

Is Bergsonian Metaphysics Antithetical to a Positive Understanding of Language?

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Metaphysics, according to Bergson, seeks to grasp an absolute by what he at times calls an effort of imagination and at others an intellectual effort. This effort of imagination or intellectual effort in turn creates the possibility for entering into an intuition.¹ An absolute is counterpoised, to his mind, against a relative, and taken together, absolute and relative knowledge comprise the two branches of knowledge. On the one hand, there is a kind of knowing that, remaining on the outside of the object, collects its data from a certain vantage point in the world. On the other, there is a kind of knowing that enters into the object of its investigation, harmonizes with it, sympathizes with it, and concerns itself only with the vantage point of the thing inside of itself. While the former gains merely relative knowledge, the latter approaches the goal of metaphysics, that is, absolute knowledge.

In turn, Bergson says that the two kinds of knowing instantiate themselves as the projects of positive science and metaphysics (PM, 1396/191). Science seeks to uncover empirical facts, therefore, laying hold of relative knowledge. Conversely, finding that the absolute is the source of all that is relative, metaphysics aspires to lay aside particulars in order to become one with the absolute. Each branch of knowledge, science and metaphysics, has tools suitable for its field of investigation. Science, for instance, selects one particular perspective from which to survey. Then, for the purpose of allowing others to benefit from the results of the investigation, science makes use of symbols to express the pieces of knowledge gathered. However, metaphysics' primary tool for reaching the absolute is, pace Kant, the non-

¹ (PM, 1268/29, 1393/187). Hereafter parenthetical references to Bergson will use the abbreviations to his works found in the keyed Works Cited section of this essay. Reference is always made first to Henri Bergson, *Œuvres*, Édition du Centenaire, texts annotés par André Robinet, Introduction par Henri Gouhier, Paris: presses Universitaires de France, 1959, and then to the translated English editions.

sensible intellectual intuition. In what way, therefore, shall metaphysics express the gleanings of its knowledge? More to the point—is it possible at all for metaphysics to express the unmediated knowledge of the intellectual intuition?

It would appear that if science and metaphysics are indeed different branches of knowledge, with different tools for gaining knowledge in their respective fields, then both branches ought to have different means of expressing this knowledge as well. At the very least, it would seem they do not share the same mode of expression.

The problem faced with here is that Bergson, when the project of metaphysics is under consideration, appears to be antithetical to a positive understanding of language.² Bergson at times associates language with the obstacles the metaphysician must overcome to have an encounter with the absolute: mediation and the habitual patterns of everyday life that require subjects to concentrate on parts of life and spatiality rather than the whole of life and mobility. Speaking about the intuition's ability to avoid the pitfalls of mediation—deformation and uncertainty—he says, “[the intuition] is the direct vision of the mind by the mind, — nothing intervening, no refraction through the prism, one of whose facets is space and another, language” (PM, 1273/35). Yet again, he reasons, “That inner experience of which we speak will nowhere find a strictly appropriate language” (PM, 1288/52). *We speak*, but perhaps it is impossible to speak the intuition without mediating it. Moreover, his genealogy of traditional metaphysics claims to have located the failure of traditional metaphysics ultimately in the common and assumed way of living, which is adopted unwittingly by the many. “Metaphysics,” he suspects, “must have conformed to the habits of language, which in turn are governed by the habits of common sense” (PM, 1256/13-14). So, excising passages from Bergson's corpus, which highlight language's dubious connection with the declension of metaphysics, one could present an argument to the effect that Bergsonian metaphysics rejects language as a suitable philosophical tool.

² For other considerations of the problem of language in Bergson please refer to Kolakowski (1987), Lacey (1993), Lawlor (2003), and Mullarkey (1995).

This essay, however, contends something else altogether. Language as a representational medium, thoughtlessly guided by the habits of commonsense, cannot provide direct admission into the temple of unmediated knowledge. Nonetheless, if one is to have a full view of the Bergsonian project, one must emphasize that his philosophy is foremost about duration, living mobility, and centers its critique of language on the misguided habits of its users, not language itself. Since language is not genetically (from its origin) faulty, and the utilitarian ends of speakers and writers are what hold language in a bind, then this fact alone, if true, opens up the possibility for readjusting the center of gravity. The playing field of day-to-day commerce tilts in such a direction that the thoughts of the unsuspecting are guided toward utilitarian ends. But this should give us hope. If language can be coaxed to support and breath life into one set of ends, then perhaps language can be used to support another set of ends or none at all.

The goal, then, of this essay is to show that a positive Bergsonian account of language is possible. To this end, I introduce my argument in the following stages. First, I elaborate on the problem of communicating in symbols the supposedly immediate knowledge of the intuition. Second, I broach the question of how intellectual effort and the dynamic scheme direct the attention of the individual who was lucky to enough to grab hold of the intuition of the absolute. Since immediate knowledge cannot be mediated, if language is to play a positive role it will have to serve another purpose other than a mediational one. Third, I note Bergson's claim that the metaphysician's task is to point in the way of where others many grab hold of the intuition. This is the first suggestion that language can serve as a pointer or guidepost on the way to the absolute. Fourth, I contend that before the attention can be directed toward the absolute that the attention must be loosened from its attachment with the particular and utilitarian needs of life. In conclusion, I argue that a positive Bergsonian account of language must emphasize that language can be used as a tool to develop an absentminded attitude, which is the first half of the double-movement to the absolute.

Science expresses itself in symbols (PM, 1393/87). To express in symbols—coming from the Greek *συμβολη* meaning to throw together or the juncture of two parts—implies that the

symbol and the symbolized are thrown together in such a way that one comes to represent or stand in for the other. When the symbolized is not present or within purview, its substitute, the symbol, can stand in for it in its absence. Said differently, within the Bergsonian schematic of two types of knowledge, scientific knowledge is always mediated knowledge through the use of symbols. The other person for whom scientific knowledge is expressed does not gain knowledge as such but only the symbolic form of that knowledge.

How is it with metaphysical or intuitive knowledge? Metaphysical knowledge claims to sympathize with, *to feel with*, and to harmonize with, *to piece itself together with*, the object of knowledge (PM, 1396/191). To direct his readers to a correct understanding of what an intuition is Bergson provides a number of different metaphors and otherwise real life examples. He asks us, for instance, to consider “a character whose adventures make up the subject of a novel” (PM, 1394/188). When the novelist portrays a character the novelist goes all around the character describing the character’s actions, mood, and environment. The novelist may even include partial expressions of the character’s thought life. However, no matter what style the novelist adopts, the manner of wording used, the attention paid to word economy, and detail, the caricature developed in the novel will never have the “same value as the simple and indivisible feeling I should experience if I were to coincide for a single moment with the personage himself” (PM, 1394/188). As the novelist constructs the character, each trait attributed to the character gives a new perspective. Moreover, it is Bergson’s claim that description of the character relies upon comparisons of things already known to the reader.

The novel, taken from one purview, is not unlike the knowledge science wishes to express in symbols. Ironically, instead of giving us what is new or novel about the being of the character in the novel, the novelist is forced to dress the character in concepts that do not quite fit the character. Some of the concepts are oversized. Others are too small. At any rate, the novelist draws from a storehouse of readymade concepts that were not made for this particular character, but for a large variety of characters and other things. From reading the words on the page

alone, the reader will not be able to enter into an intuition of the being the character. Only a distilled and fragmented arrangement of pieces from other characters from other times and other places remains. Through the words, the reader sees the character frozen in discrete moments at one time doing this and at another doing that. What falls through the fabric, which is produced from threads of readymade concepts, however fine and costly they may be, is the mobility and the duration of the character from moment to moment. Undeniably, through an effort of imagination, the reader can sympathize with the character on the page, but all this, *from first sight*, really has nothing to do with reading the words on the page. For, it is the imagination that creatively fills in the lacunae not the words themselves. The effort to translate the character's mobility into words misses some pieces along the way. The absolute, the intuition of the character, "is perfect in that it is perfectly what it is" (PM, 1395/189). Being perfectly "what it is," the absolute does not require translation, indeed, cannot be translated into symbols, and consequently the absolute is "inexpressible" (PM, 1395/190).

Given the typical desire to communicate knowledge gained and to utilize it, the situation appears bad for metaphysics. Metaphysics wishes to reach the absolute, which is the inspiration and root for all relative knowledge. Yet, once the absolute is reached it appears that it cannot be expressed via the normal channel of symbols, which at this point includes language. Bergson makes the point that symbols, expression, and representation go out the door when the philosopher concerns herself with metaphysics. He declares, "Metaphysics is therefore the science which claims to dispense with symbols" (PM, 1396/191).

There is something very suspicious about Bergson's project. He says that we must dispense with symbols when *doing* metaphysics. However, philosophers, professors, students, and other folk seem to have little difficulty with finding, checking out, buying, and reading his books. This means that Bergson at some point in his life sat down and wrote *about* philosophy, specifically metaphysics, in symbols. Language utilizes, in some cases, a symbolic means of conveying information. Therefore, Bergson communicated his philosophy in symbols. Nonetheless, he tells us that metaphysics does not use symbols, the consequence of which

is that seemingly Bergson was not doing metaphysics when he wrote about metaphysics. An antipathy between metaphysics and writing is also one between metaphysics and language. It is true that the situation appears bad for metaphysics if we wish to communicate the knowledge gained thereby. In addition, the situation appears worse for language from the Bergsonian perspective if we wish to enter the intuition by means of it, thus making our way to the absolute.

As it stands, either language is essentially worrisome for metaphysics with no foreseeable remedy, or the problem lies with the humans that use language. The former case gives us little hope. In this scenario, no one can tell us how to have an intuition or where to find the absolute. Some people, although subsequently unable to express the intuition, are fortuitous enough to find it, while others sit on the sidelines. If the latter is true, however, the relation between language and intuition is more complex. It is still possible to change our habitual ways of using language thus communicating effectively, however, probably not perfectly. Even more radically still, it might be possible to re-envision language as something other than the expression of our inner being to the external public world.

Let us return to the example of the novelist who intends to capture and to put into words a caricature of the hero of a novel. I elaborate upon this illustration in a way Bergson did not, but which I believe follows in the spirit of Bergson. If the novelist intends to use words to force the unique character of the hero into readymade storehouse concepts what is actually presented is an impoverished generic form of the character. What we get from such an approach is a fragmentary and piecemeal collage any piece of which could be applied to the description of another character in another novel situated in another place and time. Nevertheless, anyone who has read a well written novel realizes that the novel and the act of reading the novel does not conform neatly to what Bergson calls scientific knowledge. It is imaginable to hear a reader say after having read a succinct passage in a good novel, "In reading this novel I thought I was there with the character." Such a reader has an intuition of the character's life, and gets within the story rather than remaining without. Consequently, if the novelist wishes to give us the particular character of *this* novel it is necessary for her

to reject the patchwork approach to description, or at least make it secondary in her work, and adopt another method. What is this other method?

Bergson hints at it in an essay entitled *Intellectual Effort*. Here he is concerned to unravel the essence of intellectual effort, and its two forms: reproduction and production. Discussing intellectual effort—mental work “which cannot be conceived as performed with ease and facility”—as reproduction he cites examples of people who through discipline and training have gained extraordinary powers of recollection (ES, 931/153). One example, taken from William James, is of a preacher who at “twenty it took three or four days to commit an hour-long sermon; after twenty, two days, one day, half a day; and now one slow analytic, very attentive or adhesive reading does it” (ES, 936/159-160; James, i. 668). Bergson wants to know how the preacher recollects the sermon. He hypothesizes that the preacher grabs hold of a single idea, which while preaching the preacher dissolves into images, and the images into words (ES, 936/159).

What evidence is there that the preacher uses a single idea to recreate the sermon? As the preacher matures, less and less time is needed to prepare for the sermons. So, supposing the preacher is attempting to memorize new material on each attempt, either the preacher is able to memorize sermon material verbatim much faster as a mature preacher than as a novice, or the preacher, so to speak, has the key that unlocks the door. This key would be one that provides access to the memory of the sermon without actually being the said memory or a condensation of the memory. The single idea is way of proceeding, a way of chopping up the world into bits, and as such it is the root of all representation and language.

The single idea of the preacher is not unlike the simple feeling that one would have in coinciding with the character of the novel. However, Bergson explains that the single idea is not an impoverishment of all the images. Neither is the single idea the average of all such images taken together. For Bergson, the single idea, the simple feeling, is a dynamic scheme that indicates how we are to reconstruct the images. If the single idea were merely the *meaning*, the mean, of all such images then it would be impossible to reconstitute what was taken away from the images in

their impoverishment. In addition, the meaning of all the images might just as well fit another group of images, therefore not giving us enough information to arrive at a specific series of images. So, while the single image is not itself the images, a condensed version of them, or a medium through which they can pass, it is a function that allows for their reconstruction and division into discrete bits. It is worthy of mention that there are parallels here with Merleau-Ponty's idea of a principle, or origin (Merleau-Ponty).

Most importantly, the scheme of the images, the single idea, is not easily defined (ES, 937/160). Bergson does not provide much in the way of a positive definition for the scheme that helps the preacher coordinate the images and recall his sermon. Rather, his definition, if it is anything, is negative in nature. The scheme, according to Bergson, is *not this*, and *not that*. He is, conversely, concerned to show *how* the scheme functions as opposed to telling *what* it is. The scheme is difficult to define as regards its essence, but Bergson does seem to manage to direct the reader in the way of its modality or how it is.

He gives another example of how the scheme works. This further example of the dynamic scheme involves remembering a name, which has distanced itself from memory for the time being. He says that he forgot a name that was to be included in a paper he was writing. In order to remember the name he "started with the general impression which [he] had of it" (ES, 939/163). Many people have an odd or peculiar sensation when trying to recall a lost word. In such cases, people commonly say, "It (the word) is on the tip of my tongue." There is, moreover, a sense that this general impression is pointing us in a certain direction. The hidden supposition is that if the duration of the impression is prolonged and clung to then we can ride the impression back to its source, the lost word. Just as the sermon-schematic indicated how the preacher was to go on, or proceed, so in this case the general impression indicates how the name is to be recovered. As such, one might say that one has the source of the word without having the word itself. If the impression were merely a fragment of the word, the impression alone would not be enough to reach the word. One would have to gather other impressions. However, the impression is singular and whole in itself. Therefore, it is the source of the division of this word from all others.

In trying to remember a name or a word, Bergson notes that, often, not always, a feeling or mood attaches itself to the memory. When I call to mind the name of my enemy, there is a distastefulness that coats the memory, and when the name of my lover a sweetness (ES, 939/163).

Eventually, Bergson recovered two letters of the sought name. “They presented themselves,” he tells the reader, “especially as indicating a certain *direction of effort* to follow in order to get at the articulation of the name I was trying to think of” (ES, 940/164). Furthermore, the letters had the “appearance of pointing out to [him] a road” (ES, 940/164). Note that the recovered letters provided the necessary direction to get at the lost name. People who are competent in a skill or task often speak about having a sense of direction in doing a task. What do they mean by this? They mean, first, that the task, mental, physical, or spiritual, can be undertaken in an organized as opposed to a confused manner. When I say that I have the directions for a journey to a certain destination it means that I have the possibility of making my way in an orderly and coordinated fashion. There is another element in the dynamic scheme that must be accounted for, effort.

This excursion was introduced by a search for an alternative way of both writing a novel and reading one so that one does not merely get a heap of words and patent phrases from the commonsense collection bin. I said that Bergson’s notion of the intellectual effort would help generate such a method. When one needs to apply intellectual effort in doing a task, according to Bergson, one is not going to be able to do the task easily. So, when Bergson speaks of the direction of effort, he is emphasizing that the mind is focused on a certain issue or certain way of looking at a set of issues. The mind has to be focused in order to perform a task that is intellectually laborious. Likewise, the scope or the frame of reference for a mind that is focused is relatively narrow, whereas as a mind that is unfocused is relatively wide ranging.

One might imagine the various ways of directing the mind as intersecting roads and highways. There are many competing and mutually exclusive directions that the intellect can travel. If one’s thoughts are concerned with gaining wealth and fame, then

this choice will exclude other possibilities. The scheme, therefore, directs the effort of the imagination down one of the various roads of the intellect. What is it like, therefore, when the imagination has little or no direction? “When we let our memory,” he says, “wander at will without effort, images succeed images, all situated on one and the same plane of consciousness” (ES, 940/165). The preacher who does not exert the effort needed to preach in an orderly fashion sees the images of the sermon all scattered about. However, when the required effort is made to direct the imagination in a coordinated manner, the preacher does not start from one plane of consciousness comprehensively containing all the images of the sermon. Rather, the preacher, and anyone else trying to exert intellectual effort, starts from a higher plane of consciousness, proceeds successively through the other planes of consciousness, and draws upon the images as necessary, instead of allowing the images to force themselves upon the memory in a compulsory fashion.

According to such an understanding, the imagination directs itself along two axes, the horizontal, and the vertical. “In the first case, [the horizontal,]” he continues, “the images are homogeneous among themselves, but the objects represented by the images are different; in the second, [the vertical,] there is but one identical object throughout all stages of the operation, but it is represented differently” (ES, 940/165). It is easy to travel the horizontal road where all the representations appear similar, while it is fairly difficult to grasp hold of the one identical object, the intuition, the single idea, which presents itself in a myriad of incarnations. The single idea can present itself in multiple forms because it is not truly any one of the forms, but the principle by which they are cut up and arranged.

However, most of us manage to travel the vertical road at least for small periods of duration. If we did not manage to do so the imagination would be in chaos and in a state rather like the one of the sleeper who waking is suspended in the liminal place between this world and that in the twilight hours. During those brief waking moments images are flung together in such a way that the person who once asleep now fully awake cannot make sense of the waking thoughts because her mind is attuned and directed to the needs of life. The liminal place between any two lucid

moments, although Bergson does not label it as such, is a critical piece of the puzzle we are putting together, that is, a positive Bergsonian account of language.

In short, to follow the intuition we need to pay attention to the single idea. We are already paying attention, not to the single idea, but to particularities produced by the single idea. We need to twist free from this common everyday manner of paying attention that is directed to utility as its end. In twisting free from this utilitarian attention, the metaphysician is left hovering. But, this moment of hovering after having recoiled from everyday habits is only a doorway, an entrance, into another way of paying attention, of perceiving, which is done for its own sake.

Thus, he argues, if the imagination can be directed it can also be redirected. The habitual “arrangement [of the imagination],” he says, “does not force itself upon us irresistibly; it comes from ourselves; what we have done we can undo; and we enter then into contact with reality” (PM, 1270/31). That is, as in a journey, if it is found that one has gotten off the trail or the path one can also change direction, redirect oneself, and get back on course. But first we need to loosen the ropes that bind us to an habitual way of thinking.

Note that in Bergsonian metaphysics one starts from the intuition and descends downward toward the representations and the images. The process does not work the other way around. This consideration occludes the possibility of starting from a particular representation and paddling up stream in order to have a direct and whole vision of the intuition. The metaphysician does not start with representations she ends with them. Among the various forms of representation, there is the one under scrutiny here, language. Through an effort of imagination, the metaphysician enters the intuition and then works her way down the chain to language as a form of representation. Language *as* representation, since it only gives bits and pieces of reality instead of the whole, will not lead us to the absolute or the intuition of the inner life. Just as impossible is the idea that once the intuition has been accessed that it can be translated. The intuition of my inner life cannot be put into words, that is, represented by concepts and introduced by images. “But,” Bergson argues, “neither is it necessary for me to try to express it” (PM, 1399/195). His

argument: We cannot put the intuition into words, but it is not put upon us to do so either.

What then is the philosopher's and the metaphysician's task? That is, what is the philosopher to do with the object of all her aspirations, the intuition of the absolute, singular and simple, neither attainable by language as partial expression nor expressible? "In this regard," he contends, "the philosopher's sole aim should be to start up a certain effort which utilitarian habits of mind of everyday life tend, in most people, to discourage" (PM, 1399/195). Here is an answer to a question posed earlier. He admits that the absolute is unspeakable, yet he writes. He does not speak the absolute, which he resolves to enter into, yet he speaks. Does this constitute a difficulty for Bergson? Absolutely not. His aim is not to write what cannot be written or to speak what cannot be spoken. He has assigned himself as a philosopher the humble task of pointing in the direction of the intuition. Therefore, if language can have a positive role in Bergsonian metaphysics, language in this respect will serve as a guidepost that points in the direction of the absolute. Language, in part, makes such pointing possible.

When Bergson says in the passage just cited he wishes to "start up a certain effort" I do not believe he means, in this particular case, to start up this effort in his own person, but in other persons. Why would he want to start up an effort to gain an intuition, of his inner life, which he already has? Rather, he wishes to start up the effort, the resolve that makes it possible to direct and redirect one's imagination and attention, in others, thus empowering them with the ability to give the intuition to themselves. Not unlike the scheme of the preacher, which directs him along the road of images, the philosopher becomes a guidepost for others either who are seeking the intuition or who loll to sleep by the utility of everyday life need to travel a higher road.

I want to suggest that language used in a certain way can serve a similar function as the preacher's scheme, the general impression that leads to the remembrance of the name, and the philosopher as a guidepost and way maker for others. All three point, guide, lead, and direct the intellectual effort to and upon the road to having the intuition of the inner self. There is, however, a peculiar feature to this road. It is a leap and not a passage through

(Lawlor, 73; 77-79). The traveler does not pass through language, or any other medium to obtain the prize, the absolute, the direct vision of unmediated knowledge. If she did, then the prize would cease to be the absolute, since the prize would be mediated through *this* or *that*. Consequently, either the intuition of the inner life, or duration is obtained immediately or it is not at all. The journey to absolute or immanent knowledge has to be one continuous, unmediated leap to the top; only the descent from absolute knowledge to representational or relative knowledge is disclosed in stages. If language can help the traveler make this most reckless and uncertain of all leaps, then, this help will come in the form of shaking up, stirring up the fleeting effort necessitated by such a feat (PM, 1275/39).

“No image,” he says along these lines, “will replace the intuition of duration, but many different images, taken from quite different orders of things, will be able, through the convergence of their action, to direct the consciousness to the precise point where there is a certain intuition to seize on” (PM, 1399/195). An image as the product of the imagination can be any number of things. In fact, Bergson, in order to escape the problems in which traditional metaphysics snares itself—idealism and realism—when considering the differentiation between subjects and objects, uses the term “image” to denote the midway point between things as completely separate from our perception of them and representation (MM, 169/9). In addition, when the person who has taken hold of the intuition descends back into the world of the relative, the knowledge gained on the mountaintop is scattered successively into images, that is, matter. Keeping this in mind, we can rightly say that natural language is an image or an aggregate of images. By drawing attention to the movement, the action, of natural language, the metaphysician can point others to the intuition.

Language as an aggregate of images does not replace the intuition, nor is it identical to the intuition. He tells us that many different images can converge in such a way as to direct us to the intuition. Therefore, it is possible to use language in a series of variegated ways to direct our attention to or refocus the imagination on the intuition of the absolute. This is exactly what the novelist does. She approaches the character she wishes to give

to the reader from several and different angles. Through this process, she corners the character, triangulates a path to the character, thus enabling the reader to enter the story and the character through the intuition. However, given this, it must be maintained that language neither mediates the intuition, nor represents it to the metaphysician. If anything, it is not language's ability to represent or predicate, but to carry the metaphysician over the slippery slope of representation by means of metaphor. Remember, the goal is unmediated knowledge, and as such requires a leap, and precisely because of this, language as metaphor, is a carrying over, a leaping.

An important element of successfully being able to lead others to the intuition or to the point where others can grab hold of the intuition is the use of images of different sorts together at the same time. Not only does Bergson prescribe this as a way to direct others and ourselves to the intuition, Bergson also employs this method in his writing. If he uses a metaphor to describe the intuition, the intellectual effort, the dynamic scheme or whatever, he uses more than one metaphor, usually three, to lead the intellect in the right direction. He illustrates, for instance, the duration and its movement by providing three metaphors: "the unrolling of a spool," "a spectrum of a thousand shades," and a "small piece of elastic" (PM, 1397-8/192-3). He proceeds to qualify each of the metaphors by stating how each one fails to get at *exactly* what he is trying to say. The metaphors are very different in nature. While one image points in a certain direction, another nudges the intellect slightly off the course it would have taken if only one image was the guide on the journey. The images do not direct the intellect in opposite directions, for they are not merely contradictory. However, through the process of triangulation, each image serves as a corrective for the excesses of its two counterparts.

It is not, however, the images in themselves which guide us to the intuition of the absolute. Rather, the action or the movement of the images is what the gaze should follow in watching the images. Moreover, the movement of one or two of the images is not sufficient alone to guide the metaphysician to the intuition. It is necessary to have several images whose actions do not merely counteract one another, but complement and correct one another. For the purpose of reaching a clearer understanding of Bergson's

notion of converging action I employ a metaphor of my own. In *Matter and Memory*, Bergson uses the notions of reflection and refraction to explain memory, so I will likewise fashion my example from current knowledge about light.

While it is true that all light travels at the same speed, light does travel at different frequencies—that is, the rate at which a number of light waves pass by or hit a point within a given interval. So, red light has a longer wavelength and a slower frequency than green and blue light. Scientists also tell us that at a given point a human can only perceive one particular color. How does one perceive, then, the convergence of two light waves of different frequencies at one point in space? Even in this scenario, a person will perceive one color. Yet, the perceived color is the result of an additive process—a process in which each color changes and is changed by its counterpart, and not merely a combination of the two sources. Given that the three main colors are red, blue, and green, almost any color can be obtained by mixing these three. When all three converge on one spot, the result is white light. If it is considered that white light is the fullness of the visible spectrum, then one can understand white light as an absolute, or at least a metaphor thereof.

If this light metaphor fails to capture what Bergson means by saying that the convergence of the action of the different images directs the consciousness to the intuition, then the problem is that we are too blinded by the substantiality or materiality of the example to truly see the action and mobility in it. We apply all of our attention to visualizing the multicolored lights, without paying due reverence to the movement into place of the lights. Imagine again the colored lights. Each light is an image, which taken alone will not guide us in the right way to the intuition. Each light wanders by itself for a while, then slowly, unforeseeably all three lights converge on one spot allowing something totally new to emerge, white light. It is the movement of the lights, the convergence upon a single point, and their creation and recreation in one another that our intellectual effort needs to struggle with here.

I propose that Bergson's metaphors and the metaphors of the novelist work in a similar fashion to the convergence of the lights or the images of which Bergson speaks. Not one of images

taken alone can represent the intuition for us, and not one of them can point us in the direction of the intuition. Even taken together the sum of the metaphors cannot represent the intuition to us. However, three or more taken together may direct us by the process of triangulation to the intuition. Nonetheless, even this proposal leaves many questions unanswered. First, one must “know” where the absolute is in order to craft finely tuned metaphors that collectively point to the absolute. Second, even in everyday life we are always in some sense intellectually focused. If we were not focused then nothing would get accomplished. In order to type a well written analytical essay one needs to be focused on the syntax of the sentences, the logical order of the thoughts, and the thesis that one is trying to sell to the reader. If while trying to write such an essay, one allows various and sundry thoughts to wander here and there in the mind, then more than likely the view that one is trying to maintain will be obscured. This is not to say that all of life is governed by a focused mentality. Nevertheless, in order to reach specific goals we do have to be focused on this or that.

Here finally is the clue that is needed to distinguish between the attention, the direction of thought, of everyday life and the attention that the intuition of the absolute necessitates. That is, there are two ways of paying attention, as there are two branches of knowledge. Remember Bergson divides knowledge into two spheres: scientific and metaphysical knowledge. Scientific knowledge is relative and as such its focus is particular things, that is, things for which “this” and “that” are appropriate pronouns. Metaphysical knowledge on the other hand grabs hold of the absolute and seeks to know things as they are in themselves. Furthermore, things for which “this” and “that” are appropriate descriptors are normally focused upon as use-objects. However, the only thing with which I know I can sympathize with, that is, have an intuition of, is myself (PM, 1396/191). I do not treat myself as a use-object in everyday life. And, it appears that if I am to pay attention to the absolute, even with the help of language in the form of metaphors, I will first have to become detached from my present mode of paying attention to particular objects. Before I can focus on the absolute, or even focus in the appropriate way on

the metaphors which lead to the absolute, I must unfocus my attention on the particular.

The journey to the absolute involves a double-movement: one must unlock the vise, which holds the attention very tightly to the needs of life and then leap to the top of the mountain to come into contact with the absolute. Note that in the first stage, which Bergson calls the disinterested attitude or detachment, one lays everything aside, and in the second, seeing that one is now free of all particulars, one grasps the absolute. However, one grasps the absolute in order that one may descend again from the absolute, which is scattered in successive stages into images, and images into particulars. In this way, the one who is willing to lose everything to gain the absolute regains that which was lost. After having freely speculated about the stages on the way to the absolute, I return to Bergson's texts to flesh out the nature of this double-movement.

Speculation is not the primary concern of human beings. "Before we speculate," he declares, "we must live, and life demands that we make use of matter, either with our organs, which are natural tools, or with tools properly so-called, which are artificial organs" (PM, 1278/43). We must first live and, make provision to secure the maintenance of life. Only after such considerations are taken care of does one have the freedom to speculate about life. A person can live it seems without speculating, but one cannot speculate if one is not alive, at least insofar as speculation is held to be human activity and humans are thought of as alive. Similarly, he says, "Before philosophizing one must live; and life demands that we put on blinders, that we look neither to the right, nor to the left nor behind us, but straight ahead in the direction we have to go" (PM, 1372/161). Bergson believes the day-to-day demands of life point the imagination and the intellect in a certain direction. In order to pay attention to the particular activity one is doing at the moment, one also has to *not* pay attention to other activities.

Bergson thinks that we have a vast array of virtual knowledge, that is, potential knowledge. From this array or field of knowledge "the brain...actualizes the useful memories" while "it keeps in the lower strata of the consciousness those which are of no use" (PM, 1373/162). Usually people are very attached to

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life. They know what needs to be done in order for life to flow smoothly and effectively. However, Bergson recognizes that there is another kind of person who is not so attached to life; they are absentminded. He says,

But now and then, by a lucky accident, men arise whose senses or whose consciousness are less adherent to life. Nature has forgotten to attach their faculty of perceiving to their faculty of acting. When they look at a thing, they see it for itself, and not for themselves. They do not perceive simply with a view to action; they perceive in order to perceive,—for nothing, for the pleasure of doing so (PM, 1373/162).

In this passage, Bergson describes two characters we have already met: the everyday person whose knowledge production is geared to utility (or the scientist) and the metaphysician. The person who is “born *detached*” or the metaphysician, without the needs of utility to obscure or confine the view, is able to see “a greater number of things” (PM, 1373/162-63). Bergson, therefore, thinks that there is a lucky few in the world who by nature are detached from life and do not need help to become so. The difficulty of such an unqualified ascertain—that a select few are privileged to have a unique vision of reality—is that it leaves many others in the dark. He admits that most people do not come into the world at birth detached. The majority of us are attached to life and feel the rhythms and the needs of life.

He thinks that an elect few have been given the gift of being absentminded, that is, detached from life. Does he also think that those who are attached to life are genetically so? It appears that he does not. He, furthermore, I would argue, does not think that the few who are absentminded from birth are genetically determined to be so. Those who are absentminded from birth can through rigorous socialization learn to be attached, and likewise those who are attached can learn to be detached from life. Remember “the philosopher’s,” and therefore philosophy’s, “sole aim should be to start up a certain effort which utilitarian habits of mind of everyday life tend, in most people, to discourage” (PM, 1399/195). This effort it turns out will in part be characterized by a loosening of the faculties of the mind, so that they can become distracted by various other data. Everyday life is characterized by

tunnel vision. We wear mental blinders that suppress extraneous and superfluous data, because the necessities of action require that the field of vision be limited. Thus, most of our attention is given to negotiating how we will act and react in the practical world.

Philosophy, if anything, should be able to provide us with a “completer perception of reality” (PM, 1373/163). If it is true that the practical viewpoint constrains perception then perhaps the solution is to rid ourselves, at least for a time, of the constraints. Such, Bergson thinks, is the task of philosophy. Speaking along these lines, he muses,

It would be a question of *turning* this attention *aside* from the part of the universe which interests us from a practical viewpoint and *turning it back* toward what serves no practical purpose. This conversion of the attention would be philosophy itself (PM, 1373/163, *his emphasis*).

Eloquently presented, we have here the double-movement that the metaphysician must perform in order to reach the absolute. The double-movement was characterized earlier as detachment from the world of particulars and a reattachment to the world of absolutes. Here it is characterized as a turning away from the everyday constraints of life, and a turning back to life without those constraints. The question, then, becomes: Can language aid the philosopher in performing the double-movement, the turning away from practical ends and a turning back to things without thought about ends?

The path to the absolute has been outlined as a double-movement: detachment from the invested purview of the world, and reattachment to a disinterested one. There is also a habitual attachment to the needs of life and utility that necessitates that the move into the absolute has to be a double-movement. One cannot merely attach oneself to the disinterested attitude. It is necessary, first of all, to become detached from life. But, what about this habitual way of attaching to the needs of life? I suggest habitual attachment to the needs of life and utility is a mode of knowing, as I suggest that all types of attachment are ways of knowing. Attachment to life in a certain way is a knowing-how to proceed in the light of having certain ends in view. Because I have X as my end, then Y appears to be the appropriate action. This “X therefore

Y” understanding is perhaps a perceptual knowledge. It is equally true, and most important, therefore, that turning away or detaching is a mode of forgetting. Attachment is a way of knowing, and detachment a way of forgetting. If my knowledge paradigm is shaped around Y, which in turn always gives me X as the result, and I actually want Z, then I will have to forget the knowledge of Y. At least the habitual commonsense way of doing things will have to fall out of scope.

Freud suggests that we laugh in order to forget or suppress memories, which are not practically or evolutionarily useful (Freud). Bergson, however, contends that the comic is the result of the forgetfulness or absentmindedness of life or other people. We laugh at the absentmindedness of the fellow who is not aware enough to sense the danger in approaching life mechanically (R, 397/20). In his book on laughter, Bergson provides several examples of absentmindedness. Many of these examples present a person who has learned how to live and maneuver in the world. In fact, they have learned to do so too well. I improvise my own example. A man is crossing the street, and while crossing a car obstructs the path he would have taken to get to the other side. Instead of adjusting his course, he keeps walking until he walks into the car and falls down. Of course, this is laughable because the man has acted rather rigidly and as a machine. There seems to be some lack on the part of the man who does not adjust his course. Speaking of a similar case Bergson comments, “Habit has given the impulse: what was wanted was to check the movement or deflect it” (R, 391/9-10). Once again, the needs of life demand that we know how to do certain actions, which make life livable, such as getting food, eating, and walking. These actions are developed by routine and therefore are the habits of life. The absentminded of one sort know these habits well, but they do not deviate from them when it is necessary to do so. “This rigidity is the comic,” he continues, “and laughter is its corrective” (R, 396/21). Bergson thinks we laugh in general as a social warning to the absentminded to wake up to life, its particularities, and the demands it places on us.

The absentminded, then, are characterized as being inattentive to the demands of life. It is this lapse in attention that characterizes the comic. Bergson goes on to make a further

distinction in the comic itself: “the comic *expressed* and the comic *created* by languages” (R, 436/103). Whereas the first discovers the comic or the lapse of attention *in life*, and then expresses this comic happening in words, the second through a lapse *in language itself* creates the comic. The first distinction mediates the absentmindedness of life and therefore can be translated from one language to another. This use of language, therefore, will not get us what we need, the unmediated experience of the double-movement into the absolute. However, the second distinction, the comic created by language, because it gives the comic *in language itself*, does not mediate absentmindedness. The first step in reaching the unmediated lapse in attention, then, is to follow the movements of language, and, most importantly, its lapses. Likewise, the second step is to allow language by way of its convergence upon things in themselves to direct the attention to a disinterested attitude. To have a positive Bergsonian understanding language is to wish to enter into language itself, grasp its absolute by way of the intuition, and follow its lapses in attention to the fleeting moment, the liminal space, where one can make the decision to turn back to life with disinterest.

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