

A Phenomenological (Husserlian) Defense of Bergson's "Idealistic Concession"

MICHAEL KELLY

Boston College

ABSTRACT: When summarizing the findings of his 1896 *Matter and Memory*, Bergson claims: "That every reality has ... a relation with consciousness—this is what we concede to idealism." Yet Bergson's 1896 text presents the theory of "pure perception," which, since it accounts for perception according to the brain's mechanical transmissions, apparently leaves no room for subjective consciousness. Bergson's theory of pure perception would appear to render his idealistic concession absurd. In this paper, I attempt to defend Bergson's idealistic concession. I argue that Bergson's account of cerebral transmissions at the level of pure perception necessarily entails a theory of temporality, an appeal to a theory of time-consciousness that justifies his idealistic concession.

When summarizing the findings of his 1896 *Matter and Memory*,¹ Bergson makes a rather strong and—perhaps to some—peculiar concession to idealism; he writes, "That every reality has ... a relation with consciousness—this is what we concede to idealism. . . . No philosophical doctrine, moreover, provided that it is consistent with itself, can escape from this conclusion" (360/229). One only need reflect briefly upon the title of the work in question, with its prioritized order of terms and dualistic assumption, to discern the tension created by Bergson's idealistic concession (*IC*). And if one penetrates the pages of this rich and complex work and examines the theory of pure perception (*PP*) therein, then the tension heightens, for Bergson's theory accounts for perception according to the brain's mechanical transmissions. Unsurprisingly, phenomenologists from the second to the present generation, as well as contemporary Bergsonists, have concluded that Bergson's theory of *PP* renders his *IC* absurd.² In this paper, I attempt to defend Bergson's *IC* by appealing to the view of temporality at the base of his theory of *PP*. Such a defense comes by way of examining Bergson's account of the relation between memory and *PP*. While Bergson confusedly expresses this

distinction between memory and *PP*, his account of the preservation of cerebral stimuli invites us to clarify this distinction by appealing to Husserl's view of inner time-consciousness and thereby justify his *IC*.

In section one, I explain the tension between Bergson's theory of *PP* and his *IC*. In section two, I consider the possibility of reconciling *PP* and *IC* by examining Bergson's account of bodily consciousness, which reveals two central claims in Bergson's account of *PP*: (1) *PP* entails duration because "every sensation translates a . . . succession . . . of vibrations," and (2) duration at the level of *PP* entails *durée*, i.e., consciousness' "memory of . . . immediate experience . . . not memory of former experience" (280, 377/138, 249). These claims, I argue in section three, reveal that Bergson's account of *PP* implies a consciousness of temporal distinction, which view amounts to something quite similar to Husserl's distinction between retention and memory. In short, we shall see that Bergson's theory of *PP* entails a theory of time-consciousness that underscores the sensibility of *IC*.

1. THE IDEALISTIC CONCESSION AND PURE PERCEPTION: A HYPOTHETICAL CONCESSION TO MATERIALISM

Bergson begins *Matter and Memory* with an assumption designed to overcome philosophy's persistent "problem of appearances." Bergson's assumption amounts to a methodological move designed to circumvent the ontological opposition of inner to outer. He writes,

We . . . assume for the moment that we know nothing of the theories of matter and . . . the theories of spirit, nothing of the discussions concerning the reality or ideality of the external world. (169/17)

Like Husserl's *epoché*³ Bergson's methodological suspension of dogmatic beliefs about the world, does not amount to a Cartesian denial of the external world. Rather, Bergson "ask[s] . . . of the reader . . . to forget . . . the disputes between philosophers" (162/10). This *epoché*, argues Bergson, makes possible the discovery of images in "the vaguest sense of the word, images perceived when my senses are opened to them, unperceived when they are closed" (169/17).

In opposition to realism and idealism, the image denotes "a certain existence that is more than what the idealist calls a representation, but less than what the realist calls a thing" (161/9). For Bergson, the "object exists in itself and . . . is pictorial as we perceive it: image it is, but an image which exists in itself" (162/10). In place of Cartesian idealism's separation of thing from thought and Cartesian materialism's reduction of idea to cerebral transmissions, Bergson proposes to consider the common denominator of these positions, namely the image in its specific relation to the perceiver. One may even venture to say, in phenomenological parlance, that Bergson understands the image as the phenomenon as it appears to the perceiver independently of traditional scientific and philosophical theories.

The complicated status of Bergson's image aside for the moment,⁴ his choice of term implies an innovative sense of idealism:

That every reality has a kinship, an analogy—in short, a relation with consciousness, *this is what we concede to idealism* by the very fact that we term things "images." No philosophical doctrine, moreover, provided that it is consistent with itself, can escape from this conclusion. (360/229—my italics)

The apparent expansiveness of the realm of images in Bergson's philosophy is undeniable. Everything, argues Bergson, is image after the *epoché*, including my body. Indeed, "the afferent nerves, . . . the brain, . . . the disturbance traveling through the sensory nerves and propagated in the brain"—i.e., all the significations with which neuroscience operates—amount to "images" (170/19). The letter of Bergson's text establishes his *IC* indisputably. But it is not even clear that *IC* is coherent within Bergson's broader account.

Bergson himself qualifies both his notion of the image and his *IC*. Taking the latter qualification first, Bergson insists contra idealism that we must restrict perception to its "true office . . . [which] is to prepare actions" (360/229). And the foundation for this office of action, i.e., perception, Bergson argues, rests in the body's rudimentary preparation of actions. Here, the former qualification becomes important for understanding the tension created by *IC*. Though an image among images, my body constitutes a part of the whole of images, which Bergson terms matter (173, 176/22, 25). Having obfuscated his concept of the image and tied perception to the body as an image among images, or a part of matter, Bergson's *IC* begins to seem absurd (173–4/22). Moreover, to explain exactly how perception prepares actions, Bergson proposes to "simplify the conditions under which perception takes place" (183–4/33). This simplification, which amounts to a schematic rendering of human perception that "exists in theory rather than fact" (185/34), is Bergson's *hypothesis* of *PP*. Here is the difference: Since the hypothesis of *PP* forms the basis on which we perceive images, and since images form the basis of Bergson's *IC*, these theories collide. The relation between the theories thus requires a closer look.

PP requires the philosopher to bracket all activities contributing to everyday concrete perception, e.g., memory, recognition, etc., and consider perception "confined to the present" cerebral interval (183–5, 212/33–4, 65). At this "lowest degree of the mind" (356/222), the brain connects inseparably to the whole of images, i.e., matter. Specifically, the brain functions as the switchboard (180, 194/30, 45)⁵ through which centripetal and centrifugal forces transfer at the impersonal, non-subjective level of *PP*.⁶ The body's interaction with the world in *PP* parallels that of an amoeba's (180, 182, 203/30, 32, 55). But unlike the amoeba that reacts immediately to touch, the higher functioning organism enjoys a minimal freedom of response, a zone of indetermination, as Bergson calls it (184/34). In the higher functioning organism, the brain absorbs stimuli from which it prepares

possible actions and “chooses” (179/29) the most efficacious neural pathway to satisfy its basic needs, e.g., hunger, thirst, sex etc (359–60/229). Perception thus arises for advanced organisms in a moment of hesitation between the stimulus and the response. On Bergson’s account, the brain contracts and narrows the whole of images, selects from this whole the partial image that suits its interest, and initiates bodily action (356–9/225–8).

This material and impersonal cerebral instant in *PP*, the rudimentary stage in the preparation of actions, Bergson terms the “poverty of consciousness” (188/38). And he deems this poverty of consciousness in *PP* “necessary” because concrete perception—that is, common sense or mundane perception before the hypothetical construct of *PP*—could not arise apart from this “material” substrate (183, 188–9/34, 38–9). The “absurdity” of *IC* now emerges. If perception arises from the ‘telephonic exchange’ between the brain and the world, then “no need” exists “for a subjective consciousness;”⁷ and if no need exists for a subjective consciousness, then, the phenomenologist retorts, Bergson’s *IC* appears absurd.⁸ Since bodily consciousness connects to the world via the brain (359/228) on Bergson’s account,⁹ the coherence of his *IC* depends upon establishing a place for conscious perception within this vast network of image-relations (the totality of which, as we have seen, Bergson terms matter).

But it is precisely a place for conscious perception within *PP* that phenomenologists think Bergson’s very theory eliminates. In his typically laconic way, Sartre dismisses the possibility of Bergson’s *IC* because he (Sartre) cannot see how this “impersonal consciousness” in the material body “becomes the conscious consciousness of an individual subject.”¹⁰ Unlike Sartre’s sweeping charge, Merleau-Ponty specifically targeted Bergson’s theory of *PP* as the specific source of psychic blindness in Bergson’s philosophy.¹¹ The phenomenologist of the lived-body believed that *PP* advanced a theory of the body’s perception based upon the brain’s mechanistic relation to the material world. Unlike his own phenomenological account of embodied consciousness, the early Merleau-Ponty considers Bergson’s account of the body in *PP* as an objective, scientific account that precludes a proper investigation into the intentional structures of bodily consciousness. Hence, Merleau-Ponty concluded that *PP* constituted at best another form of psychologism, at worst a reductionistic materialism.¹²

Perhaps underscoring the phenomenological critique of Bergson, moreover, the latter of these charges does not ring as a criticism in the ears of recent post-structural readings of Bergson developed out of Deleuze’s influential *Bergsonism*.¹³ My point is not so much that Deleuze and those reading Bergson with Deleuze read Bergson as a thoroughgoing materialist; a reading of Deleuze’s *What is Philosophy?* is enough to see that he does not.¹⁴ What is interesting in this juxtaposition of readings of Bergson is that phenomenology’s supposed allergy to any materialist concessions makes phenomenologists dismissive of Bergson’s *IC*

on the very score on which Deleuze and Bergsonists appreciate Bergson, namely the privileging of neither idealism nor materialism. On such Deleuzean inspired Bergsonist accounts, the redeeming quality of Bergson's thought is the materialist concession that explains conscious perception with "a feature of matter in its most immanent mode"¹⁵ as "impersonal" (195/46). My point in carving out this opposition between phenomenologists and Bergsonists, then, is that from very different philosophical starting points and thus very different readings of Bergson, both camps share the same conclusion regarding Bergson's *IC*. And the conclusion can be stated as follows according to the Deleuzean interpretation: How can one interpret Bergson's *IC* as anything more than a "so-called concession" when his theory of *PP* admittedly deals "hardly . . . with the spirit" (365/235)?¹⁶ Indeed, as Merleau-Ponty put it, "the action of which Bergson is thinking is always virtual action, that by which the organism maintains itself in existence."¹⁷

2. THE POVERTY OF CONSCIOUSNESS:

FORETELLING BUT NOT YET ESTABLISHING THE IDEALISTIC CONCESSION

Bergson's theory of *PP* certainly appears to render his *IC* absurd. Bergson's *IC* certainly requires a place for consciousness, but this place seems unlikely in an account perception that attributes perception to "the work of the brain."¹⁸ To address this issue, one might argue for a place for consciousness in *PP* by examining Bergson's description of impoverished consciousness as the "impersonal" and "physical basis of my personality" (195, 209/46, 61). In his account of the body at the level of *PP* in that state of impoverished consciousness, Bergson describes the body as having a "double faculty" of awareness (209/61). He writes:

[T]his image [my body] always occupies the center of representation, so that the other images range themselves round it in the . . . order in which they might be subject to its actions; on the other hand, I know it from within, by sensations which I term affective, instead of knowing only, as in the case of other images, its outer skin. There is, then, in the aggregate of images, a privileged image. . . . [It] is this particular image which I adopt as the center of my universe . . . the physical basis of my personality. (209/61)

Not merely an image among the whole of images, not merely a part of matter, Bergson thus articulates a sense of bodily self-givenness in which the self is aware of itself not as an object, i.e., not as it is aware of "other images." In this case, the reader of Bergson can identify a descriptive account of the distinction between first-personal, non-objective, tacit bodily self-givenness and third-personal, objective, conceptual self-consciousness.¹⁹ That the impersonal founds the personal descriptively implies and necessarily entails that the former includes some sense of consciousness' ownership of its body's rudimentary functions such that this impoverished consciousness can assimilate these experiences into the life of the self, i.e., its personality.

The value of this approach for assessing Bergson's idealistic concession lies in its readily accessible phenomenological descriptions of bodily motility in the mode of first-person givenness. These ready examples that might elucidate the nature of this impersonal, first-person bodily self-givenness—and thereby locate a place for consciousness or an *IC* within *PP*—come at the expense of an argumentative leap from Bergson's account of *PP*, which he restricts to matter, to his account of concrete-perception, which he admits to include memory. At best, a reflection on Bergson's account of the body's double function merely reports Bergson's assertion of two separate claims about the body as lived-body and corporeal-body. But since "Bergson . . . attributes [perception] to the action of the body" where the "brain receives the messages coming to it from the senses and transforms it into a corporal movement,"²⁰ a defense of Bergson's *IC* must explain the interaction of these two functions of the body. Indeed, if this mechanistic account of perception in *PP* presents the final word on Bergson's theory of perception, then the large issue remains: Does Bergson's materialism in *PP* drive out anything resembling a self-aware consciousness since there must be some space between that which is (pre-reflexively) aware of the self (not as an object but precisely as self) and the self of which it is aware (non-objectively)? As difficult questions often do, this one points precisely to the issue upon which rests a definitive resolution to the interpretive dilemma of *IC*.

If Bergson's theory of *PP* precludes a sense of consciousness, then it also drives out the sensibility of his *IC*. But, when scrutinized closely, the materialism of *PP* becomes less pronounced. In fact, Bergson argues, *PP* marks the "poverty of consciousness" that "foretells of spirit" (188, 194/38, 45). Specifically, as we shall see, even the brain's activity at the level of *PP* depends upon a minimal form of consciousness because *PP* entails duration insofar as "every sensation translates a . . . succession of elementary vibrations" (280/138). If *PP* involves a temporal span, as Bergson seems to suggest that it does, then the interpretive tension surrounding *IC* ultimately concerns the place and coherence of *durée* in *Matter and Memory*.

3. TRANSLATION AS TRANSITION-SYNTHESIS: ESTABLISHING BERGSON'S IDEALISTIC CONCESSION

Let us return for a moment to the brain's relation to images in *PP*, that moment when the brain contracts and narrows the whole of images to select the particular image that suits its needs. In this instance, if the interest of the organism influences the choice of one image from the mind's assessment of the whole of images, can this selection reduce to a mere neurological process? Asked differently, can this process of selection, depending as it does on a hesitation characterizing the higher organism's response to external stimuli received from the senses, reduce to a mere neurological process? It seems that it cannot. Though Bernet, for example, has

argued against the possibility of finding a place on a phenomenological panel for Bergson, he also seems to suggest, as I would like to here, that Bergson's account of the cerebral transmissions at that material level cannot amount merely to a neurological process. As Bernet writes,

In our view this "contraction" can no longer be attributed to a simple neurological process—even if it is not yet a question of . . . recollection or . . . explicit foresight. Properly speaking, this comes down to neither memory nor expectation, but to what Husserl calls a "retention" and a "protention" and which he furthermore qualifies as being a "perception" of the past and the future. There seems to be no way of getting around the fact that such a primitive consciousness of temporal duration already belongs to "pure" perception."²¹

Bergson's text seems to support Bernet's observation, for (1) perception does not occur in the brain and (2) this contraction entails a 'perception' of the past along with a perception of the present, or the perception of a succession of elementary vibrations that the brain cannot secure.

In the section entitled "Of the Survival of Images: Memory and Mind," Bergson qualifies his examination of the brain's function in perception. Although "physico-chemical phenomena take place *in* the brain," an image itself within the whole of images (matter), the brain "never occupies more than the present moment" and thus "cannot store up images" (290–1, 292/148–9, 151). The brain's function may process elementary vibrations, but such processing occurs over time, which the ever-present brain cannot traverse. As such, the brain itself cannot account for the apprehension of successive vibrations in *PP*. Hence, Bergson concludes, it is "a chimerical enterprise to seek to localize past or even present perceptions in the brain: they [past or present perceptions] are not in it [the brain]; it is the brain that is in them" (292/151). This is the poverty of consciousness, a temporal awareness that foretells of spirit.

Bergson will traverse the gap between past and present vibrations by correcting two classical problems concerning philosophy's understanding of time. First, "nothing *is* less than the present moment, if you understand by that the indivisible limit which divides the past from the future;" second, the past itself cannot provide the substrate for my present, for how can that which no longer is "preserve itself" (291–8/149–58)? By locating the brain in perceptions both past and present, Bergson means to locate the brain in "my present," which "consists in the consciousness I have of my body" (280/138). The question, then, concerns whether Bergson attaches to the present vibration in the brain my memory of past vibrations as an addendum? Or, does Bergson describe a more primordial form of time-consciousness that distinguishes the perception of a succession of elementary vibrations that makes possible memory?

On a Deleuzian reading of Bergson's resolution to this classical paradox, one emphasizes the distinction between *PP* and memory, or matter and memory, for

these denote ontologically separate realms somehow integrated in the higher organism.²² Cerebral transmissions fleetingly pass through the switchboard brain and memory's storehouse, which Bergson does not think parasitic upon the brain, preserves them. Memory not only can preserve the past, Deleuze contends, but thanks to Bergson's discovery of a new notion of the past it also marks the condition for the possibility of the passage of time. Bergson's distinctive discovery in *Matter and Memory*, an advance beyond his psychological theory of time from *Time and Free Will*, holds that the past constitutes a separate realm of ontological existence that makes possible the passage of the present into the past, for without considering the past as a separate ontological realm of existence the present moment would have nothing into which it could pass. On this reading, we cannot understand the past as the mere residue of a no longer existing present, for such residue needs a place to reside. The past and the present, then, must coexist, and this "past which never *was* present" constitutes the passage of time.²³

That Deleuze emphasizes the importance of this discovery seems most reasonable, for Bergson's observes that the past continues to exist just as unperceived objects in space do (284, 286–7/142, 145).²⁴ Deleuze seizes on Bergson's notion of the "past in general" (275–6/133–4) treating it as something of an ontological reservoir.²⁵ Here, the present and past, *PP* and memory, butt up against one another like Aristophanes' mythical lovers just at the point when Zeus scornfully splits them.²⁶ Concerning their interaction, Deleuze's Bergson reconstructs temporal passage by maintaining (i) that each present cerebral instant's nature is to pass, (ii) that such passage occurs thanks to the leap consciousness makes into the *past in general*, and (iii) that memory constitutes the perception of succession by recuperating the deceased moments of (i) relevant for the immediate experience.²⁷ Deleuze's Bergson thus argues for a "contemporaneity of the present and the past"²⁸ that understands "my present's" extension beyond the now to consist in memory plus the absolutely new (cerebral transmission).²⁹

But this Deleuzean reading of Bergson, which holds in abeyance *PP* and memory, cannot remove the absurdity of Bergson's *IC*, since it does not (wish to) acknowledge any such concession to idealism. Rather, this Deleuzean reading insists on a fundamental dualism, a mixture of matter and memory, present and past, materialism and idealism. It does seem reasonable to me to deny that Bergson's notion of a past in general can contribute to an understanding of the perception of successive states insofar as it believes itself to explain the sense of the past upon which time's passage depends. It does not follow as reasonable, however, to countenance Deleuze's resultant dichotomous reading. To be sure, Deleuze's reading preserves the difference in kind between memory and *PP* upon which Bergson insists, even in the title of *Matter and Memory* (279/137). At the same time, however, Deleuze's theory seems to retain the "arbitrary" definition of the present as "that which is . . . the indivisible limit which divides the past from

the future" (291/149–50). As such, Deleuze's reading struggles to accommodate Bergson's belief that the present is "that which is being made" (291/150).

To preserve the difference in kind between memory and perception upon which Bergson insists, then, one must flesh out the more fundamental distinction in kind that Bergson articulates between memory of former and memory of immediate experience, a distinction Bergson conflated in his psychological account of *durée* in *Time and Free Will*.³⁰

Bergson resolves the problem of the apprehension of successive vibrations in *PP*—and thus secures the sensibility of *IC*—through a proto-phenomenological turn to the living-present, *durée*, that which is constantly flowing and being made.³¹ According to Bergson, the metaphysical paradox of the preservation of time-past dissolves when one considers the "present such as it is actually lived by consciousness," even at the impoverished level of *PP* (150). He writes,

In the fraction of a second which covers the briefest possible perception of light, billions of vibrations have taken place, of which the first is separated from the last by an interval which is enormously divided. Your perception, however instantaneous, consists then in an incalculable multitude of remembered elements; in truth, every perception is already memory. *Practically, we perceive only the past. . . .* Consciousness, then, illumines . . . that immediate part of the past which, impending over the future, seeks to realize and associate with it. (150)

We shall return in the conclusion to this important Bergsonian notion of perceiving the past. For now, we should note that Bergson explains the preservation of time to consist in the perception of the immediate past referred to above as memory of the immediate (not former) experience.

Conscious perception consists not in the memorial "revival" of past vibrations brought into the present but the "survival" of these past impressions in the flow of conscious life, *durée*. And the flow of conscious life, *durée*, enables a consciousness of the past of the immediate experience relevant for a present action soon to be completed, e.g., listening to a sentence. The vibrancy and self-apprehension of the flow of conscious life enables the survival of those successive ("material") vibrations in a consciousness of the past of the relevant series.³² As Bergson put it in *Time and Free Will*, *durée* "is the form which the succession of our conscious states assumes when our ego lets itself *live*. . . . It is because I *endure* . . . that I picture to myself what I call the past" of an object.³³ *Durée*, then, understood as the consciousness of consciousness's past (a dimension of its flow in general), makes possible the apprehension of the occurring and deceased moments of the successive vibrations in *PP* relevant for consciousness's present concerns, thereby underscoring the function of *PP* and vindicating the sensibility of *IC*.³⁴

Unfortunately, Bergson's account in itself appears slightly confused. Is the extension that is the flow of conscious life constituted by a multitude of remem-

bered elements? Or, does the flow of conscious life constitute a *perception* of the past rather than remembrance of these successively passing vibrations? To make clear the difficulty facing Bergson's account of the relation between *durée* and *PP*, consider Husserl's critical self-reflection on his early theory of time-consciousness, where he concluded that primary memory cannot explain the consciousness of succession.³⁵ Merely attaching memory to the present flow, argued Husserl, renders the consciousness flow of life nonsensical, for such an account has the effect of confining the flow and the past of consciousness to the now that always is no longer. What's more, for Husserl at least, appealing to memory to explain the flow's apprehension of a successive object implies that "at any given moment I perceive only the actually present phase of the tone and the objectivity of the whole enduring tone is constituted in an act-continuum that is in part memory, in smallest part perception."³⁶

Memory and perception, then, mark acts different in kind, as Bergson seemingly agrees despite his equivocation in using these terms (279–80/137).³⁷ Indeed, something quite different occurs when I remember my tenth birthday and when I listen to a sentence or perceive a passing train. In order to explain this experience of the flow that constitutes the consciousness of succession, Husserl distinguishes retention from primary memory, much as Bergson distinguished memory of an immediate from memory of a former experience.³⁸ For both, it seems, we cannot differentiate memory from retention merely as a matter of temporal distance. Memory and retention are structurally opposed: The former is an active, mediated, objectifying awareness of a past object, the latter a passive, immediate, non-objectifying awareness of the elapsing phase of conscious experience.³⁹ In short, memory presents the object *as* past, whereas retention presents a consciousness of the past phase of experience and thereby the object *as* past, a consciousness of the past of the object rather than a consciousness of the object *as* past.⁴⁰ Were retention thought as a re-production, re-petition or re-cognition of past states, it would not differ from the thematizing activity of primary memory—or memory of a former experience, as Bergson expresses it. Given these differences, Husserl concludes, that retention—as an inseparable though distinguishable moment of the living-present—founds memory, and this is because of the role that the retentional moment of the living-present plays in constituting the perception of an temporal object, which object only can become a memory once fully constituted, i.e., after it has become a completed perception.

To return to Bergson's account, just as Husserl says that retention perceives rather than remembers the past, Bergson says that "practically we *perceive* only the past," and this sense of perception is not, for Bergson, memory in the traditional sense of the revival of a former experience. Indeed, Bergson insists, "to *picture* is not to *remember*" (135). This perception of the past, then, according to Bergson, is a consciousness of the elapsed phase of consciousness's flow, its *durée*, by

which it apprehend the successive vibrations in *PP*. It is this insight that we have clarified by our appeal to Husserl's distinction between memory and retention despite Bergson's unhappy description of the perception of the past as memory of the immediate experience.

4. RETAINING BERGSON'S IDEALISTIC CONCESSION

Even if the present account provides reasonable textual support for and validation of Bergson's concession to idealism, it may not persuade either phenomenologists or Bergsonists. The important point to note, it seems to me, however, is that Bergson's notion of a memory of immediate experience entails a "poverty of consciousness" that amounts to an activity that provides a transition-synthesis—a retentional mode of intentionality—that translates cerebral vibrations into images, phenomena.⁴¹ If my reading of Bergson's idealistic concession is persuasive, then since it entails a theory of the life of consciousness in its retentional-intentional relation to the world, we are left to choose between clarifying or dismissing his *IC*. That is, we argue for a mechanical, cerebral relation that precludes subjectivity's awareness of itself and objects, or we see the self apprehending itself and therefore phenomena in the world by way of understanding the apprehension of successive cerebral vibrations as a pre-reflective, "impersonal" self-consolidating that makes possible 'memory' of immediate experiences and thereby memory of former experiences. The former approach cannot reconcile Bergson's *IC*, while the latter approach can accommodate Bergson's *IC*. It seems that the letter and spirit of Bergson's text calls us to reject the former option in favor of the latter.

As I noted at the close of section two of this essay, a defense of Bergson's *IC* must explain the interaction of the "double-awareness" enjoyed by the body. Indeed, if this mechanistic account of perception in *PP* presents the final word on Bergson's theory of perception, then Bergson's materialism in *PP* drives out anything resembling a self-aware consciousness since there must be some space between that which is (pre-reflexively) aware of the self (not as an object but precisely as self) and the self of which it is aware (non-objectively)? But the materialism underscoring the *hypothesis* of *PP* is not the end of the story. Indeed, Bergson identifies the brain only as a "necessary condition" for experience, for "the cerebral mechanism does indeed in some sort condition memories but is in no way sufficient to ensure their survival" (222/75). That the brain constitutes a necessary but not sufficient condition for experience is not anathema to phenomenology and thus on this reading does not undermine Bergson's concession to idealism; Husserl himself maintained that the neurophysiologic events in a human organism constitute the "'turning point' where causal relations are transformed into conditional relations between external world and the Bodily-psychic subject."⁴² Such a synthesis of these cerebral moments cannot stem from a reduction of

conscious perception to the brain because the brain is a “thing like others” and “it would be absurd that the container should issue the content” (190/41). That is, under Bergson’s hypothesis of *PP*, moreover, the body considered as the brain can be nothing otherwise than a necessary condition because it has no time, i.e., it “never occupies more than the present moment” and thus appears anew each moment (291/149). Since perception arises only when consciousness brings these cerebral moments together, Bergson maintains that “pure perception, . . . however rapid we suppose it to be, occupies a certain depth of duration, so that our successive perceptions are never the real moments of things . . . but the moments of our consciousness” (216/69).

In the final analysis, since cerebral activity itself cannot experience the time delay that it creates, Bergson concludes that experience must result from time-consciousness and its intersection with the body. Summarizing his findings from *Matter and Memory*, Bergson writes,

[T]he humblest function of spirit is to bind together successive moments of the duration of things. . . . We note that [the nervous system’s] increasing complexity appears to allow an ever greater latitude to the activity of the living being, the faculty of waiting before reacting. . . . The more complex organization of the nervous system . . . is only the material symbol of that independence itself . . . the symbol of the inner energy which allows the being to free itself from the rhythm of the flow of things and to retain in an ever higher degree the past in order to influence ever more deeply the future. (352/221–2)

And this is why, Bergson, although he maintains that perception includes a motor phenomenon, consistently describes the human body as an ambiguous center characterized by a “double faculty” that I “know . . . from within, by sensations which I term affective, instead of knowing only, as in the case of other [objects], its outer skin” (209/61). Rather than examining the intrinsic properties of neural systems as a positivist or vitalist, Bergson establishes mind and matter as necessary conditions for living and experiencing by focusing on the dynamic interplay of the body, its neural activity and the world. Bergson’s insights into the ‘turning point’ from matter to ‘memory’ (of immediate experience, or retention) at least place his philosophy on a parallel rather than perpendicular plane to phenomenology. But, Bergson’s parallel plane, which itself includes a concession to idealism, might benefit from and benefit phenomenology, for as Husserl writes,

It can be said that, if [the] psychology of cognition had ever gone to work with a consciousness of its aim and had consequently been successful, its results would also have been work accomplished directly for the philosophic theory of cognition. All insights into structure that had been acquired for the psychology of cognition would also have benefited transcendental philosophy.⁴³

Read in this way, Husserl's distinction between memory and retention makes explicit Bergson's implicit distinction between memory and perception. And this distinction between memory and retention allows the sensibility of Bergson's *IC* to shine forth, a glimmer that, in turn, shines new light on phenomenologists' dismissal of Bergson's thought, as well as the contemporary Deleuzian inspired Bergsonist revivals of his thought.

NOTES

1. H. Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, trans. N. M. Paul and W. S. Palmer (New York: Zone Books, 1991). All references to Bergson's work with the pagination of the English translation following the pagination of H. Bergson, *Œuvres*. Édition du Centenaire (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1959). Henceforth cited parenthetically by page number alone; no other work will receive parenthetical citation.
2. For a few examples of phenomenological thinkers who express reservations about Bergson's philosophical project and his idealistic concession see R. Barbaras, "Le problème de l'expérience: proximité ou corrélation? Bergson et la phénoménologie" in *Vie et intentionnalité Recherches phénoménologiques* (Paris: Vrin 2004); R. Barbaras, *Introduction à une phénoménologie de la vie* (Paris: Vrin 2008), 141–56; R. Bernet, "A Present Folded Back on the Past (Bergson)," *Research in Phenomenology* 35 (2005): 55–76; J. P. Sartre, *Imagination*, trans. F. Williams (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1962); M. Merleau-Ponty, *The Structure of Behavior*, trans. A. L. Fisher (Pittsburgh: Duquense University Press, 1983); D. Zahavi, "Life, Thinking and Phenomenology in the Early Bergson," in *Bergson and Phenomenology*, ed. M. Kelly (London: Palgrave, forthcoming). On the Bergsonist side, Keith Ansell-Pearson, *Philosophy and the Adventure of the Virtual: Bergson and the Time of Life* (New York: Routledge, 2002); G. Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, trans. H. Tomlinson and B. Habberjam (New York: Zone Books, 1999); L. Lawlor, *The Challenge of Bergsonism* (London: Continuum Press, 2003); Frédéric Worms, "La conscience ou la vie? Bergson entre phénoménologie et métaphysique" in *Annales Bergsoniennes II: Bergson, Deleuze, La Phénoménologie*, ed. Frédéric Worms (Presses Universitaires de France, 2004), 191–206. Other works expressing similar reservations along these party lines will emerge throughout the course of this essay.
3. Cf. Lawlor, *The Challenge of Bergsonism*, chap. 1, where Lawlor compares the methodological assumption orienting *Matter and Memory* with Husserl's notion of the *epoché*.
4. The notion of the image in Bergson's thought is one of his most perplexing. A quick glance at the concept may make it appear to resemble Kant's conception of phenomena. But Bergson quite clearly argues against such a reading. Sartre has provided the most sustained reflections on this issue. See Sartre, *Imagination*.
5. Cf. Lawlor, *The Challenge of Bergsonism*, 16.
6. Ansell-Pearson, *Philosophy and the Adventure of the Virtual*, 151. We have in the theory of pure perception Bergson's reminder that we have left behind not only the

Cartesian material-realism that sequesters the theater of the mind on which images of the world play, but also the traditional al Cartesian idealism that would “fain go without [matter]” (*MM* 34, 39).

7. Bernet, “A Present Folded Back on the Past,” 60ff. Cf. Sartre, *Imagination*, 39–40.
8. Sartre, *Imagination*, 40. As Bernet has recently put it, it seems impossible to find space for Bergson on a “phenomenological panel” given his theory of *PP*; Bernet, “A Present Folded Back on the Past,” 61. Indeed, Bernet writes, since “Bergson attributes [perception] to the action of the body . . . there is no need for a subjective consciousness to introduce a break into the machinery of the universe.”
9. Bergson writes, “Here is my body with its ‘perceptive centers.’ . . . Where is it? I cannot hesitate as to the answer: positing my body, I posit a certain image, but with it also the aggregate of other images, since there is no material image which does not owe its qualities, its determinations, in short, its existence to the place which it occupies in the totality of the universe.”
10. Sartre, *Imagination*, 40.
11. Merleau-Ponty, *The Structure of Behavior*, 162. Cf. M. Merleau-Ponty, *The Incarnate Subject: Malebranche, Biran, and Bergson on the Union of Body and Soul*, trans. P. Milan (Amherst, N.Y.: Humanity Books, 2001), 89. In that text, Merleau-Ponty claims that Bergson’s theory of pure perception suffers from a “psychic blindness,” a materialism “blind” to the issue of intentional consciousness and the body’s directedness toward self and other.
12. “When Bergson stresses the unity of perception and action and invents . . . the term ‘sensory motor process,’ he is clearly seeking to involve consciousness in the world. . . . Generally speaking, Bergson saw that the body and the mind try to communicate with each other. . . . But the body remains for him what we have called the objective body . . . and one cannot see why . . . consciousness becomes involved in a body and a world.” M. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. C. Smith (New York: Routledge, 1995), 78n2.
13. Deleuze, *Bergsonism*.
14. G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, trans. H. Tomlinson and G. Burchell (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 48–9.
15. Ansell-Pearson, *Philosophy and the Adventure of the Virtual*, 141, 156.
16. Lawlor, *The Challenge of Bergsonism*, 9.
17. Merleau-Ponty, *The Structure of Behavior*, 176. Cf. Barbaras, *Introduction à une phénoménologie de la vie*, 148. Although it goes beyond the scope of this essay, the reader should note that Merleau-Ponty later in his career ultimately comes to a greater appreciation of Bergson’s thought. As he writes in “The Philosophy of Existence” (1959), “If we had been careful readers of Bergson, and if more thought had been given to him, we would have been drawn to a much more concrete philosophy, to a philosophy much less reflexive than Brunschvicg’s. But since Bergson was hardly read by my contemporaries, it is certain that we had to wait for the philosophies of existence in order to be able to learn much of what he would have been able to teach us. It is quite certain—as we realize more and more today—that Bergson, has we read him carefully, would have taught us things that ten or fifteen years later we believed to be

- discoveries made by the philosophy of existence itself." M. Merleau-Ponty, *Texts and Dialogues*, ed. H. Silverman and J. Barry, Jr., trans. M. Smith et al. (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1992), 132.
18. Bernet, "A Present Folded Back on the Past," 56.
 19. For a discussion of the distinction between first- and third-person modes of bodily self-givenness, see D. Zahavi, *Self-awareness and Alterity: A Phenomenological Investigation* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1999); as well as his *Subjectivity and Self-hood: Investigating the First-Person Perspective* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2005).
 20. Bernet, "A Present Folded Back on the Past," 60.
 21. Cf. *ibid.*, 61. Despite this claim, the reader should note that Bernet still resists a phenomenological reading of Bergson. See note vii herein.
 22. Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, chap. 3.
 23. G. Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. P. Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 82.
 24. Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, 58–9. Cf. A. Al-Saji, "The Memory of Another Past: Bergson, Deleuze and a New Theory of Time," *Continental Philosophy Review* 37 (2004): 203–39.
 25. Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, 59; Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 81.
 26. Plato, "Symposium," trans. M. Joyce, in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, ed. E. Hamilton and H. Cairns (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989), 542–3, 190a–e.
 27. Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, chap. 2, "Repetition in Itself."
 28. Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, 59
 29. Lawlor, *The Challenge of Bergsonism*, ix.
 30. For an account of this conflation, see M. Kelly, "Husserl, Deleuzean Bergsonism and the Sense of the Past in General," *Husserl Studies* 24 (2008) 15–30.
 31. That a similarity exists between Bergson's notion of duration and Husserl's notion of inner time-consciousness is a matter of great dispute. In addition to Deleuze's clear appreciation for Bergson's account of time-consciousness over Husserl's as noted in Chapter II, "Repetition in Itself" of *Difference and Repetition* (London: Athlone Press, 1994), two papers inspired by the tradition of Deleuzean-Bergsonism recently defended Bergson's theory of time at the expense of Husserl's account of time: S. Crocker, "The Past is to Time What the Idea is to Thought or, What is General in the Past in General," *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, vol. 35, no. 1: 42–53; Al-Saji, "The Memory of Another Past," 204. Nevertheless, without dismissing Deleuze's contributions to Bergson's theory of time, Rudolf Bernet recently has argued that a similarity exists between Bergson's theory of the duration associated with pure perception and Husserl's theory of the living-present with its notions of retention and protention: Bernet, "A Present Folded Back on the Past," 61. For a fuller account that pursues a line similar to Bernet's suggestion, see Kelly, "Husserl, Deleuzean Bergsonism and the Sense of the Past in General."

32. This is perhaps why Bergson entitles the chapter dealing with *PP* and time-consciousness “Of the Survival of Images. Memory and Mind” rather than on the revival of images.
33. H. Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, trans. F. L. Pogson (Mineola, N.Y.: Dover Publications, 2001), 100, 108.
34. Bernet, “A Present Folded Back on the Past,” 61.
35. E. Husserl, *On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time (1893–1917)*, trans. J. Brough (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991), 23, 130.
36. *Ibid.*, 25.
37. Bergson writes, “the illusion which consists in establishing only a difference of degree between memory and perception is more than a mere consequence of associationism, more than an accident in the history of philosophy. Its roots lie deep. It rests, in the last analysis, on a false idea of the nature and of the object of external perception. . . . But there is much more between past and present than a mere difference of degree. My present is that which interests me, which lives for me, and in a word, that which summons me to action; in contrast, my past is essentially powerless.”
38. While this is not the place to engage in a sustained defense of Husserl’s theory of the living-present against possible Bergsonian objections, I feel compelled to make the following brief remark. Husserl certainly describes the living-present according to the distinguishable yet inseparable moments of retention, primal impression and protention. Such a description, however, does not render these moments divorced from one another, thereby requiring a synthesis to rejoin them; against this potential Bergsonian worry, the reader of Husserl’s time-consciousness writings must keep it in mind that Husserl regards the flow as a non-temporal temporalizing, an identity in a manifold that in no way resembles a series of morsels of lived-experience that require re-connection (for such a view implies that these moments are spread out in temporal order, which Husserl maintains they are not).
39. R. Cobb-Stevens, “James and Husserl: Time-Consciousness and the Intentionality of Presence and Absence,” in *Self-Awareness, Temporality and Alterity*, ed. D. Zahavi (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1999), 45.
40. Husserl, *On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time (1893–1917)*, 31, 324.
41. One may justifiably wonder at this stage if Bergson has not traded in one Husserlian concern for another. On the one hand, the reader of Bergson can explain away the conflation of memory and retention upon which rests the conflation between memory and perception. On the other hand, when Bergson claims that to picture is not to remember, one might ask whether or not this expression distinguishes perception from memory or imagination from memory. The notion of picturing rightfully tempts one to conclude the latter. This presents a certain difficulty for a phenomenological interpretation of Bergson’s account of time-consciousness. It is well-known that Husserl rejected Brentano’s account of originary association because it accounted for the extension of perception beyond the now by making recourse to the imagination, a move that reduced perception to imagination rather than explaining its extension beyond the now. To picture may not be to remember, but to perceive is not merely to

image. At any rate, an attempt to address this difficulty must reckon with Bergson's account of the image mentioned in section one and tease out its relation to perception, a task well beyond the scope of this brief inquiry.

42. E. Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy, Second Book*, trans. R. Rojcewicz and A. Schuwer (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989), 169.
43. E. Husserl, *Formal and Transcendental Logic*, trans. D. Cairns, (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1969), 254.

