

Russell's critique of Bergson and the divide between 'Analytic' and 'Continental' philosophy

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Abstract:

In 1911, Bergson visited Britain for a number of lectures which led to his increasing popularity. Russell personally encountered Bergson during his lecture at University College London on 28 October, and on 30 October Bergson attended one of Russell's lectures. Russell went on to write a number of critical articles on Bergson, contributing to the hundreds of publications on Bergson which ensued following these lectures.

Russell's critical writings have been seen as part of a history of controversies between so-called 'Continental' and 'Analytic' philosophers in the twentieth century. Yet Russell's engagement with Bergson's thought comes as a response to a particular British form of Bergsonism and is involved with the wider phenomenon of the British import of Bergsonism (by figures connected in different ways to Russell, such as Hulme, Wildon Carr or Eliot). Though this may challenge the view of Russell and Bergson as enacting an early version of the 'Analytic'-'Continental' divide, there are however some particular characterisations of Bergson by Russell which contribute to the subsequent formation of the 'rotten scene' (Glendinning 2006: 69) of the divide in the second half of the twentieth century.

Keywords:

Russell; Bergson; Analytic; Continental; divide

1. Introduction

The twentieth century has seen the rise of an image of Western academic philosophy as divided between two predominant camps, one 'Continental' and the other 'Analytic'. Whether some or other form of the division which this image purports to depict exists in reality is of course highly disputable and problematic. For example, though the origins of the

divide have been traced by some back to Kant or Hegel,¹ it is clear that there are not two mutually exclusive philosophical movements (united by either theses, or topical, doctrinal, methodological, stylistic concerns) which have consistently divided themselves up according to some disagreement over nineteenth-century philosophy.² Generalising attempts to map a number of dichotomies onto the ‘Analytic’-‘Continental’ divide (e.g. one side is Kantian, or scientific, or counter-enlightenment, while the other is not) often fail to grasp the concrete historical nature of the phenomenon of the rise of such an image of a divide.

The earliest diagnosable sign of confrontation between philosophers associated with either side is to be found in Frege’s (1894) polemical review of Husserl’s *Philosophie der Arithmetik* (1891). Yet even this dispute is clearly one between kindred spirits, and is only retrospectively related to some notion of divide between ‘Analytic’ and ‘Continental’ philosophy.³ Carnap’s 1931 criticism of Heidegger’s metaphysical language marks the first instance of philosophers associated with either side coming to a kind of aporia over a particular topic, though even this has been shown to be endemic within a Germanophone context where it would be inappropriate to talk of an ‘Analytic’-‘Continental’ divide.⁴

Between 1894 and 1931, there is to be found an intriguing instance of an encounter between two leading philosophers of the early twentieth century: Bertrand Russell and Henri Bergson. Having met Bergson in 1911, Russell criticised his philosophy; Bergson did not respond to Russell’s criticisms. What is intriguing about Russell’s critique of Bergson is precisely the question of its status as a contribution to widening the ‘gulf’ between ‘Analytic’

¹ See e.g. Braver 2007; Critchley 1997.

² See e.g. Glendinning 2006; Glock 2008s.

³ See Dummett 1993: 26.

⁴ See e.g. Friedman 2000; Gabriel 2003; Rosado-Haddock 2008: 3.

and ‘Continental’ philosophy.⁵ In what follows, I examine Russell’s encounter with Bergson, and his subsequent critical commentary on Bergson’s philosophy written in 1912, focusing in particular on his review of Bergson’s *Laughter* (1911), and his presentation to ‘The Heretics Society’ of *The Philosophy of Bergson*. Through examining Russell’s encounter with Bergson, I aim to dispel the view that this was a product of a split between ‘Analytic’ and ‘Continental’ philosophy which was already in place in 1911. Instead, I aim to show how both Bergson and Russell emerged from a climate which favoured international philosophical debate, of which the import of Bergsonism into Britain was a product. Russell’s critique of Bergson is shown to be a response to this import. Though the Russell-Bergson exchange was not the product of a split, but rather of an attempt towards exchange between philosophers in Britain and on the Continent, I claim that there are nevertheless several aspects of Russell’s characterisation of Bergson which have ended up contributing to the formation of the abovementioned image of a split.

2. Philosophical Cosmopolitanism?

2.1 Russell’s British context

Russell and Bergson were both philosophers of supranational standing and renown. Not only did their influence extend beyond the confines of, respectively, the Anglophone or Francophone academic world, but also influences on their work came from a number of heterogeneous sources that lay outside such strictly confined spaces.

⁵ Chase and Reynolds argue that Russell and Bergson were ‘significant in the development of the divide’ (2010: 23) between analytic and continental philosophy.

The latter is particularly clear in the case of the third Earl Russell. Russell in a sense could not have avoided being ‘multi-cultural’ in his philosophical influences, given the environment in which he was educated. Late Victorian philosophical culture in Britain, and most prominently in England, was to a great extent dominated by so-called ‘British Idealism’, a loose grouping of philosophers who were thought to owe more to Hegel than to Locke and Hume.

As early as 1840, J. S. Mill had already constructed a dichotomy between two tendencies in philosophy, the Benthamite Anglo-Saxon empiricist tradition which revolved around ideas of scientific progress, and the Coleridgean ‘Continental’ philosophy which was more or less romantic, reactionary and poetic.⁶ Mill proposed this dichotomy only in order to surpass it by showing the two sides to have mistaken part of the truth for the whole, and in the person of Mill the two tendencies which he describes were synthesised.

The Coleridgean import of the ‘Continental’ idealists had a profound impact on British academic philosophy. If in 1840 there had been a struggle, as Mill described, between the Benthamites and the Coleridgeans, one might claim that it was the latter who had prevailed through the overwhelming dominance of Idealism in academic philosophy during the late nineteenth century. And even for those who attempted to counter the prominence of idealism, crucial exchange with Germanophone academia nevertheless took place. Perhaps the most striking example of such exchange was the influence of Brentano and his school on thinkers such as J. Ward and G. Stout, who were later themselves particularly influential on the rise of the rebellious new ‘analytic’ (or, ‘scientific’, which was the term preferred by its early proponents) philosophy developed by Moore and Russell.⁷

⁶ Mill 1985.

⁷ See Bell 1999.

In his philosophical development, Russell would have to absorb and come to terms with a number of the aforementioned Germanophone influences. Together with Moore, they famously attacked the Hegelian doctrines of their predecessors. It is often assumed that their attacks were conclusive – a view which had been instrumental in establishing a kind of borderline between the old Continentalist philosophy of the Victorians and its modernising ‘Analytic’ counterpart. This ‘revolution in philosophy’ would become mistakenly viewed as stereotypically not non-Anglophone,⁸ and as disinterested in its continental counterparts and unwilling to engage with the history of its discipline. The latter tendency has included a general lack of interest in the history of the making of this ‘revolution’, which perhaps led to the formation of such stereotypes.⁹

In contrast to these stereotypes, a quick glance at Russell’s work would serve to clarify that his commitment to philosophy transcended any barriers between Britain and the continent. Russell’s most famous paper, ‘On Denoting’ (1905), critically introduced two very important Germanophone philosophers, Frege and Meinong, to the Anglophone world. Due at least in part to his location in Jena, and his not so popular mathematical logicism (which was seen by philosophers at the time to fall under mathematical *Logistik*, rather than the philosophical study of the nature of logic), Frege had remained an obscure figure in German philosophy.¹⁰ Russell’s critical discussion of Frege’s views led to a gradual interest in his work in the Anglophone world and to an appreciation of the significance of his contributions to logic and other fields.

⁸ See e.g. Ryle 1971: 182.

⁹ See e.g. Sorell and Rogers 2005. The notable recent rekindling of interest in this area has undermined these stereotypes; see e.g. Preston 2005; Floyd 2009.

¹⁰ See Kusch 1995: 205-206; Käufer 2005: 141-144.

The majority of Russell's writings on such philosophers throughout his career tend generally to be of a form that is necessarily critical, such as for example critical analyses,¹¹ reviews,¹² replies,¹³ or even satire.¹⁴ In Russell's work one finds the prototype of an attempted application of the new logico-philosophical methods of analysis to doing philosophy, and in particular to a certain 'traditional' way of philosophising. In a sense, Russell is paradigmatic in giving himself not only the new tools through which he may dismantle 'old' ways of philosophising, but also a certain aura of this newly found sense of novelty and modernisation which is involved in transforming part of philosophy into an innovatively critical enterprise. Of course, this exercise is not limited to the rejection of theses developed on the continent – Russell is perhaps at his best when he attempts to dismantle the various Victorian pretensions of his English contemporaries. At its most optimistic, the Russellian attitude is one which looks upon some of the most important and highly-regarded philosophers of the past as refutable contemporaries who have not been privileged with the tools of modern logic and its insight into argumentation.

It is partly due to Russell that a precedent is set for a certain tendency by 'Analytic' philosophers to mistakenly see those on the continent as siding with the old ways of thinking (rather than with the 'advances of our logical theory' (Ryle 1971: 182)). Often such attempts are fundamentally flawed, insofar as they inevitably lead to talking past each other: one cannot engage one's interlocutor in rational debate over the extent to which the building blocks of her rationality are antiquated through use of those tools which supposedly render it antiquated, without falling into a vicious circle.

¹¹ E.g. Russell 1905; Russell 1914a.

¹² E.g. his review of Boutroux's book on James (Russell 1992: 306).

¹³ E.g. his exchange with Koyré (Russell 1992: 57-60).

¹⁴ See Russell 1954: 36-39.

It is however clear that, for Russell, if there is to be something like a new ‘scientific’ or ‘analytic’ mode of philosophising, this is universally applicable, and obviously not simply a tool for attacking philosophers on the continent. Yet despite any supranational tendencies in early analytic philosophy,¹⁵ one of the effects of its emergence is, in a way, a de-continentalising of English philosophy, which in the long-run leads to various distorted claims being made on the inferiority of its ‘Continental’ counterpart.¹⁶ But such borders imposed onto international philosophical dialogue (e.g. through false claims to the Britishness of ‘Analytic’ philosophy) were simply not in place prior to the Second World War.¹⁷

2.2 Bergson’s French context

Something of the opposite appears to be true of Bergson. One might claim that Bergson is, in a way, a particularly French philosopher, and that reaction against his thought paved the way for that affiliation between Francophone and Germanophone philosophy which underlies the idea of ‘Continental’ philosophy.¹⁸ In a sense, this claim is founded on a philosophical taxonomy according to which Bergson’s philosophy lies within (by responding to) a particularly French Cartesian tradition. Of course ‘Cartesianism’, which one might be mistaken in characterising as a French tradition, was as much Bergson’s target as it was a tradition Bergson was interacting with. Regardless of the above, Bergson’s thought offered an alternative to the then predominant Neo-Kantianism which dominated French academia, and

¹⁵ See Sluga 1998: 111-112.

¹⁶ E.g. Ryle 1971; Hare 1960.

¹⁷ Cf. Akehurst, 2010.

¹⁸ It is also likely that this existentialist reaction to Bergson was to a great extent indebted to Bergson. See e.g. Richmond 2007.

which had also been prominent in the Germanophone world where it originated and from which it was imported into France. Bergson's alternative to Neo-Kantianism was one which attracted a much larger group of readers, a number of which lay outside the academic establishment. Though Russell may have thought of Bergson as representative of the 'old' philosophy, to many Bergson was seen as a moderniser, and this innovative aspect of his thought (with its emphasis on innovation) was conducive to the widespread influence of Bergsonism, particularly among quasi-modernistic cultural movements of the time: 'Bergsonism composed the very atmosphere in which almost all French realities were steeped since 1900' (Papadopoulo 1942: 2, trans. in Guerlac 2000: 195).

Bergson's intellectual influence goes far beyond the national borders of France. A number of examples might be given in support of this, such as his involvement with the League of Nations' International Commission on Intellectual Cooperation, which he presided over in the nineteen twenties. The mutual admiration between Bergson and William James led to certain affinities between Bergsonism and American Pragmatism, culminating in the import of Bergson's philosophy into America which influenced a number of prominent philosophers, literary intellectuals and artists in the twenties.¹⁹ During the twenties Bergson was also appropriated into the Germanophone world by being considered as an early ally of the movement of *Lebensphilosophie* which was coming to the fore at the time.²⁰ It was the Germanophone reaction to this movement, led by Martin Heidegger's rise to prominence in the late twenties, which eventually led to Bergsonism's popularity being replaced by that of

¹⁹ According to Russell, Bergson and the pragmatists are the 'chief representatives' of practical philosophies 'which regard action as the supreme good, considering happiness an effect and knowledge a mere instrument of successful activity' (Russell 1914a: 2). According to Russell, such philosophies 'would have been common among Western Europeans if philosophers had been average men' (Russell 1914a: 2).

²⁰ See e.g. Scheller 1972.

existentialism in France.²¹ Heidegger's rise to prominence in Germany is associated with the 1929 International Philosophers' Workshop held at Davos in Switzerland, which had as its mission statement the rekindling of ties between French and German philosophers following the Great War.²² Thus the decline of French Bergsonism was characterised by a strengthening of mutual influence between German and French philosophy.

What is perhaps more crucially relevant to our account, though, was the attempted export of Bergson's thought into Britain during the turn of the century which forms the context of Russell's critique of Bergson. It is well known that various literary intellectuals associated with British literary modernism, most famously T. S. Eliot, were deeply influenced by Bergson.²³ One of the earliest British Bergsonians associated with the early development of literary modernism was T. E. Hulme.²⁴ Hulme was a poet, critic, and self-professed dilettante in philosophy. Following his expulsion from Cambridge, Hulme's travels led him to become an importer of various philosophical currents from the continent to Britain. For example, Hulme's is one of the first Anglophone references to Husserl's work, which is viewed in favourable comparison to that undertaken by Russell (Hulme 1915: 187) and Moore (Hulme 1916).

Hulme wrote a number of articles on Bergson, particularly during the height of British Bergsonism around 1911-12.²⁵ His 'Notes on Bergson' were being published in *The New Age* between October 1911 and February 1912,²⁶ his 'A Personal Impression of Bergson' in the

²¹ Cf. Schrift 2006: 20.

²² See e.g. Gordon 2010.

²³ See e.g. Gillies 1996: 78-106.

²⁴ Cf. Schuchard 2003.

²⁵ See Thacker 2006: 39-40.

²⁶ Hulme 1955: 28-63.

Westminster Gazette, November 1911.²⁷ He presented a series of lectures titled ‘The Philosophy of Intensive Manifolds’ in November and December 1911,²⁸ while he published ‘Bergson’s Theory of Art’.²⁹ Hulme also translated the first English edition of Bergson’s *An Introduction to Metaphysics* (1912).

Hulme’s involvement may have tinged British Bergsonism, at its outset, with a certain political outlook which was otherwise highly disputed among the multiple French interpretations of Bergson. Hulme’s later polemics against Russell’s pacifist stance certainly did not help alleviate Russell’s antipathy towards Bergson. Hulme was killed by a shell in 1917 while fighting in Oostduinkerke, and his early death possibly played its role in limiting the dissemination of certain ‘Continental’ philosophers in Britain, including Bergson.

Another early proponent of Bergson’s thought was Herbert Wildon Carr. In a letter to Lady Ottoline Morrell, Russell describes Wildon Carr as ‘a humble stockbroker who happens to be Secretary of the Aristotelian Society – a man rather like the host in one of Peacock’s novels, but milder’ (Russell 1992: 318). This humble stockbroker was to write the defence of Bergson which was in 1914 published alongside a reply by Russell and the original article.³⁰

Bergson’s association with philosophical amateurs (e.g. Hulme, Carr, Eliot, etc) was not an exclusively British phenomenon, and Bergson was generally criticised for being a populariser even in France.³¹ There were, nevertheless, at least some professional philosophers in the Anglophone world, such as William James, but also more importantly

²⁷ Hulme 1960.

²⁸ Reprinted in Hulme 1936:171-214.

²⁹ Hulme 1936: 141-170.

³⁰ Russell 1914a: 26-32.

³¹ See Guerlac 2000: 197.

Russell's collaborator Alfred North Whitehead, whose positions were quite close to Bergson's and who had partly been influenced by him.³²

2.3 Bergson in England

Bergson's fame in Britain came to its peak in 1911, when Bergson visited the country for a number of lectures. On May 26-27 he was awarded an honorary doctorate from the University of Oxford, where he presented 'The Perception of Change',³³ followed after two days by the Huxley Lecture which he delivered at the University of Birmingham on 'Life and Consciousness'.³⁴ Later that year he returned in order to present a lecture series titled 'The Nature of the Soul' on 28 October at University College London.³⁵ Russell wrote of Bergson's lectures that they 'are reported in the daily newspapers – all England has gone mad about him for some reason' (Russell 1992: 318). Hundreds of articles discussing his philosophy followed.³⁶

Russell attended Bergson's London lecture, and the two philosophers met in person. Apparently Russell was seated next to Bergson. In his letters to Morrell, he describes Bergson as 'urbane, gentle, rather feeble physically, with an extraordinarily clever mouth, suggesting the adjective "fin" (I don't know any English equivalent)' (Russell 1992: 318). Later, he would note to Morrell that 'I don't hate Bergson. If I didn't have to read him I shouldn't be tempted to; when I met him I liked him.' (Russell 1992: 315).

³² See e.g. Lowe 1949.

³³ Bergson 1911.

³⁴ Bergson 1920.

³⁵ Bergson 1966.

³⁶ See Gillies 1996: 28.

Bergson had a different impression of Russell. Throughout his career, he did not respond to any of Russell's criticisms, and one of his few unofficial remarks on Russell were in reference to his visit to London. On 30 October 1911, two days after Bergson's lecture, Russell presented 'On the Relations of Universals and Particulars' to the Aristotelian Society. Bergson attended the lecture,³⁷ and seems to have made some critical remarks at the end of Russell's presentation. Bergson believed that Russell had never forgiven him for refuting 'his completely materialistic presentation of Platonic forms' (Russell 1992: 319). In fact, Bergson told his biographer that Russell 'avenged himself' (Russell 1992: 319) in his polemics against Bergson, citing particularly his comment that instinct is more powerful in 'bees, ants and Bergson' (Russell 1992: 319).³⁸

Russell's objections to Bergsonism seem to have already arisen during their London encounter. From the start, Russell thought of Bergson's philosophy as imaginative but lacking in argument.³⁹ He thought Bergson was too set in his views to answer to objections, and disliked what he perceived in Bergsonism to be an aversion to science. Perhaps the latter, and possibly more powerful dislike, was not one directed towards Bergson in particular, but to a specific English *Zeitgeist* which Russell had chosen to relate to Bergsonism. In his comments on the event, he attributes this anti-scientism to the entire gathering, who he compared to 'naughty children when they think (mistakenly) that the governess is away – boasting of their power over matter, when matter might kill them at any moment' (Russell 1992: 318). Russell does not mention the large size of the audience. Bergson's popular appeal

³⁷ See Russell 1992: 319.

³⁸ Cf. Russell 1914a: 3.

³⁹ See Russell 1992: 318.

resulted in the tickets to the event being sold out; his lectures were turned into a gathering of high society.⁴⁰

3. Russell's review of Bergson's *Laughter*

Having met Bergson in 1911, Russell went on to read and write about him. His earliest commentary on his work was a critical review of *Laughter* for *The Cambridge Review*, mockingly titled 'The Professor's Guide to Laughter', and published on 18 January 1912. Beginning with a comparison of Bergson's book to the 'constant stream of etiquette books' (Russell 1992: 385), Russell's review amounts to little more than a caricature revolving around the notion of a professor writing a guide which will fulfil people's desires 'to have a faultless sense of humour' (Russell 1992: 385). Russell portrays Bergson more or less as the academic who takes his effort to theorise about laughter too seriously.

Russell is right to begin by noting the lack of books on comedy, though unfortunately even in posing this he exaggerates: he claims that Bergson's book fills an 'extraordinary lacuna' (Russell 1992: 385) in instruction manuals and introductory books on joking. Bergson's book is indeed unique; not in attempting to teach one how to laugh, but rather in attempting to provide a philosophical treatment of a subject which has been understudied since the second book of Aristotle's *Poetics*, addressing comedy, was lost.

There was, nevertheless, one book to which Bergson's work was constantly compared to by most of its British reviewers.⁴¹ This was George Meredith's *Essay on Comedy*, published in 1877. In this book, Meredith takes comedy as 'one excellent test of the civilization of a country' (Meredith 1897: 82), proceeding to assign various types of comic traits to particular

⁴⁰ See Gillies 1996: 29.

⁴¹ See Connor 2008.

civilisations. Thus for example the Germans are said to laugh infrequently and monstrously, the Middle-Easterners (which are bundled together) are said to drive comedy to the ‘gutters of grossness’, while the highest forms of humour are diagnosed as either Attic or Anglo-Saxon.

Though Russell does not mention Meredith in comparison to Bergson, it is partly the idea of Parisian wit against the humour of Londoners which seems to underlie Russell’s critique:

The truth seems to be that the comic differs with the individual, the country, and the age. Latin wit is different from Teutonic humour; the laughter of the Parisian is different from the laughter of the Londoner. For this reason it would seem to be impossible to find such a formula as M. Bergson seeks. Every formula treats what is living as if it were mechanical, and is therefore by his own rule itself a fitting object of laughter. (Russell 1992: 386).

Here Russell appears to have convinced himself of the truth of his own caricature, i.e. that Bergson indeed is attempting to offer a formula which captures the entirety of comedy in a way which might end up being used as a manual on how to ‘acquire the finest flower of Parisian wit’ (Russell 1992: 385). Though Russell’s conviction in his own caricature seems at first almost like an innocent form of indulgence in his attempt to produce a comical review of a book on comedy, there might nevertheless be a deeper and more troubling set of beliefs hiding behind it.

Russell’s review, though comical, demonstrates at least partly what might have been the expected scholarly response to Bergson, insofar as it claims that certain limitations should be set for philosophical enquiry, and that a treatise on laughter obviously exceeds such bounds. Beside the various excessively satirical statements against Bergson, Russell poses some rudimentary objections to the content of Bergson’s book. For example, he criticises his basic

notion that laughter is connected to instances when human bodies resemble mere machines. As a counterexample to Bergson's, he produces an exaggerated version of the standard slapstick episode of slipping on fruit peel, where serious injury is involved. He further objects to Bergson's insistence on repetition, by pointing out that the repetition of a bad joke does not produce laughter. He rejects Bergson's association of comedy with comic types, by using the example of Balzac as a non-comic writer who uses types, and Falstaff as an individual who is a comical character. He mentions the British essayist Charles Lamb, giving an example in which the opposite of Bergson's 'formula' holds true, i.e. in which something mechanical is humanised to humorous effect. Finally, he remarks that Bergson's association of laughter with absence of feeling finds its negation in those cases where sympathy is the cause of laughter; he vaguely refers to Lamb, as well as to Hamlet's passionate wit which he thinks would be less likely outside its tragic context.

The above objections are serious, yet perhaps all too quick and superficial, though no less superficial than might be expected of a book review of less than two pages. What is troubling about Russell's review is its very early association of two elements which will become prominent in the rhetoric characteristic of the so-called divide between 'Analytic' and 'Continental' philosophy. One could read Russell's review in such a way as to suggest that there might be a vague link between the excesses of Bergson's attempt to philosophise about laughter and the kind of national cultural barriers which Russell accuses Bergson of failing to cross. Here we have the first steps toward the formation of the stereotypical 'Continental' philosopher who, taking himself too seriously, abuses his authority (derived through such seriousness) by overstepping his boundaries. Despite Bergson's philosophy being presented as 'largely a protest against the attempt to bind down living things by the fetters of cast-iron formulas' (Russell 1992: 385), it is overwhelmed by Bergson's 'Latin instinct for order' (Russell 1992: 385). Russell's implication is that by writing a book about laughter, which

attempts to statically capture what laughter is, Bergson contradicts himself. Somehow this contradiction is vaguely implicated in some particularly ‘Latin’ character of philosophising.

4. Russell on *The Philosophy of Bergson*

4.1 The presentation to The Heretics Society

On 11 March 1912, around two months following the publication of his review of Bergson’s *Essay on Laughter*, Russell presented a paper on Bergson to ‘The Heretics Society’ at Cambridge. The Heretics were founded in 1909 as a group of undergraduates who met primarily to ‘discuss more or less religious matters’ (Russell 1992: 313). They counted among their members C. K. Ogden, who was one of the society’s founders and who also founded *The Cambridge Review* (where Russell published his review of Bergson), as well as F. P. Ramsey, among others.⁴² Their outlook on the religious matters they were discussing was more or less one of radical questioning, and to this end they enlisted the help of both famous atheists such as Russell, but also of some, like G. K. Chesterton, who were Christian apologists. On 25 February 1912, a week prior to Russell’s presentation, T.E. Hulme had presented a paper titled ‘Anti-Romanticism and Original Sin’ to the society.⁴³

⁴² Both Ogden and Ramsey were involved in the rising tide of ‘analytic philosophy’ and were responsible for the first translation of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1922)

⁴³ Hulme and Russell would later, in 1916, engage in a public controversy over the war. The controversy began with Hulme’s response to Russell’s lectures on ‘The Principles of Social Reconstruction’, published under the pseudonym ‘North Staffs’ in *The New Age* (North Staffs 1916; Russell 1916); the dispute continued for two months in the pages of *The Cambridge Review*.

It is not clear whether the topic of Russell's presentation was chosen partly as a response to the fact that Hulme had recently presented.⁴⁴ In his letter to Morrell dated 12 October 1911, Russell says that Ogden 'wanted a paper out of me, and I more or less undertook to write about Bergson next term' (Russell 1992: 313). This seems to show that it was Russell's wish to write about Bergson. It is possible that this interest on Russell's behalf was partly due to curiosity about Bergson's rising popular appeal, which Russell refers to in his letters to Morrell at the time.⁴⁵

Russell had already begun reading Bergson prior to agreeing with Ogden to write his paper on him. Interestingly, Russell's earliest impressions from reading Bergson resulted in his very brief remarks to Morrell about Bergson's conception of nothingness:

In the intervals of my morning, I read Bergson on Nothing, which he thinks is nothing. This led me to a number of reflections on negation – a very puzzling topic. (Russell 1992: 313).

What precisely is intriguing about this all too brief and perhaps obscure comment by Russell is that it is here that the Russell-Bergson exchange comes closest to touching on the subsequent history of the 'Analytic'-'Continental' divide. Russell's (1905) criticism of Meinong is perhaps the first move in a long line of criticisms by philosophers deemed to be representatives of the 'Analytic' camp weighed against representative 'Continental' philosophers.⁴⁶ The paradigmatic case of such critique is Rudolf Carnap's (1931) attack

⁴⁴ Russell may have targeted Hulme when he called Bergson irrationalist (Thacker 2006: 40).

⁴⁵ 'I have read a good deal of him and I can see why people like him' (Russell 1992: 313).

⁴⁶ See Oliver 1999: 63-69.

against Heidegger's exclamation that 'Das Nichts nichtet' (the nothing nothings),⁴⁷ which was repeated by A. J. Ayer against both Heidegger (1936) and Sartre (1945); the same sentence by Heidegger is also the topic of various remarks by Wittgenstein and Quine.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, Russell's commentary on Bergson's conception of nothingness consists of a quasi-tautology (i.e. the claim that nothing is thought by Bergson to be nothing), and an expression of puzzlement briefly stated in a letter to a lover; not much is to be made of this.

The sense of some radical gap between *two* and only *two* cultures of philosophising, one 'Continental' and the other 'Analytic', is wholly absent from Russell's criticism of Bergson. Of course Russell notoriously misunderstood Bergson, unquestionably due to reading him with a view to demolish what he thought was the imaginative anti-scientistic philosophy of a mystic. On particular issues Russell saw Bergson as his antithesis,⁴⁹ and thus to a certain extent he went on to construe in his work on Bergson something of what he thought to be antithetical to his own work.

Misunderstanding does not, however, prevail in Russell's interpretation of Bergson. Clearly Russell purposefully misconstrues some aspects of Bergson for comic effect. His presentation to a lay public at the Heretic Society perhaps drove Russell to exaggeration.⁵⁰ Russell himself afterwards described the paper as 'unduly flippant' (Russell 1992: 318) and

⁴⁷ Cf. Vrahimis 2009.

⁴⁸ Wittgenstein et al 2003: 69-77; Quine 1960: 133.

⁴⁹ See Russell 1992: 313.

⁵⁰ Though Chase and Reynolds (2010: 23) argue that both Russell and Bergson were already public figures at this time, Russell's speech at the Heretic Society was 'his first success as a public speaker' (Russell 1992: 317; cf. Monk 1996: 247).

regretted some of the jokes; nevertheless he did include a version of it in his *History of Western Philosophy* (1946).⁵¹

4.2 Criticism of Bergson's account of number and space

Despite all the jokes, Russell includes in his criticism at least one serious objection to Bergson, which he derives from his own work on the foundation of mathematics. This is the infamous critique of Bergson's conception of number, extended to his association of quantity with space. Russell's self-professed pedantry results in an argument which is based on distinguishing between three possible meanings of the term number which are confused in Bergson's use of the term.⁵² According to Russell, number can mean either (i) the general concept number, which can be applied to some particular numbers, (ii) particular numbers, or (iii) any collection to which particular numbers may be applicable. Bergson, Russell surmises, defines number as a collection of units, a definition which therefore excludes (i) and (ii). Yet to define number as (iii), would mean to confusedly imply that (iii) is either (ii) or (i), i.e. it would be to think that a collection, such as the twelve apostles, somehow is the particular number 12 or even number in general. The particular number 12 is something that collections of twelve, as opposed to collections of eleven, have in common. Thus, according to Russell,

⁵¹ Russell returned to Bergson in 1914, both in *Mysticism and Logic* where Bergson plays the role of the mystic (Russell 1917: 12-18), and in *Our Knowledge of the External World* (Russell, 1914b) where Bergson is often referred to.

⁵² Russell 1914a: 14-15.

the number 12 is neither a collection of twelve terms, nor is it something which all collections have in common ; and number in general is a property of 12 or 11 or any other number, but not of the various collections that have twelve terms or eleven terms. (Russell 1914: 14)

This is meant to undermine Bergson's idea of the primacy of geometry over logic, and particularly his claim that number is primarily spatial. According to Russell, number is not (iii) and thus is more abstract than any particular collection to which a number may be applied. It is impossible for (i) and (ii) to be pictured in space, whereas it is not for (iii).⁵³

Russell furthermore expands this criticism to the entirety of Bergson's 'contention that every plurality of separate units involves space' (Russell 1914: 15), by suggesting that Bergson's insistence on space is centred on vision. Bergson is, according to Russell, an individual in whom visual perception, rather than e.g. aural or tactile, is more acute: a 'visualiser'.⁵⁴ Thus, for example, a series of clock strikes may be counted (as a plurality of separate units) without being placed in an imaginary space. It is, according to Russell, a mere autobiographical fact about Bergson which leads him to reduce all forms of pluralities of separate units into spatially separable pluralities.

4.3 Bergson and the British Idealists

Though Russell passes over them too quickly, the above are two examples of objections which may have opened up a dialogue between Russell's and Bergson's positions, and indeed

⁵³ Wildon Carr's reply to this (Russell 1914a: 28-29) is rejected by Russell as a misunderstanding (Russell 1914a: 34).

⁵⁴ But see Wildon Carr's corrections (Russell 1914a: 27-28), which Russell accepted (Russell 1914a: 33-34).

Wildon Carr who replied in place of Bergson did in fact undertake a reply to these theses. The more fundamentally problematic aspect of Russell's treatment of Bergson emerges when Russell associates him to a particular British strand of thought which he had once identified with and now seeks to oppose, namely the British Idealists.

Calling Bergson's philosophy 'anti-intellectualist', Russell accuses Bergson of thriving 'upon errors and confusions of the intellect' (Russell 1914: 16), preferring 'bad thinking to good' (Russell 1914: 16) in his attempt to show that intuition is preferable to intellect. According to Russell, Bergson's anti-intellectualism extends to his interpretations of science and mathematics, which Russell thinks are there as a rhetorical device for convincing careless readers.⁵⁵ Of course, Bergson's careless readers, ignorant of the aspects of science and mathematics Bergson interprets, are most likely equally ignorant of Russell's technical work in the foundations of arithmetic.⁵⁶

Russell avoids commenting on Bergson's views of biology and physiology, but focuses on his views of mathematics invoking his expertise of the subject.⁵⁷ His basic claim here is that Bergson 'has deliberately preferred traditional errors in interpretation to the more modern views which have prevailed among mathematicians for the last half century' (Russell 1914: 16). Russell attributes such traditional errors to Hegel and his followers, who had attempted to 'prove all mathematics self-contradictory' (Russell 1914: 17) based upon the 'fallacies and confusions' (Russell 1914: 17) which lay at the foundations of the infinitesimal calculus in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

⁵⁵ Compare with Sokal and Bricmont 1999.

⁵⁶ See e.g. Russell 1914a: 30.

⁵⁷ Though Bergson's mathematical prowess was not comparable to Russell's, in 1877 his original solution to a mathematical problem was awarded first prize at a congress; see Lacey 1989:59-60.

Russell believes that modern work on the foundations of mathematics had removed the obstacles which had caused these problems; of course his own work, together with Whitehead, was largely responsible for this. He therefore complains that following Hegel, philosophers have paid no heed to such achievements in the philosophy of mathematics, the foundations of arithmetic, the creation of modern logic, and all other relevant fields. Insofar as the latter is concerned, he is of course right, given that a large part of the innovative work done by philosophers on arithmetic was deemed too mathematical (and therefore extra-philosophical) by philosophers at the time.

However the justification Russell gives for philosophers' ignorance of new developments in mathematics is puzzling to say the least:

so long as the main object of philosophers is to show that nothing can be learned by patience and detailed thinking, but that we ought rather to worship the prejudices of the ignorant under the title of 'reason' if we are Hegelians, or of 'intuition' if we are Bergsonians, so long philosophers will take care to remain ignorant of what mathematicians have done to remove the errors by which Hegel profited. (Russell 1914: 17).

Here Russell's indictment of Hegelian 'reason' and its grouping together with Bergsonian 'intuition' muddles the waters.⁵⁸ Of course the former part of the equation refers to his contemporaries in Britain, the older generation of philosophers (typically bundled together as 'British Idealists', to a large extent due to Russell's *en masse* rejection of their work) who

⁵⁸ Russell later claims that the distinction between reason and intuition is illusory; the latter, he thinks, is favoured by a quasi-theological romantic anti-scientism (1914b: 12-13).

paid little attention, Russell had felt, to the implications of advances in the foundations of arithmetic for philosophy. Whether this is absolutely true or not is not to be decided here.

What is, however, puzzling is this identification of one of Russell's enemies with another, which demolishes the substantial differences which exist between the two. It is rather unclear how the 'anti-intellectualism' which Russell attributes to Bergson can be equated with the absolute idealism of the Bradleyans. Russell's equation blurs the challenge that the new wave of British Bergsonism posed to any remnants of the old British academic establishment composed primarily of Neo-Hegelians, a challenge which might have resembled that which Bergsonism posed to the Neo-Kantian establishment in French academia, or later to the Germanophone Neo-Kantian academic establishment. If both Bergsonism and Hegelianism, following 'the example of most philosophers' (Russell 1914: 16) ignored the advances of modern logic, this clearly cannot be due to some common ground in their otherwise utterly opposed insistence on the one hand on 'reason', on the other on 'intuition'.

5. The 'Analytic'-'Continental' divide

The role that Russell's review played in the British reception of and reaction to Bergson, though important, should be placed within the context of the hundreds of articles, many critical, which were written on Bergson after 1911. British Bergsonism became a sort of fashion that soon came to be overshadowed by the Great War. Its demise perhaps owed more to the war than to Russell. Russell was quickly judged to have misunderstood Bergson,⁵⁹ and

⁵⁹ See e.g. Wildon Carr's reply to Russell (Russell 1914a: 28-29); Rostrevor 1821: 138-150.

perhaps this impression was reinforced by Bergson's lack of a reply to Russell, other than his brief endorsement of Carr's defence.⁶⁰

Russell's critique of Bergson was directed as much towards the phenomenon of the import of the latest 'Continental' philosopher, as it was towards its native importers (e.g. Hulme, Carr). Russell characteristically wrote about M. Bergson, while Carr replied about Mr. Bergson. Russell furthermore insisted on forging a link, vague though it may be, between this import and prior imports, such as Hegelianism. Yet when Russell speaks of such foreigners, he is also addressing a particularly British scene.

The image of an 'Analytic'-'Continental' divide refers to an absence of interaction between two seemingly heterogeneous traditions. Thus, it would be inappropriate to talk of an 'Analytic'-'Continental' divide in 1912, at the peak of British Bergsonism. Nevertheless, Russell introduces a number of stereotypes in his discussion of Bergson, which will plant the seeds for future misconstrual of the divide: (i) Bergson is accused of being unaware of the advances in modern logic,⁶¹ (ii) Bergson is bundled together with Hegel (with the implication that they are both traditional pre-analytic philosophers), and finally (iii) Bergson's philosophical arguments are dismissed, and he is demoted to the status of a poet.⁶² Though these particular accusations do little harm when applied to a particular philosopher (who may dismiss them as Russell's personal grudge against him), and could possibly even be construed in such a manner as to contain a grain of truth, they are misleading when projected onto the idea of a 'Continental philosophy' in general. Thus, Russell's critique of Bergson's philosophy, far from being the product of some general split between two kinds of

⁶⁰ 'Je trouve excellente la réponse que Mr. Wildon Carr a déjà faite, et qui porte sur les points spéciaux visés par la critique de Mr. Russell.' (Russell 1914a, i).

⁶¹ Cf. Ryle 1971.

⁶² Cf. Carnap 1931.

philosophy, is productive of a number of attributes associated with an image of contemporary Western philosophy as divided into two.

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