

## Bergson on Realism and Idealism

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According to Bergson, the classically opposed doctrines of realism and idealism essentially concern the question of the being of matter and its relation to consciousness. Whereas realists hold that matter exists independently of its representation, idealists argue that matter's existence is equivalent to the representation that one can have of it. Bergson sometimes traces these positions back to the writings of Descartes and Berkeley respectively, but he also acknowledges that one can give different interpretations of these texts and other definitions of these terms. For this reason, in "Brain and Thought: A Philosophical Illusion" (1904), Bergson writes that realism and idealism can be understood as "conventional terms" that refer to "two notations of reality, one of which implies the possibility, the other the impossibility, of identifying things with the representation . . . that they offer to a human consciousness."<sup>1</sup> More specifically, the realists that Bergson describes proceed from the perspective of science and argue that all the parts of the material universe exist in themselves and vary in a way that is strictly determined by physical laws. Further, according to Bergson, these realists argue that the perception that one might have of a part of this closed system of matter need not resemble that which it represents. On the other hand, the idealists that Bergson describes proceed from the perspective of consciousness and argue that the parts of the material universe exist only insofar as they are perceived (or perceivable) and vary in a way that reflects the perspective, movement, and practical interests of one's body.

The objective of the first chapter of *Matter and Memory* (1896), the book that contains Bergson's most extensive and significant treatment of realism and idealism, is to show that both

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<sup>1</sup> Henri Bergson, "L'énergie spirituelle," in *Oeuvres* (Paris: PUF, 1959), 962; *Mind Energy*, trans. H. Wildon Carr (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1920), 236, translation modified.

doctrines are “excessive” in their conception of matter and its relation to consciousness.<sup>2</sup> On the one hand, according to Bergson, realism goes too far when it considers matter as a thing that produces perceptions in us that are of another nature than it. On the other hand, idealism goes too far by reducing matter to the perception that we can have of it. While realism is not able to account for consciousness except by making it an inexplicable epiphenomenon that accompanies matter, idealism is not able to account for the truths of science. Bergson points out that both of these doctrines rely on the same premise—namely, the idea that our perception of the material universe involves an internal representation of an external reality. Aiming to refute both realism and idealism in one move, Bergson rejects this premise and argues that perception reaches directly to the objects that are perceived; “it is in them rather than they in it.”<sup>3</sup> Referring to *Matter and Memory*, Bergson writes in the second introduction to *The Creative Mind* (1934) that realism and idealism “fell to the ground with the illusion which had given them birth. It is not in us, it is in them that we perceive objects; it is at least in them that we should perceive them if our perception were ‘pure.’”<sup>4</sup>

Aiming to avoid the excesses of both realism and idealism, Bergson argues that matter (what he terms image) has a mode of existence that is partway between what the realist calls a thing and what the idealist calls a representation. Specifically, Bergson argues that matter is like the realist thing insofar as it exists independently of the consciousness that perceives it, but also unlike the realist thing insofar as it is not entirely different in itself from the perception that one has of it. Further, Bergson argues that matter is like the idealist representation insofar as it exists just as it is perceived, but also unlike the idealist representation insofar as it is not reducible to what is perceived. Thus, although Bergson concedes to idealism that “every reality has a kinship, an analogy, or, finally, a relation with consciousness,”<sup>5</sup> he does not thereby state that the being of matter is reducible to what is actually perceived. That is, and this is where Bergson draws away from idealism back towards realism, the material universe also maintains an independence from

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<sup>2</sup> Henri Bergson, “Matière et mémoire,” in *Oeuvres* (Paris: PUF, 1959), 161; *Matter and Memory*, trans. N. M. Paul and W. S. Palmer (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 9, translation modified.

<sup>3</sup> Bergson, “Matière et mémoire,” 359; *Matter and Memory*, 229.

<sup>4</sup> Henri Bergson, “La pensée et le mouvant,” in *Oeuvres* (Paris: PUF, 1959), 1317; *The Creative Mind*, trans. Mabelle L. Andison (New York: Citadel Press, 1946), 76.

<sup>5</sup> Bergson, “Matière et mémoire,” 360; *Matter and Memory*, 229, translation modified.

consciousness insofar as it always exceeds the perceptions that we have of it. In short, matter is not essentially different than the perceived, but it is also always more.

In *Matter and Memory*, the question of the being of matter and its relation to consciousness is only considered insofar as it concerns the more specific question of the relation of the body to the mind. As a result of this focus, Bergson's discussion of the opposed doctrines of realism and idealism sometimes comes to merge with a discussion of the theoretically independent opposed doctrines of materialism and spiritualism. So, while Bergson is usually clear that the distinction between realism and idealism is separate from the distinction between materialism and spiritualism,<sup>6</sup> in *Matter and Memory*, he also sometimes crosses the distinctions and contrasts idealism to materialistic realism or simply to materialism.<sup>7</sup> In his 1910 introduction to the seventh edition of *Matter and Memory*, Bergson allows that such "mixing" (*enchevêtrement*) of problems introduces a certain complexity into the book, but he also claims that this is unavoidable insofar as the complexity that is introduced is the complexity of reality itself.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> For example: Bergson, "Matière et mémoire," 176, 218; *Matter and Memory*, 25, 71.

<sup>7</sup> For example: Bergson, "Matière et mémoire," 177, 318; *Matter and Memory*, 26, 181.

<sup>8</sup> Bergson, "Matière et mémoire," 167; *Matter and Memory*, 16, translation modified.