Sartre's central criticisms of what he calls "the illusion of immanence" can be traced back to Bergson, and that, despite Sartre's rejection of Bergson's account of consciousness, Sartre's account of the imagination is still heavily indebted to Bergson's logic of multiplicities. The second part argues that Sartre's analysis of the imagination leads, in *Being and Nothingness*, to an account of freedom that still bears traces of his early Bergsonism, even if it reverses the direction of Bergson's own analysis of freedom.

Keywords

Introduction

It has often been noted that Sartre borrows heavily from previous philosophers, particularly from members of the phenomenological tradition. In this regard, *Being and Nothingness* is traditionally seen as a work with a strong Germanic heritage, developing within a nexus of Hegel, Husserl and Heidegger.[1] While

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1   The relation to the phenomenological tradition is almost exclusively taken as the basis for
    both positive and negative assessments of Sartre. Hubert Dreyfus, for instance, writes of

this tradition, and in particular, the method of phenomenology, is rightly seen as a central axis in the development of Sartre's thought, a focus on this phenomenological tradition has obscured the extent to which Sartre's early reading of Bergson influenced his views on consciousness and freedom.[2] The aim of this paper is to remedy this deficiency by drawing out some points of influence of Bergson on the development of Sartre's philosophy. I will begin by highlighting the central characteristics of Bergson's early work, *Time and Free Will*, namely his logic of multiplicities. Having done so, I will focus on Sartre's early

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Sartre that he "started out as a Husserlian . . . then he read Heidegger and was converted to what he thought was Heideggerian existentialism. But as a Husserlian and a Frenchman he felt he had to fix up Heidegger and make him more Cartesian . . . When I visited Heidegger he had *Being and Nothingness* on his desk, in German translation, and I said, 'So you're reading Sartre?' and he responded, 'how can I even begin to read this muck?' (His word was '*Dreck.*') That's pretty strong, but I think accurate." (Dreyfus interviewed in Bryan Magee, *The Great Philosophers: An Introduction to Western Philosophy* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000], 275) Catalano, by contrast, presents a more positive account of Sartre, arguing that Sartre deals more authentically with the contingency of existence, which is covered over by Heidegger in *Being and Time* (Joseph Catalano, *A Commentary on Jean-Paul Sartre's 'Being and Nothingness'* [London: University of Chicago Press, 1974], 100–101). In both cases, however, it is in relation to the phenomenologists, and primarily Heidegger, that Sartre is judged. Bergson receives no mention in recent commentaries such as Joseph Catalano, *Reading Sartre*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), Anthony Hatzimoysis, *The Philosophy of Sartre* (London: Routledge, 2010), or Jonathan Webber, *The Existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre*, London: Routledge, 2009), and is only mentioned in general terms in passing in Catalano's *Commentary on Jean-Paul Sartre's 'Being and Nothingness,'* and Sebastian Gardner's *Sartre's Being and Nothingness: A Reader's Guide* (London: Continuum, 2009). Similarly, Vincent Descombes' *Modern French Philosophy*, trans. L. Scott-Fox and J. M. Harding (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980) recognises the importance of Bergson for the development of French thought in general, but only includes one brief, tangential reference to Bergson in his account of Sartre. While there are some articles that address Sartre's relationship to Bergson, such as Giovanna Gioli, "What Is Transcendental Empiricism? Deleuze and Sartre on Bergson," *Pli—The Warwick Journal of Philosophy*, 18 (2007): 182–203, and Sarah Richmond, 'Sartre and Bergson: a disagreement about nothingness,' *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, 15 (2007), 77–95, these emphasise the differences between Bergson and Sartre.

2   As Sartre notes, it was his reading of Bergson that convinced him to consider the vocation of philosopher: "At sixteen, you see, I wanted to be a novelist. But I had to study philosophy in order to enrol in the École Normale Supérieure. My ambition was to become a professor of literature. Then I came across a book by Henri Bergson in which he describes in a concrete way how time is experienced in one's mind. I recognized the truth of this in myself" (Jean-Paul Sartre, "Playboy Interview: Jean-Paul Sartre: Candid Conversation," in *Playboy: Entertainment for Men*, 12 [1965]: 69–77).

works on the imagination, which is run through with references to Bergson. In these works, Sartre accepts Bergson's line of argument against traditional accounts of the imagination while holding that Bergson himself fails to fully extricate himself from this tradition. I will then argue that Bergson's theory of two multiplicities lies at the heart of Sartre's account of the imagination, and that the implications of this Bergsonian heritage can be found at play in the formulation of his account of freedom provided in *Being and Nothingness*. I will show that this account of freedom operates by inverting the direction of Bergson's account of multiplicities.

Bergson's Theory of Multiplicities

At the heart of Bergson's early account of consciousness is the claim that we suffer from a natural illusion whereby we assimilate what are essentially temporal phenomena to a spatial mode of understanding. In doing so, we misapprehend both the nature of the elements that make up our experience, and the connections between those elements. In order to explain this process of abstraction and translation, Bergson presents the case of counting as a paradigmatic case of this spatialization of experience. Counting involves bringing together a collection of entities, but also bringing them together in a particular way. As Bergson notes, given a collection of entities, we could enumerate the members of a group by taking a register rather than counting them directly. Doing this would allow us to list every person in a room, but it would not give us a total. To arrive at a total, we need to leave to one side the fact that each individual is different from the others and treat each element as identical to one another. To use Bergson's example, "we can count sheep in a flock and say there are fifty, although they are all different from one another and are easily recognised by the shepherd: but the reason is that we agree in that case to neglect their individual differences and to take into account only what they have in common."[3] To turn to the question of how we actually move from the collection of individuals to a summation, Bergson suggests two possibilities. First, we can represent the individuals "side by side in an ideal space,"[4] in which case the operation of counting will be based on our representation of space, or we can instead see the act of counting as grounded in time. In order that we are able to reach a summation in this way, the previous presentations of

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3 Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*, trans. F. L. Pogson (Mineola: Dover, 2001), 76.

4 Ibid., 77.

individuals need to be retained. We do so by representing time as a line upon which each of the different objects (the sheep we count in Bergson's example) are placed at regular intervals. By viewing time as a line, we effectively are able to juxtapose the elements that make up the number, and thus come to a total.

What makes counting possible in this case is a representation of time that is borrowed from space. Seeing time as a line allows us to conceive of time as a container in which the various elements are discrete units, much as we see objects in space as juxtaposed, and separated from one another by being in different positions in a homogeneous medium. What therefore allows us to count is not the succession of moments in time as, for instance, Kant thought was the case, but rather the representation of that succession in a spatial milieu. As Bergson puts it, "when we are adding up units, we are not dealing with these moments themselves, but with the lasting traces which they seem to have left in space on their passage through it."[5]

If we base our understanding of the world on a representation of time that is essentially spatial, we bring to the world a number of characteristics. First, time is here seen as a container for events, just as homogeneous space is a container for objects. Time is that within which moments are juxtaposed. Second, understanding the mind in spatial terms allows us to see mental states as quantifiable—that is, to make sense of concepts such as feeling an increasing sense of joy, for instance. The key feature of talking about the more and the less is that we understand objects in essentially geometrical terms. Essentially, if we see a space, a distance, or an area as greater than another space, distance, or area, we are effectively assuming that the smaller space could be contained within the larger space. The notion of a homogeneous space is key here, as the essentially passive nature of space entails that an object in such a space can change position without altering its nature. Thus, understanding the world in terms of a multiplicity of elements within a homogeneous space allows us to either ideally or physically bring these bodies into relation with one another to compare their magnitude. Third, understanding the world in spatial terms allows us to separate the world into clearly defined elements. These elements are both related to one another, and distinguished from one another by being placed within a homogeneous medium. Such an ability to conceive of elements distinctly is the foundation of the kind of analysis we find in the work of Descartes, and in the *Regulae*, for instance, he claims that "problem[s] should be re-expressed in terms of the real extension of bodies and should be pictured in our imagination entirely by means of bare figures. Thus [they]

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5   Ibid., 79.

will be perceived much more distinctly by our intellect."[6] Once we are able to distinguish parts from one another, we are able to solve problems by breaking them up into distinct components without needing to worry that such a process will change the nature of what is being analysed. Fourth, an analysis in terms of homogeneous material precludes the possibility of genuine novelty. As Bergson notes, insofar as we see a system defined in terms of a collection of discrete elements within a homogeneous milieu, then what appear to be novel states are simply different relations between parts that are in theory perfectly reversible.[7]

Melody and Confused Multiplicities

If we accept Bergson's claim that we typically understand our mental states in spatial terms, borrowing from the structure of the external world, the question naturally arises, if we normally think in terms of a representation of conscious experience, what is conscious experience itself? This question is somewhat problematic to answer, since the same tendency to represent the world in spatial terms is also present within language itself. Nonetheless, Bergson does provide a number of examples of conscious experience. Here, for instance, he provides a clear counterpoint to the representation of counting:

> Whilst I am writing these lines, the hour strikes on a neighbouring clock, but my inattentive ear does not perceive it until several strokes have made themselves heard. Hence I have not counted them; and yet I only have to turn my attention backwards to count up the four strokes which have already sounded and add them to those which I hear. If, then, I question myself on what has just taken place, I perceive that the first four sounds had struck my ear and even affected my consciousness, but that the sensations produced by each one of them, instead of being set side by side, had melted into one another in such a way as to give the whole a peculiar quality, to make a kind of musical phrase out of it. In order, then, to estimate retrospectively the number of strokes sounded, I tried

6 Descartes, René, "Rules for the Direction of the Mind," trans. Dugald Murdoch, in John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff and Dugald Murdoch, eds. *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes, Vol. I*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 7–78, Rule 14.

7 Henri Bergson develops this point in *Creative Evolution*, trans. Arthur Mitchell (New York: Random House, 1944), 11, where he notes that the reversibility of mechanical motions means there is no genuine novelty.

to reconstruct this phrase in thought: my imagination made one stroke, then two, then three, and as long as it did not reach the exact number four, my feeling, when consulted, answered that the total effect was qualitatively different.[8]

Whereas counting involves the juxtaposition of entities within a homogeneous space, the elements we find in our conscious life instead interpenetrate one another. When Bergson starts attending to the sound of the clock, the previous strokes are still present within the sensation of the fourth. Rather than the sensations being distinct entities in a homogeneous space, the first stroke is contained in the perception of the final stroke, and changes its nature. As Bergson notes, this shows that our mental life cannot be mapped out in the same way that physical objects are mapped out. One of our central assumptions about a spatial mode of organisation is that two bodies cannot occupy the same place at the same instant. Here, however, we have an example of just such an interpenetrative structure, where mental states are simply incompatible with the kind of geometrical analysis favoured by Descartes. In order to give a proper account of mental phenomena, therefore, we need to move away from a geometrical conception of the mental.

For a spatial multiplicity, all of the possible divisions we could make in them are already present in them. Dividing numbers does not change their fundamental nature. In the case of the sensation of the clock striking, the quality of the multiplicity, and not just its extension, is governed by the number of elements. Changing the number of elements changes the nature of the multiplicity, as well as the nature of the elements themselves, as each sound retains the impression of the previous striking. An implication of this is that rather than the elements simply being outside of one another as spatial objects are, the elements in a confused multiplicity define one another through their interrelations. As such, the unity of the elements isn't something we simply impose from the outside on such multiplicities, as we might choose a sample at will, but rather is something intrinsic to them. What this tells us is that here we are dealing with a manifold that is constituted in a different manner from the discrete multiplicity we find in the representation of space. Given its interpenetrative nature, Bergson dubs such a manifold a confused multiplicity. While counting might be the best example of a discrete multiplicity, the best example of a confused multiplicity is that of a melody. Here, each of the elements in the melody form an organic unity, rather than simply being juxtaposed with one another. Rather than counting, where previous states are set alongside present

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8   Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, 127.

ones, when we listen to a melody, the notes cannot be understood as distinct from one another, and instead retain the past while opening out onto future notes. As Bergson notes, this lack of distinctness comes to the fore in the fact that it is the melody as a whole that is affected by a mistake in performance, rather than an individual note: "if we interrupt the rhythm by dwelling longer than is right on one note of the tune, it is not its exaggerated length, as length, which will warn us of our mistake, but the qualitative change thereby caused in the whole of the musical phrase."[9] Bergson's claim therefore is that our mental life operates more like a melody than like a spatial multiplicity. Different states meld into one another and form their own unity. They are not unified by simply being in the same abstract space, or differentiated in the same manner.

We thus have in Bergson a logic of two kinds of multiplicity. One form of multiplicity, the discrete multiplicity, is organised in terms of entities that are separated off from one another, and related through the external medium of space. The other is a confused multiplicity where the elements are not distinct from one another, and instead interpenetrate without the need for an external milieu in order to bring them into relation with one another. Bergson claims that our experience of our mental states is of a confused multiplicity, with the spatialization of experience a form of illusion that allows us to bring to bear the kinds of analytic and quantitative categories that are so productively employed in analyzing the external world to our mental lives. The exact relation of these multiplicities changes through Bergson's development, so that, for instance, in *Matter and Memory*, perception is associated with the discrete multiplicity, and memory with the confused multiplicity. In *Creative Evolution*, the two multiplicities are seen as tendencies of a world that is essentially one of becoming.[10] Regardless of these changes, however, Bergson maintains the fundamental distinction between the two kinds of multiplicity.

Sartre's Critique of the Illusion of Immanence

Sartre published two early works on the imagination, translated into English as *The Imagination* and *The Imaginary*. The first of these develops a sustained critical engagement with historical approaches to understanding the imagination,

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9   Ibid., 100–1.

10   Deleuze takes up this insight that one of the central threads running through Bergson's work is the attempt to develop a logic of multiplicities. See Deleuze, Gilles Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 115–118 for a programmatic statement of the importance of this logic.

while the second concentrates on developing Sartre's own positive account of imagining. These two works were originally conceived of as forming two parts of a single work, to be entitled *The Image*,[11] though the original publisher only chose to publish the first part, the second appearing separately later.

At the heart of Bergson's account of our mental life is the claim that we tend to suffer from a natural illusion, through which we fail to recognize a difference in kind between the organisation of our mental lives and that of the external world. I will argue here that Sartre takes up this Bergsonian claim as the basis of his critique of traditional accounts of the imagination. In opening his account of the imagination, Sartre writes that "existence-as-imaged (*l'existence en image*) is a mode of being quite difficult to grasp. Grasping it requires some straining of the mind, but above all it requires us to get rid of our almost unbreakable habit of construing all modes of existence on the model of physical existence."[12] The result of this habit is that we tend to understand the image in the same terms as the perceived object. Both are, in effect, objects we discover within the mind that may or may not relate to the external world. When I close my eyes and bring to mind the image of this piece of white paper that I have just been inspecting, then I am guided by a natural illusion that the image has the same properties as the object itself, and exists like the object itself, albeit perhaps in an inferior manner. This "pure *a priori* theory" that "[makes] a thing out of the image," conflicts with the "data of intuition,"[13] which suggests that there is a difference in kind between the nature of mental processes and objects in the external world. It is in order to resolve this conflict that we develop a new theoretical model of the relation between mental states and their object. We accommodate our intuitions by holding that "the image is a thing, just as much as the thing it is an image of, but by the very fact that it is an image, it receives a sort of metaphysical inferiority in comparison with the thing it represents. In a word, the image is a lesser thing."[14] Thus, what is a difference in kind between multiplicities is accommodated into the classic accounts of the mind by reducing it to a difference in degrees of existence.[15]

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11   Translator's Introduction to Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Imagination*, trans. Kenneth Williford and David Rudrauf (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), xiv.

12   Sartre, *The Imagination*, 5.

13   Ibid., 7.

14   Ibid., 7.

15   Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, 17–21, argues for the centrality of recognising false problems where differences in kind are replaced by differences of degree.

The classic examples of this kind of theoretical model would be those of Hume and Descartes.[16] Sartre's introduction of intentionality into his account of consciousness radically transforms his positive account of the nature of consciousness, but it has not been adequately recognised that Sartre's formulation of his rejection of what he calls the "illusion of immanence"[17] operates entirely within a Bergsonian paradigm of the incommensurability of the two forms of multiplicity. Sartre notes that the illusion of immanence leads to a number of false problems, and we can see here the continuing influence of Bergson in Sartre's account.

First, Sartre notes that once images are understood as passive objects within a spatialized consciousness, we cannot understand their characteristic distinctness from perception. While we intuitively feel a difference in kind between images and perceptions, an immanent understanding of consciousness can only leave as *probable* the difference between them. Hume's criterion for the distinction between impressions and ideas is the relative liveliness of each.[18] Clearly, such a criterion does not provide a definitive way of distinguishing impressions and ideas. "Why doesn't the image of the noise of a cannon blast appear like a weak but real creaking?"[19] We might try following Descartes in giving a more explicit role for judgement in distinguishing perceptions and ideas,[20] but this seems hardly plausible either. As Sartre notes, such an account is once again phenomenologically false, not only because it can once again only give us probable knowledge of the difference between perceptions and ideas, but also because it misrepresents the immediate nature of our recognition of this difference:

> [A]t each instant there arises around us a multitude of little strange incidents, objects that move by themselves (in appearance), that creak and groan, appear or disappear, etc. All these fantastic events are explained upon reflection in the simplest way in the world, but at first pass they

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16   For Sartre's analysis of Descartes and Hume's philosophies of mind, see Sartre *Imagination*, particularly 9–20.

17   Sartre, Jean-Paul, *The Imaginary*, trans. Jonathan Webber (Abingdon: Routledge, 2004), 5.

18   David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (London: Penguin, 1985), 1.1.1.

19   Sartre, *The Imagination*, 84. As Sartre notes, there are instances when we appear to take images for perceptions, such as when we mistake a tree trunk for a man. In these kinds of cases, he claims that what he have is a false interpretation of a real perception, rather than a confusion between a perception and an image.

20   See Sartre, *The Imagination*, 92.

should surprise us. We should be, at least for an instant, tempted to rank them amongst images.[21]

This same criticism is raised by Bergson in *Matter and Memory*, where Bergson argues that while pure perception would take the form of a spatial multiplicity, memory, as a mental operation, has the form of a confused multiplicity. It is only by considering each to have a mode of organisation that differs in kind that we can explain why we suffer no confusion distinguishing a perception from a memory.[22] Thus, Bergson argues that a logic of multiplicities is a precondition for the proper distinction of mental phenomena.

Second, in Sartre's positive account, *the Imaginary*, Sartre reiterates Bergson's critique of the associationist logic of resemblance. Sartre poses this problem by asking how it is that we are able to see a music hall performer, Franconay, give an impersonation of Maurice Chevalier. The question is how this "small, stout brunette" woman can imitate a man. Following Bergson, Sartre notes that supposing it is resemblance that operates in this case to allow us to see in Franconay the figure of Chevalier is problematic, since so few details are shared between the figure of Franconay and that of Chevalier.[23] In describing how one is able to see Chevalier in the performance of Franconay, Sartre explicitly cites with approval Bergson's claim from *Matter and Memory* that resemblance has to be seen as operating prior to the constitution of the entities it brings into relation. The kinds of discrete entities that an associationist account presupposes are thus dependent on a prior confused multiplicity.[24] As

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21   Sartre, *The Imagination*, 96.

22   Bergson formulates the criticism that Sartre takes up as follows: "[The psychologists] will have it that these mixed states, compounded, in unequal proportions, of pure perception and pure memory, are simple . . . The first effect of this error, as we shall see in detail, is to vitiate profoundly the theory of memory; for, if we make recollection merely a weakened perception, we misunderstand the essential difference between the past and the present, we abandon all hope of understanding the phenomena of recognition, and, more generally, the mechanism of the unconscious" (Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, trans. N. M. Paul and W. S. Palmer [New York: Zone Books, 1991], 67–8).

23   Sartre, *The Imaginary*, 27.

24   Bergson's claim in *Matter and Memory* is that once we have separated elements into a series of passive givens, the principle whereby they are related to one another appears to be arbitrary: "why should an image which is, by hypothesis, self sufficient, seek to accrue itself to others either similar or given in contiguity with it?" (165) The difficulty is that once we have reached the level of discretely determined impressions, it is impossible to determine the principles by which they are related to one another, primarily because their self-sufficiency means that they are not internally related to other impressions. For

such, once again, the notion that synthesis *operates on* the objects of the mind is shown to be inadequate. Instead, Sartre follows Bergson in arguing that our mental life cannot be understood as an activity performed on inert elements, but that images themselves must be syntheses. In clearing the grounds for his own account of the imagination, therefore, Sartre takes up Bergson's criticisms of seeing consciousness as an essentially spatial container for inert ideas.

Sartre's Critique of Bergson

In what way, then, does Sartre's analysis here differ from that of Bergson? If we return to *Time and Free Will*, we can note that the original French title is *An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*.[25] That is, Bergson is concerned with the structures within consciousness, even if his account moves away from a spatialized vision of these structures. As such, while Bergson may develop a more sophisticated account of the image, this image is nonetheless understood within what Sartre would call an immanentist context. This leads to a number of criticisms of Bergson. First, while Bergson accuses Hume of only positing a difference in degree between memory and perception, Sartre claims that this is also the case for Bergson. In *Matter and Memory*, Bergson argues that pure perception and pure memory differ in kind in terms of structure, but he then goes on to claim that *de facto*, perception always involves a mixture of perception and memory. Thus, while there is a distinction between memory and perception, it is not one that is present to consciousness itself, since this difference in kind is only one of tendency, and is actualized only in differences of degree. Thus, Bergson fails to avoid his own criticism of Hume.[26]

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this reason, we require an external force, such as the active synthesis of consciousness, to impose a set of relations on them. If this act of relation is external to the elements, and comes after them, then we cannot explain how it is able to operate according to an affinity we find within them. Bergson's solution is to claim that "in fact, we perceive the resemblance before we perceive the individuals which resemble one another; and in an aggregate of contiguous parts, we perceive the whole before the parts." (165) The elements of the discrete multiplicity are therefore an expression of a prior confused multiplicity.

25   See Leonard Lawlor, "Intuition and Duration: an Introduction to Bergson's 'Introduction to Metaphysics,'" in Michael R. Kelly, (ed.) *Bergson and Phenomenology*, (Chippenham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 25–41, on the relationship between intentionality and Bergsonism.

26   We can see here already the radicality of Sartre's commitment to the descriptive methodology of phenomenology in this criticism, which largely rests on the impossibility of making the discrimination *within* consciousness. This rejection of metaphysical explanations

Similarly, Sartre contends that while Bergson is correct to understand images as syntheses, his adherence to an immanent conception of thought leads him to conflate the process and result of synthesis. At points, Bergson considers consciousness as a process of synthesis, the rule whereby images are generated, whereas at other points, he considers consciousness as the result of this process of synthesis. Consciousness is both what relates to the world, and, given Bergson's continuation of the illusion of immanence, also that to which it is itself related.[27] In discussing Bergson's criticism of traditional accounts of resemblance, Sartre is sympathetic to Bergson's approach. He notes, however, that while Bergson provides a synthetic model of images that sees them as prior to the resemblances that relate them, this synthetic model fails to give an account of the agent responsible for this synthesis: "[O]ne seeks in vain, in Bergson, a positive description of the intentionality that constitutes it. Such is indeed the constant ambiguity of Bergsonian dynamism: melodic syntheses— but without a synthetic act; organisations without an organising power."[28]

While rejecting Bergson's analyses of the implications of experience, Sartre's analysis here is more sophisticated than a simple rejection of his thought, at many points maintaining the accounts of experience themselves while holding Bergson to have succumbed to a transcendental illusion. As Sartre notes in the *Transcendence of the Ego*, we do have an awareness of the self much as Bergson described. "The *me* is given as an object."[29] The source of this object, however, is the reflection of consciousness on itself. For Sartre, since consciousness relates to objects, when it relates to itself, it constitutes itself as an object for itself. As such, the ego is a result of synthesis, rather than a cause. While we take consciousness to be an emanation of our ego, Sartre claims that this is an illusion, and in fact, the ego is constituted from our intentional acts.

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will ultimately lead to the development of a fundamentally perspectival ontology. Sartre is somewhat vague on the differences between metaphysics and ontology, but see Catalano's *Commentary on Jean-Paul Sartre's 'Being and Nothingness,'* 228 and Sebastian Gardner's *Sartre's Being and Nothingness*, 200–4, for interpretations of this distinction.

27   Sartre formulates this criticism in the language of Husserl's phenomenology, where noema refers to the object intended towards by an intentional act of consciousness, and noesis refers to that act of consciousness itself. Sartre's claim is that Bergson conflates our acts of introspection and the objects of those acts:

   [H]aving constantly confounded the noema and noesis, he was led to endow the syncretic reality he names *image* now with the value of a noema, now with a noetic value, depending on the needs of his construction (Sartre, *The Imagination*, 48).

28   Sartre, *The Imaginary*, 60.

29   Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Transcendence of the Ego*, trans. Forrest Williams and Robert Kirkpatrick, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1960), 86.

Thus, when we attempt to introspect, we discover an object composed of tendencies, but this is an object transcendent to consciousness, rather than the source of consciousness. Nonetheless, Sartre claims that when we do reflect on our ego structure, it has precisely the structure "that one may find in the famous 'interpenetrative multiplicity' of Bergson."[30] *The Transcendence of the Ego* therefore presents a much more nuanced relationship to Bergson than has been traditionally presented.[31] Sartre ultimately rejects Bergson nonetheless, arguing that while Bergson attempted to escape from the logic of things, even an interpenetrative multiplicity is still too thing-like. Bergsonian consciousness "is clearly in no way an act; it is a thing."[32]

Ultimately for Sartre, the difficulties one finds within the illusion of immanence stem from the failure to recognise the role of intentionality in consciousness. There is the recognition of the need for synthesis, but because of the illusion of immanence, this account of synthesis is understood as the manipulation of essentially inert mental images within the structure of consciousness itself. We take the conditions under which something may be an object for consciousness for characteristics of the matter itself. In doing so, we transform what is essentially an intending relation to the world into a thing. As Sartre puts it, "this affirmation [of the synthetic nature of consciousness] is in a relation of full compliance with the data of reflection. Unfortunately, it draws its origin from *a priori* ideas. It *complies* with the data of inner sense but does not *arise* from it."[33] Echoing a metaphor used by Bergson to show that the unity of life cannot be reconstructed if one begins with a field of discrete, passive elements,[34] Sartre claims that "it follows that the effort of psychologists has been similar to that of mathematicians who want to *recover* the continuum by means of discontinuous elements. They have wanted to *recover* psychic synthesis starting from elements provided by the *a priori* analysis of certain metaphysico-logical concepts."[35]

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30   Sartre, *Transcendence of the Ego*, 85.

31   C.f., for instance, Stephen Priest, *The Subject in Question: Sartre's Critique of Husserl in The Transcendence of the Ego* (London: Routledge, 2000), which despite offering a book length study of the *Transcendence of the Ego*, does not take up any of Sartre's references to Bergson in this work.

32   Sartre, *The Imaginary*, 60.

33   Sartre, *The Imagination*, 143.

34   Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, 36–7.

35   Sartre, *The Imagination*, 143.

Imagination and the Two Kinds of Multiplicity

At the heart of Sartre's move away from Bergson is Husserl's idea that consciousness is an intentional relationship towards an object. Sartre's account of intentionality has an ambivalent relationship to Husserl's account, just as his account of synthesis has an ambivalent relationship to Bergson's notion of consciousness.[36] Sartre's criticisms of previous accounts of the imagination revolve around his claim that "all or almost all have made the confusion…between identity of essence and identity of existence."[37] If we see images as things that consciousness relates to, in the same way that it relates to its sense-data, then there is a natural tendency to claim that images have the same ontological status as perceptions. This mistake arises from the failure to recognize that the imagination is not a faculty of thing-like images contained within consciousness, but rather imagining is a way for consciousness to relate to an absent object. To be able to imagine an object isn't to have an image of that object, but to have a rule by which we can intend towards that object. In effect, therefore, perceiving and imagining an object are not two different objects of the same nature, but rather are two acts of different natures that take the same object. To use Sartre's example, when I turn my head away from this sheet of white paper in front of me and fix my eyes on the grey wallpaper of my office, I can still relate to the paper through my imagination. In doing so, it is the *same* piece of paper that I relate to. "The sheet that appears to me at this moment has an identity of essence with that sheet that I was looking at earlier. And by 'essence' I intend not only the structure but also the very individuality."[38] Rather than seeing consciousness as manipulating representations, we now view consciousness as relating to objects in the world. In making this move, Sartre takes up one of the central insights of Husserl. Nonetheless, this insight is still refracted through the lens of Sartre's earlier Bergsonism.

Sartre gives four characteristics of the image that form the basis of its distinction from perception. The first is that the image is not an inert element to be brought into synthesis, but is itself a mode of synthesis by which the object of synthesis is made present to consciousness. Perception and imagining, as well as conceiving of an object, can all share the same object, even though the manner of synthesis will vary in all of those cases.

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36   In particular, Sartre rejects key aspects of Husserl's account of consciousness in the *Transcendence of the Ego*, such as the transcendental ego, and the *hyle*.

37   Sartre, *The Imagination*, 7.

38   Sartre, *The Imagination*, 4.

Second, while perception and the imagination both relate to objects, the imagination relates to an object as absent. This mode of relation is fundamentally different from perception. In setting out the difference between perception and imagining, Sartre once again draws on Bergson, conceiving the two kinds of synthesis at play as operating in terms of the two multiplicities of *Time and Free Will*. When we intend towards an object of perception, we can note that "the object of perception constantly overflows consciousness."[39] Its essence is given by the infinity of relations it holds to the world around it. A consequence of this is that in perception, "one must learn objects"[40] as they unfold. Sartre argues that the distinguishing feature of perception is that it must be lived, as with Bergson, and Sartre explicitly repeats Bergson's example of lived experience, of needing to live the waiting for the sugar to dissolve in order to make sugar water.[41] In contrast to this, the imagination operates purely in terms of the knowledge I have when I construct an image. If I imagine the Pantheon, and attempt to count the number of pillars, I can only do so if I already know the number in advance. No amount of scrutinizing the mental image will add to my knowledge. In a similar contrast to perception, mental images do not require spatial or temporal context. "The smile of Pierre that I represent to myself at this moment is neither the smile of yesterday evening nor his smile of this morning. It is no longer a case of a concept but of an irreal object that gathers in an invariable synthesis the diverse smiles that endured and disappeared."[42] Finally, whereas perception relates consciousness to the full duration of its object, when we imagine an object, the time of the object "is similar to the spatialized time that [Bergson] describes in *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*."[43] The reason for this is that the imagined object is complete. "I know where I am going and what I want to produce."[44] To this extent, even when the image I produce is one of a movement, it is always viewed from the point of view of its completion. Thus,

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39   Sartre, *The Imaginary*, 10.

40   Ibid., 8.

41   Compare Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, 12: "If I want to mix a glass of sugar and water, I must, willy-nilly, wait until the sugar melts. This little fact is big with meaning. For here the time I have to wait is not that mathematical time which would apply equally well to the entire history of the material world, even if that history were spread out instantaneously in space." and Sartre, *The Imaginary*, 8: "The perception of an object is therefore a phenomenon of an infinity of aspects. What does this signify for us? The necessity of *making a tour* of objects, of waiting, as Bergson says, until the "sugar dissolves."".

42   Sartre, *The Imaginary*, 130.

43   Ibid., 131.

44   Ibid., 132.

imagining is a procedure that, like Bergson's account of our representation of our mental processes, happens in retrospect, and replaces succession with juxtaposition. Here, there is a sharp difference from Bergson, however. Whereas for Bergson, the two multiplicities were tendencies within consciousness, for Sartre, they are two actual modes of consciousness' relationship to its object. This actual difference in kind allows him to explain why we feel an immediate sense of certainty in discriminating images from perceptions. Thus, the difference in kind between two kinds of multiplicity provides the basis for Sartre's account of two kinds of synthetic relationship to the object. The key difference is that whereas for Bergson, multiplicities are synthetic *objects* (in the loosest possible sense), for Sartre, they are synthetic *relations to objects*.

The third characteristic of the imagination is that it "posits its object as a nothingness."[45] Whereas perception relates to an object which is present to us, imagining posits its object as "non-existent, or as absent, or as existing elsewhere; it can also 'neutralize' itself, which is to say not posit its object as existent."[46] In taking nothingness to be a characteristic of imaging, and being to be a characteristic of perception, Sartre sets up a radical dichotomy between the two relations to its object—in a sense, each opens out onto a different world. As such, Sartre notes that when I say that I have an image of Pierre, I do not simply mean that I do not see Pierre, but also that I do not see anything at all. As we shall see once again when we look at Sartre's account of our relationship to the world, at the heart of Sartre's account of how nothingness functions is something very close to Bergson's own understanding of nothingness.

The final characteristic of imagining consciousness is that whereas perception is felt to be something that is passively undertaken, we feel that imaging consciousness carries with it a certain spontaneity. When I imagine a cube, I am free to manipulate it, to change its position instantaneously in a manner of my choosing. When I actually perceive a cube, I must wait upon perception itself to see a different perspective on it.

What we can see from this analysis that even with the rejection of Bergson's theory of consciousness, the distinction at the heart of Bergson's thought between two kinds of multiplicity is central to Sartre's account of the imagination. Bergson provides the difference in kind that allows Sartre to clearly distinguish acts of imagining from acts of perception. In doing so, Sartre follows Bergson in associating discrete multiplicities with a break from nature. The failure to emphasize Bergson's place in Sartre's somewhat technical account of the imagination has led to a failure to see that this Bergsonism still plays a

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45   Ibid., 11.
46   Ibid., 12.

foundational role in the existential phenomenology of Sartre's mature thought. In the next section, I will show how this account of the imagination opens onto Sartre's later philosophy, and how, as a consequence, Bergson's influence can still be felt in *Being and Nothingness*.

The Imaginary and the Constitution of the Situation

While *Being and Nothingness* presents Sartre's existential phenomenology in detail, the outlines of this worldview are already present in his work on the imaginary. As we have seen, the imagination is a faculty that provides rules for relating to absent objects. To see how this might constitute a situation, we can briefly examine one of Sartre's most famous examples, that of Pierre's absence from the café. Sartre gives the following summary of a situation: "I have an appointment with Pierre at four o'clock. I arrive at the cafe a quarter of an hour late. Pierre is always punctual. Will he have waited for me? I look at the room, the patrons, and I say, 'He is not here.'"[47]

As Sartre notes, when we look around the café, the café at first appears as a "fullness of being"—it is filled with numerous sights, sounds and actions. In order to perceive an object, we do not just need the object itself, but we also need a background against which we perceive it. The kind of notion of a sense perception that we find in classical empiricism, a spot of colour, for instance, is problematic for Sartre—for a spot of colour to show up, it needs to distinguish itself from a background that differs from it. When we look around the café for Pierre, then similarly, as our gaze moves from object to object, people and things raise themselves from the ground of the café to become the object of attention, before falling back in to the background of another perception. Eventually, we realize that Pierre is not in the café. Sartre's claim is that we perceive this absence of Pierre concretely against the background of the fullness of the café. When we say "Pierre is not in the café," this absence is manifested to us prior to our actually making the claim that he is not there. This concrete absence is very different from what would happen if we said that "Wellington is not in the café," or that "Andy Warhol is not in the café." In these cases, we would really just be playing with language. We can note a number of implications of this account.

First, it is the failure of the world to meet our expectations that allows nothingness to be introduced into the world, even if this nothingness nonetheless

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47   Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes, (Padstow: Routledge, 1989), 9.

has a real existence. Destruction relies on the existence of unities that we have posited. "It is man who destroys his cities through the agency of earthquakes or directly, who destroys his ships through the agency of cyclones or directly"[48] because without our giving significance to a certain unity of matter as a city or a ship, we would simply have the indifferent alteration of one form of matter to another. Once we posit the significance of the possibility of the destruction (negation) of an object, however, nothingness becomes an objective fact. "Fragility has been impressed upon the very being of this vase, and its destruction would be an irreversible absolute event which I could only verify."[49] As Sartre notes in both the *Imaginary* and *Being and Nothingness*,[50] this relationship between nothingness and expectation coincides with Bergson's own account of nothingness. In *Creative Evolution*, Bergson argues that negation enters into our world only when we find our practical aims thwarted by circumstances:

> The idea of annihilation is therefore not a pure idea; it implies that we regret the past or that we conceive it as regrettable, that we have some reason to linger over it … Suppress all interest, all feeling, and there is nothing left but the reality that flows, together with the knowledge ever renewed that it impresses on us of its present state.[51]

While for Bergson, this introduction of nothingness into the world is illusory, this claim rests on a metaphysics which is broader than experience itself, just as the concepts of pure perception and pure memory for Bergson outstrip what we actually experience. For Sartre, for whom our ontology begins with experience, nothingness in this sense has the same degree of validity as other phenomena we experience, and thus Sartre accords it an objectivity beyond that found in Bergson.

Second, we should note that what Sartre is providing here is a theory of the constitution of a meaningful world, which he calls a situation. The elements and people within the café take on their significance in terms of the absence of Pierre. It is the fact that they are the background for his lack of presence that forms the café into a unity.[52] In this instance, what is constituted is a set

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48   Ibid., 8.

49   Ibid., 8.

50   See Sartre, *The Imaginary*, 187, and *Being and Nothingness*, 11.

51   Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, 320.

52   Later in *Being and Nothingness*, where Sartre discusses his concept of a situation, this reliance of the qualities of things on our projects and expectations becomes more explicit.

of relations between objects. In *Being and Nothingness*, the account of consti-
tution Sartre offers becomes more radical. Not only are the relations between
objects constituted by our introduction of negation into the world, but the
world of objects itself that we relate to is constituted in this manner. In this
sense, our practical engagements structure the situation within which we find
ourselves.

Here we come to perhaps the most significant ethical difference between
Sartre and Bergson. For Bergson too, it is our practical categories that struc-
ture our everyday understanding of the world. We have evolved to translate
and extract from the world those characteristics which are most useful to our
survival. In *Matter and Memory*, Bergson suggests that this constitution of a
situation occurs on the level of the species:

> [I]magine a rudimentary consciousness such as that of an amoeba in
> a drop of water: it will be sensible of the resemblance, and not of the
> difference, in the various organic substances which it can assimilate.
> In short, we can follow from the mineral to the plant, from the plant to
> the simplest conscious beings, from the animal to man, the progress of
> the operation by which things and beings seize from their surroundings
> that which attracts them, that which interests them practically, without
> needing any effort of abstraction, simply because the rest of their sur-
> roundings takes no hold upon them: this similarity of reaction following
> actions superficially different is the germ which the human conscious-
> ness develops into general ideas.[53]

While *Matter and Memory* presents a more sophisticated account of the world
than that of *Time and Free Will*, one of Bergson's key concerns in both texts
is freedom, and his aim in the latter text is to show that our belief that our
mental life is causally determined originates from our belief that our spatial
representation of it adequately captures its nature. When the question of free
will or determinism is posed in spatial terms, it becomes impossible to answer.
That is because the dynamic nature of consciousness is set aside, and we no
longer deal with the *process* of deliberation. As we saw, spatial representation

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For example, Sartre writes that upon encountering a rock, that this rock will only be seen
as either "scalable" or "not scalable" in the light of a projected scaling. "For the simple trav-
eller who passes over this road and whose free project is a pure aesthetic ordering of the
landscape, the crag is not revealed either as scalable or as not-scalable; it is manifested
only as beautiful or ugly" (Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 488).

53   Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, 159–60.

deals with already constituted entities. It is concerned with the trajectory of an already completed movement, and not with the movement itself, and so the process of creation itself remains outside of its remit. In representing our thought processes in spatial terms, we falsify our conception of deliberation. We represent our thought process as a line where decisions are points where the line branches in different directions. We therefore either fall into the kind of mechanistic account of the psyche represented by associationism, or argue that the fact that another path appears possible shows that we are free: "All the difficulty arises from the fact that both parties picture the deliberation under the form of an oscillation in space, while it really consists in a dynamic progress in which the self and its motives, like real living beings, are in a constant state of becoming."[54] Freedom for Bergson has a somewhat Spinozistic edge, as the rejection of external determination in order to reach a state where we act from our own nature. Rather than seeing oneself under the illusion of the spatialization of the self, "to act freely is to recover possession of oneself, and to get back into pure duration."[55]

If freedom for Bergson is a return to understanding the world in terms of a confused multiplicity, for Sartre, freedom is instead fundamentally tied to viewing the world as structured in terms of our practical concerns. Since the basis of our projects is something that is absent from the world, and it is this irreal object that gives meaning to our world, then we have a certain degree of freedom, as different choices of irreal objects are possible. As our projects involve transcending the present, then the meaning of our past and present will be determined by these future projects. "Who shall decide whether that mystic crisis in my fifteenth year 'was' a pure accident of puberty, or, on the contrary, the first sign of a future conversion? I myself, according to whether I decide—at twenty years of age, at thirty years—to be converted."[56] The introduction of the irreal object into the constitution of the world leads to a sharp transformation of a central theme of Bergson's account of constitution. For Bergson the reason why the organism determines the world as a set of discrete entities is to allow us to engage with it practically. By articulating the world as discrete systems, we are able to disregard those aspects of our environment that are indifferent to our form of life. For Bergson, the differences in the way the same object is conceived operate on the level of the species: different forms of life will extract from the world different aspects of interest to it, depending on their practical concerns. Sartre's approach mirrors Bergson's, but

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54   Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, 183.

55   Ibid., 231.

56   Sartre, *Being and Nothingess*, 498.

rather than seeing our situation organized according to the practical concerns of the species, it is organized instead by the practical concerns of the individual's project. Here, we have here a reversal of Bergson's account of freedom. For Bergson, it is in recognizing the value of the deep self that we are truly free. For Sartre, on the contrary, freedom is tied to the power of the imaginary to institute a radical decompression of being, fragmenting the inherent unity of the world into a field of pragmatic and instrumental relations. Just as for Bergson, counting cuts up the object in an arbitrary manner, the imagination for Sartre similarly is able to freely determine the divisions which give sense to a situation, and thus, while my actions may be determined by my situation, my situation itself is open to radical revision. The situation is therefore no longer tied to the species for Sartre, nor even to the individual, but rather to the specific project of the individual, a project that is open to rejection and substitution at any moment. In this respect, for Sartre as well as for Bergson, there is a certain determinism associated with seeing the world from within our practical considerations, but for Sartre, there is a moment of freedom in the recognition that other situations are possible, whereas for Bergson, since situations are tied to the species, it is only by a movement back to a pure, pre-practical self, that freedom is possible.

As such, perhaps the central category of *Being and Nothingness*, the situation, which is both constituted by us but yet is an organization of the given, can be traced back to Bergson's two multiplicities. Following Bergson, it is human beings who introduce negation into the world, and it is also human beings who organize their relations to the world according to their practical concerns. By understanding our practical concerns as operating at the level of the individual, however, rather than the species, what for Bergson is a form of determinism becomes for Sartre a moment of freedom. This origin of the situation in Bergson's thought explains clearly why freedom remains such an ambivalent notion for Sartre. While the discontinuity of the discrete multiplicity allows for a radical restructuring of the world, it still retains for Sartre something of Bergson's sense of practical consciousness as something that is alienated and unable to coincide with being.

Conclusion

While Sartre rejects central aspects of Bergson's philosophy, we can see that throughout his early and middle works, even in his rejection of Bergson, his philosophical development is oriented according to the axes of Bergson's arguments, distinctions, and descriptions. In developing his positive philosophy,

he takes up Bergson's arguments against predecessors, breaking with him only through the introduction of intentionality. Here, Bergson's descriptions of consciousness are preserved, albeit on the understanding that they emerge from a natural illusion that affects introspection. His model of the imagination, which sees it as a synthesis that differs in kind from the synthesis of perception, is explicitly formulated in accordance with Bergson's distinction between two kinds of multiplicities. Similarly, Sartre's account of freedom involves an inversion of Bergson's understanding of the practical and the durational, seeing freedom in the constitution of a situation, rather than the evasion of one.

Recognising these aspects of Sartre's thought allows it to engage with more recent Bergsonians such as Gilles Deleuze. In the *Logic of Sense*, published in 1969, Deleuze calls Sartre's *Transcendence of the Ego* "decisive" in specifying the conditions for a transcendental field that does not rely on a unifying ego, and he ultimately argues that those conditions can only be met by developing an account of the transcendental field structured according Bergson's confused multiplicity.[57] The affinities between Sartre and Deleuze are perhaps even more strongly visible in the latter's collaborations with Guattari. Shortly after Sartre's death, Deleuze gave a brief essay on Sartre to the Sartre scholar, Jeanette Colombel, that makes clear the connections between the situation and Deleuze's own work.[58] Here, Deleuze talks of Sartre inaugurating a third moment in phenomenology (after Hegel and Husserl): a pragmatic phenomenology. He gives the following definition of Sartre's situation:

> The 'situation' is not a concept among others for Sartre, but the pragmatic element that transforms everything, and without which concepts would have neither sense nor structure. A concept has neither structure nor sense until it is put into a situation. The situation is the operation of the concept itself. And the richness and novelty of Sartrean concepts come from this, they are the expressions of situations, at the same time that situations are Assemblages [*Agencements*] of concepts.[59]

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57   Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, trans. M. Lester (London: Athlone, 1990), 98. For more
       on Deleuze's reading of Sartre in the *Logic of Sense*, see Henry Somers-Hall, "Sartre and
       the Virtual," in *Philosophy Today*, 50:5 (2006): 126–132.
58   The piece can be found in Colombel, Jeanette, 'Deleuze-Sartre: pistes', in *Deleuze épars:
       approches et portraits*, André Bernold and Richard Pinhas, eds. (Paris: Hermann Éditeurs,
       2005), 39–47. I am grateful to Raymond van de Wiel for drawing my attention to it.
59   Ibid., 39 (my own translation).

Deleuze's introduction of the term "assemblage" is crucial here, since he is sig-nalling a parallel between Sartre's thought and a central moment in his own later philosophy. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, an assemblage is an emergent unity formed by a collection of heterogeneous bodies. In this sense, it correlates with Sartre's concept of a situation as a synthesis of facticity into a unified field, and both have the pragmatic aim of drawing together and organizing matter in order to give sense to the world and make action possible. More than this shared pragmatism, we find in Deleuze and Guattari the same kind of logic of multiplicities we find with Sartre. *A Thousand Plateaus* is a work of pro-cess philosophy, and we can see the formation of assemblages as the organi-zation of processes into relations between bodies. Just as Sartre develops his own account of the constitutive role of the imagination in terms of the move from a continuous to a discrete multiplicity, Deleuze and Guattari explicitly map this process of the constitution of meaningful systems of bodies from a series of intensive processes onto the Bergsonian categories of continuous and discrete multiplicities, operating in the same direction as Sartre's move from perception to the imagination.[60] This isn't to say there aren't substantial differ-ences between Sartre and Deleuze, notably around the relationship between consciousness and synthesis, but their shared affinities point to the possibility of reading Sartre himself as a corrective to Deleuze and Guattari, as well as the converse. Reincorporating the Bergsonian moment into Sartre's thought allows us to see him as more than simply a bad Heideggerian. Rather, reading him as developing a logic of multiplicities reasserts his place as an important interlocutor with recent continental philosophers, but also, potentially, as an important critic of them as well.

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60   Gilles Deleuze and Guattari, Felix, *A Thousand Plateaus,* trans. Brian Massumi (London: University of Minnesota Press, 1987) is full of references to Bergson. See, for instance, p. 33: "[I]n Bergson there is a distinction between numerical or extended multiplicities and qualitative or durational multiplicities. We are doing approximately the same thing when we distinguish between arborescent multiplicities and rhizomatic multiplicities."