

Russell Reads Bergson

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1. Introduction

Bertrand Russell is well-known for having raised serious objections against some of the most influential among his contemporary philosophical figures and movements. Russell's critical outlook would in some ways set the tone for what half a decade later was described as the analytic 'revolution in philosophy' (Ayer et al. 1967). This 'revolution' has often been conceived in terms of the 'overcoming' or 'elimination' of rival approaches, in a manner which, as we shall see, is traceable back to Russell's critique of his contemporaries.

The typical (though controversial) story that is often retold about the analytic 'revolution' pinpoints its beginnings in Russell and Moore's rebellion against British Idealism (see e.g. Russell 1993, 42). Russell (1928a, 57, 68-69) himself would position his (and Moore's) rejection of idealism among a variety of anti-idealist projects developed in the first decade of the twentieth century, divided into two mutually non-exclusive camps. The one camp's rejections of idealism come from a technical standpoint; among these, Russell (1928a) includes himself and Moore alongside James, Frege, Meinong, and Husserl (68-69). The other camp involves part of the approach developed by the pragmatists (who fall into both camps) and Bergson.¹ Their overcoming of Idealism is not primarily motivated by technical developments, but rather, as Russell notes, by a dislike for 'the regimentation and orderliness involved in a world created by logic' (1928a, 57). Russell would further differentiate the two camps by noting that the former camp is motivated primarily by academic concerns (showing Idealism to be false), while the latter's projects would appeal to a broader public (57). In Russell's account, in the early twentieth century, the popularity contest had been won by Bergson who 'outbid [pragmatism] in appealing to the same tastes' (60).²

In 1912, having already left behind, as a task thought to be well accomplished, the attempt to refute idealism, Russell would turn to a new target. His criticism of Bergson's philosophy is among the most vehement Russell had directed against his contemporaries. This chapter will examine Russell's reading of Bergson, outlining the various critical arguments Russell deployed against him throughout his work, while also highlighting some contemporary defences of Bergson and Russell's responses to them. Section 2 sets off by looking at

¹ Though Russell (1928a) does not explicitly place his friend and collaborator Whitehead in this camp, he does mention Whitehead's 'defence of a more or less Bergsonian metaphysic' (55) as an example of the blurring of the lines involved in his taxonomy. Russell also acknowledges Bergson's influence on Whitehead elsewhere, e.g. Russell 1988, 313-315, 320; 1956, 101. See also Cassou-Noguès 2005.

² Prior to Russell, Stebbing (1914) had argued that pragmatism and Bergson appear to both be responding to 'the protest that philosophy has been made too hard for the plain man' (7). Nonetheless, unlike Russell, Stebbing argues in detail against the identification of Bergson's philosophy with pragmatism, two currents which she shows to be in significant opposition.

Russell's meeting with Bergson and the series of events leading up to his first published critique of Bergson's philosophy. Section 3 will analyse Russell's review of Bergson's *Laughter*, while also examining a contemporary criticism of the review by Paul Weiss, who argued that it contradicts Russell's theory of types. Section 4 offers an exposition of Russell's objections to Bergson's views, as developed in 'The Philosophy of Bergson'. The reader should be warned that in section 4 I abstain from discussing contemporary criticisms of Russell's controversial interpretations of, and arguments against, Bergson; this task is deferred to sections 5 and 6.³ Though Bergson himself refused to enter into debate with Russell, there were replies to Russell by H. Wildon Carr (officially sanctioned by Bergson and responded to by Russell) and by Karin Costelloe-Stephen which sections 5 and 6 will examine. Despite Bergson's refusal to debate with Russell, Russell would continue responding critically to Bergson in a number of works primarily published during the tens and twenties; section 7 will look at Russell's later responses to Bergson.

Note that in what follows my primary task is to put together the pieces of the history of Russell's critique of Bergson and, in part, of its contemporary reception. Russell's many misunderstandings of Bergson's work are only partly addressed by the contemporary defences which we shall analyse in what follows. Basic facets of Russell's interpretation of Bergson have all been questioned by subsequent scholarship, such as the claim that he is an anti-intellectualist and even an irrationalist, or that he is unwilling to engage in argumentative defences of his positions. Focusing in this chapter primarily on presenting Russell's critique in historical context, I defer to further work the task of evaluating the basic misconceptions involved in Russell's interpretation of Bergson.

2. Russell's encounter with Bergson

While in Paris to present a number of lectures in March 1911, Russell had lunch with Bergson.⁴ As preparation for this first meeting, Russell reports buying and hastily reading *L'Evolution creatrice* (see Monk 1997, 202-203). At the time, Bergson had been at the peak of his international fame and would soon be visiting England on two occasions.⁵ In May, he was awarded an honorary degree by Oxford, and delivered the Huxley Lecture at the University of Birmingham. In October, he presented a lecture series on 'The Nature of the Soul' at UCL.⁶ In response to Bergson's UCL lectures, Russell would write that they 'are reported in the daily newspapers – all England has gone mad about him for some reason' (1992, 318).⁷

On the occasion of assuming the presidency of the Aristotelian Society, Russell was set to present the presidential address in November, but following the suggestion of H. Wildon Carr

³ Later discussions of Russell's arguments against Bergson include e.g. Čapek (1971) (who argues that Russell wilfully misunderstands Bergson in a multitude of manners, and that in fact there is a 'hidden Bergsonism' (335-345) in Russell's work); Soulez and Worms (2002); Dumoncel (2004); Chase and Reynolds (2011, 23-26).

⁴ As Monk (1997, 200-203) points out, on the night before the Paris lectures Russell began a life-changing extramarital affair with Lady Ottoline Morell. Monk (235-236) even detects intriguing parallels between Russell's clash with Morell over their worldviews and his criticism of Bergson's philosophical outlook.

⁵ On the reaction to Bergson's visits to Britain, see also e.g. Soulez and Worms (2002, 119-141); de Mille (2008).

⁶ The lectures were published as Bergson (1966).

⁷ Note that Russell's response to Bergson would prepare the start of his career as a public intellectual; see Monk (1997, 233, 247); Russell (1992, 317).

(who was handing over the presidency to Russell), had to move the date to October so that Bergson could attend (see Monk 1997, 232-233). Bergson wrote to Russell to say that he will attend the talk, and Russell thought that he should

add some paragraphs for him. His view is that the raw material is a continuous flux to which no concepts are exactly applicable. I might suggest that the continuous flux is a philosophic construction, not 'raw' at all. (1992, 165).⁸

While he was trying to start reading Bergson's work for that purpose in early October, Russell was invited by C. K. Ogden to present a paper on Bergson to 'The Heretics', a learned society at Cambridge which functioned as a forum for public intellectuals in a broad range of fields within the arts and sciences (see Russell 1992, 313-314). On October 28, Russell met Bergson at a dinner hosted by Carr (see Russell 1992, 318; Monk 1997, 238),⁹ while on October 30 Bergson attended his presidential address, titled 'On the Relations of Universals and Particulars' (see Monk, 238).¹⁰ Russell's talk did not include the planned response to Bergson's view of the flux.¹¹ Though the minutes do not record Bergson's questions, Russell would report that

Bergson, who was present when I read my paper, obviously thought it antiquated nonsense. He said it reminded him of the Greeks, and that in the modern world particulars might be taken for granted but universals could only be accepted after careful proof. (quoted in Monk 1997, 238)¹²

In a later interview, Bergson attributed Russell's subsequent criticisms of his work to the fact that

'Russell [...] has never forgiven me for the refutation I made one day, orally, of his completely materialistic presentation of Platonic forms'. (Quoted in Russell 1992, 319).

Bergson's intuition seems mistaken, given that we can find the first formulations of Russell's subsequent objections to Bergson in letters written to Lady Ottoline Morell and Lucy Donnelly prior to October 30.¹³ For example, Russell (1992) talks of reading Bergson as something which interests him in the same way as theology and heraldry do, namely 'from

⁸ Note that this disagreement is later shown by Costelloe-Stephen to be at the heart of Russell's divergence from Bergson (Costelloe 1915).

⁹ Russell (1956, 78) later satirises an incident from that night involving a speech by Shaw in defence of Bergson, which Bergson disapproved of.

¹⁰ It is unclear whether Russell and Bergson met again after this occasion. Though in 1920 it was planned that both would present papers at an international philosophical congress in Oxford, Russell was unable to attend (see Noël 1920).

¹¹ Monk (1997, 236-237) attributes this to Ogden's invitation, which meant Russell had the opportunity to present a full-fledged critique of Bergson.

¹² Repeating a similar charge against him, Russell (1928a, 65) would later claim that Bergson's philosophy added nothing to Plotinus' mysticism.

¹³ By extension, Čapek's (1971) claim that Russell's critique was a result of his 'positive, almost personal dislike' (335) and 'personal animosity' (335) towards Bergson appears to be exaggerated. I should note that I also, in a previous work (Vrahimis 2011), not having noticed the dating of these letters, assumed that Bergson's contention was correct; I now see that this was a mistake.

the queerness and fantasticality of the stuff' (314).¹⁴ More than once, his exacerbated comments on Bergson are punctuated with the expression 'Ugh!' (313, 315). He talks of Bergson's vitalism and anti-intellectualism as 'the antithesis to me' (314). About what Russell sees as Bergson's doctrine that activity rather than intellect is what reveals the truth, Russell (314) ironically comments that he agrees with him that, once one takes pause to think, Bergson's philosophy ceases to appear true. Russell also repeats that he can understand why Bergson has such popular appeal, attributing it to his imaginative defence of 'Life and Action and Movement' (314). Russell claims that:

Bergson's philosophy, though it shows constructive imagination, seems to me wholly devoid of argument and quite gratuitous; he never thinks about fundamentals, but just invents pretty fairy tales. (318)

In what is clearly not a very charitable impression of the subsequent target of his criticism, Russell adds that Bergson in person appears 'too set to be able to understand or answer objections to his views' (318). However, following their October meeting, Russell even insists on separating his pronounced dislike of Bergson's work from any feelings directed towards his person: 'I don't hate Bergson [...] when I met him I liked him' (315).

Russell talks of reading Bergson as an ordeal which he has to undergo in order to write the Heretics paper. He continuously refers to his struggle to read Bergson charitably, saying that such charity requires true Christian spirit (314-315), talking of overcoming his 'instinctive hostility' (315), seeing it as 'moral discipline' (315), and comparing his sympathy for Bergson with Bergson's characterisation of wasps' paralysing other insects in order to lay their eggs in them as sympathy (315). He mentions that his goal for the Heretics paper was to write a sympathetic outline of Bergson's philosophy before developing a critique; yet the difficulty in writing the first part lies in that 'all the phrases that occur to me are turning him into ridicule' (315). Russell also talks of his effort to be charitable in terms of an attempt to 'have some imaginative realization' (315) of Bergson's outlook, and prior to writing his paper claims that 'I do now really feel his philosophy' (315).

Russell's struggle to read Bergson would first result in a short review (Russell 1992, 385-386) of his book on *Laughter, an Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* for the January 1912 issue of *The Cambridge Review* (to which I will return). The Heretics paper would follow on 11 March 1912. The next day, Russell writes that the paper

had a great success last night – the place was packed and they seemed to enjoy it... Not a soul rose to defend Bergson at the end, so there was no discussion. McTaggart spoke a few graceful words and we all went away. (Russell 1992, 316).

In July, Russell's (1912a) paper would be published in *The Monist* and soon reprinted as *The Philosophy of Bergson* (1912b). A reply to Russell was published by H. Wildon Carr (1913) in *The Cambridge Magazine*, and Russell (1913) responded to it. Russell's paper, along with Carr's reply and the response, were republished along with Russell's original article in the expanded version of *The Philosophy of Bergson* (Russell 1914a). In its first page, the book mentions that *The Cambridge Magazine*, which had originally published the Russell-Carr debate, had requested a response by Bergson, which he avoided, simply noting that:

¹⁴ As Slater and Frohmann note, Russell was indeed fascinated by theology and heraldry, 'because they are ridiculous' (Russell 1992, 314).

I think excellent the reply that Mr. Wildon Carr has already produced, and which deals with the specific points of criticism by Mr. Russell. (Russell 1914a, i).

In this way, Bergson would absolve himself of his responsibility to enter into dialogue with Russell. His gesture might have been intended as a way of downplaying the significance of Russell's charges. Instead of having such an effect, Bergson's silence allowed Russell to have the last word on the matter.

A lesser known voice that entered the debate was that of Karin Costelloe-Stephen, Russell's niece and philosophical protégé.¹⁵ Costelloe-Stephen's 1914 reply to Russell, published in *The Monist* (Costelloe 1914) was received in France as 'more precise and penetrating' (Anonymous 1914, 19) than Carr's defence of Bergson. Despite this, it did not receive a published written response by Russell.¹⁶

Russell would later come to privately admit that his first paper on Bergson 'was unduly flippant, & I am now mildly ashamed of some of the jokes' (Russell 1992, 318).¹⁷ He would, nonetheless, as I will go on to show, continue responding to Bergson in a number of subsequent works, especially during the tens and twenties (while Bergson's star was still on the rise).

3. The Professor's Guide to Laughter

Russell's review of Bergson's *Laughter*, published in January 1912, is ironically titled 'The Professor's Guide to Laughter' (Russell 1992, 385-386). It takes a mocking tone, ridiculing Bergson's book by humorously, while completely uncharitably, construing it as a kind of instruction manual for 'those to whom laughter has hitherto been an unintelligible vagary, in which one must join, though one can never tell when it would break out' (385). Aside from this type of ridicule, Russell's brief review also contains a number of arguments against what he takes Bergson's project to be, namely the derivation of a formula that is applicable to any and all cases of laughter. Russell's review subjects Bergson's formula to scrutiny, aiming to show that though it may cover some examples of laughter, it does not cover all such instances.

Russell finds what he calls a formula in Bergson's thesis that 'the attitudes, gestures and movements of the human body' (quoted in Russell 1992, 385) give rise to laughter insofar as they present living things as resembling machines.¹⁸ Russell interrogates this thesis by attempting to show that it and its correlates are neither sufficient nor necessary for laughter. Thus, Russell argues, though Bergson's formula might apply to the familiar slapstick example of slipping on an orange peel, it would not apply in the case of serious injury. Russell juxtaposes Bergson's slapstick example with that of a man falling from scaffolding and breaking his neck. Bergson's formula, Russell claims, entails that this should be even

¹⁵ It should be noted that Karin Costelloe was in the meanwhile married, and changed her name to Stephen; thus while her responses to Russell are signed Costelloe (1914, 1915), her later book on Bergson is signed Stephen (1922). For an extended analysis of her response to Russell's critique of Bergson, see Vrahimis (2019b).

¹⁶ Russell's correspondence indicates he knew of the reply (Forte 1988, 207). Russell did later engage in debate with Costelloe-Stephen on Bergson; see Vrahimis (2019b).

¹⁷ In the letter, Russell contrasts his 'flippant' attitude towards Bergson with Santayana's critical manner towards himself, noting the fairness of Santayana's criticisms.

¹⁸ Russell (1928b) elsewhere notes that 'Bergson's philosophy was a protest—not, to my mind, wholly sound from an intellectual point of view, but inspired by a wholesome dread of seeing men turned more and more into machines' (85).

funnier than slipping on an orange peel, 'since the movement is even more completely mechanical' (385).

Russell also offers counterexamples to Bergson's contention that repetition, which is a kind of mechanical behaviour, always gives rise to laughter; this is not necessarily so e.g. when a bad joke is repeated. Russell further conjures counterexamples to Bergson's contention that types, rather than individuals, are objects of laughter. This is not a necessary condition given that some types (e.g. Balzac's characters) are tragic rather than comic; it is not a sufficient condition given that some individuals (e.g. Falstaff) are comic, rather than tragic. Russell argues that Bergson's formula fails to account for cases in which the precise opposite of what it describes, i.e. the humanisation of mechanical processes, leads to laughter. Bergson's formula, Russell suggests, cannot accommodate the element of surprise in humour. Bergson's contention that humour is the product of pure intelligence and not sentiment is countered by appeal to Hamlet's character. According to Russell, 'Hamlet's wit is full of passion; in quiet times he would have made less jokes' (1992, 386).

Russell thus concludes that it is impossible to discover a single formula which could fulfil such a role, and that humour is an irreducibly multifaceted phenomenon. Though Russell has, as we have seen above, shown Bergson's particular formula to be problematic (if taken as necessary and sufficient for laughter), Russell offers little by way of argument in backing his claim about the impossibility of producing such a formula. He briefly opposes 'Latin' to 'Teutonic', as well as 'French' to 'British' humour, but this is obviously not enough to make a serious case against a comprehensive account of humour.

Finally, Russell attempts to turn Bergson's formula against itself. According to the formula, treating living things as mechanisms is what gives rise to laughter. Formulas, as Russell (1992, 386) points out, do exactly that: they show a living thing to function in a mechanical manner. In other words, Bergson's contention is not only that we laugh at things that resemble mechanisms, but also that laughter itself is a kind of mechanism that is triggered by such a category of phenomena. Russell's review closes by pointing out that the latter implies that Bergson's formula 'is therefore by his own rule itself a fitting object of laughter' (1992, 386).¹⁹

Russell is taken to task for this assertion in the context of a critique of his theory of types put forth by Paul Weiss (1928).²⁰ Weiss argues that Russell's attempt to apply the formula to itself constitutes a violation of the theory of types:

The characterisation of all formulae, even though it refers to a totality, seems to Mr. Russell to be of the same type as the formula characterised. (1928, 338).

In other words, according to Weiss, this part of Russell's criticism of Bergson is not admissible by Russell's own standards, as developed elsewhere. Perhaps, then, we should take Russell's application of the formula to itself as primarily intended for comic effect, rather than as a serious counterargument against Bergson.

¹⁹ Note that Russell's later works (e.g. Russell 1988, 19, 70-71) continue to mock Bergson's view of laughter.

²⁰ A predecessor for Weiss' criticism could be found in Jourdain's (1918) whimsical *The philosophy of Mr. Bertrand Russell*, which pretends to offer a hierarchical theory of types for jokes (81-82) in which a specific type is only appreciated by 'the frequenters of music-halls, Conservatives, and M. Bergson'. Furthermore, in lieu of a published version of his views of laughter by the fictional 'Bertrand Russell', Jourdain (1918, 86-87) quotes verbatim Russell's review of Bergson.

4. Russell's 1912 critique of Bergson

In 'The Philosophy of Bergson' (1912a), Russell's main line of argument runs counter to what he construes as Bergson's anti-intellectualism. This thesis is summarised by Russell as the position that 'intellect is the misfortune of man, while instinct is seen at its best in ants, bees, and Bergson' (Russell 1912a, 323). Russell (1912a) sees Bergson's anti-intellectualism as ultimately relying on his conceptions of space and time, and claims that:

If they are true, such minor errors and inconsistencies as no philosopher escapes would not greatly matter, while if they are false, nothing remains [of Bergson's philosophy] except an imaginative epic, to be judged on esthetic rather than on intellectual grounds. (334)

Unsurprisingly, as we shall see, Russell's consideration of Bergson's conception of space and time does in fact lead to what Russell considers to be insurmountable objections. Russell thus concludes that only 'esthetic' grounds remain as criteria for accepting or rejecting Bergsonism.

Russell contends that Bergson's conception of space relies on a particular technical error concerning the nature of number. Russell clarifies that the word 'number' may mean three distinct things, and confusion between them has led philosophers astray. 'Number' may mean either:

- (1) the general concept of number,
- (2) some particular number (e.g. the number 12), or
- (3) some particular collection to which a number is applied (e.g. the 12 apostles).

As Russell points out, Bergson confusedly defines 'number' as a collection of units (i.e. identifies 'number' with one of its three meanings, namely (3) above). The confusion lies in the fact that there are two more distinct senses of 'number' which this definition excludes, namely: 'number' *qua* 'general concept applicable to the various particular numbers' (Russell 1912a, 335) – i.e. (1) above – and 'number' *qua* particular numbers – i.e. (2) above). As Russell points out, Bergson relies on this confusion in order to claim that number is primarily spatial, a conclusion which can only be reached about 'number' in the sense employed by Bergson – i.e. (3) – and not in the other two senses of 'number' – i.e. (1) and (2). Whereas 'number' in the former sense can be pictured in space, this does not apply to the latter two senses.

Russell indirectly connects the error made by Bergson to his own conception of the rebellion against idealism, implicitly suggesting that Bergson's version of the rebellion has not been adequately disentangled from its idealist inheritance.²¹ Bergson's confused definition of number relies on ignorance of modern developments in mathematics, which Russell sees as wilful. Bergson relies instead on an antiquated view of mathematics favoured by

Hegel and his followers [who] seized upon these fallacies and confusions to support them in their attempt to prove all mathematics self-contradictory. Thence the Hegelian account of these matters passed into the current thought of philosophers, where it has remained

²¹ This was the subject of various contemporary debates of Bergson; see e.g. James (1910); Bosanquet (1910, 10-11).

long after the mathematicians have removed all the difficulties upon which the philosophers rely. And 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 1912a, 338).

Russell here is clear about what his preferred approach is, namely an anti-idealistic (and particularly anti-Hegelian) philosophy that allies itself with the advances of modern science and logic. Bergson is thus implicitly criticised for not taking anti-idealism far enough, precisely due to his sceptical position with regard to scientific and logico-mathematical expertise.²²

Based on his critique of Bergson's misconception of number, Russell further objects to Bergson's conception of the relation between space and time. Bergson's claim that every plurality of distinct units involves space, as Russell points out, is arbitrarily founded only on vision; we may count a plurality of distinct steps that we hear a passer-by take, though (contrary to Bergson's claim) this does not require visually imagining them in a space. Furthermore, this conception of space is assumed in Bergson's differentiation between spatialized 'time', which can involve a plurality of distinct quantities, and pure duration, which is purely qualitative (and not quantifiable). Thus, Russell argues, Bergson's view of the priority of geometry over arithmetic or logic (on which his anti-intellectualism relies) is shown to result from the combination of his prior fundamental mistake about mathematics with his preference for visualisation.

According to Russell, a further elementary confusion underlies Bergson's conception of time. Russell (1912a) claims that Bergson does not differentiate 'between the present occurrence of a recollection and the past occurrence which is recollected' (342). According to Russell, this confusion implies that what Bergson presents as a theory of time turns out not to be about *time* at all. What Bergson presents as a discussion of the past and the present is simply a discussion of two subjective psychological processes: the *present* recollection of an image of something past, and *present* perception. The *present* act of remembering, as Russell points out, is clearly not identical with that *past* occurrence which is remembered.

Russell attributes this error to 'the confusion between an act of knowing and that which is known' (343), and ultimately to a failure to adequately differentiate between subject and object. Russell sees this error as inherited from the idealist tradition, and in objecting to it implicitly signals towards Moore's (1903) and his own (1912c) arguments against this idealist confusion. In confusing the recollection of a past occurrence with the past occurrence itself, Bergson blurs the line between the act of knowing and that which is known. Once this confusion of subject and object is clarified, Russell thinks, it becomes obvious that what posed as a conception of time is merely a conception of memory.

A similar blurring occurs, according to Russell, in Bergson's conception of images. Russell claims that, according to Bergson, images are what both matter and our perception thereof consists of. Russell (1912a, 344) quotes Bergson's definition of images as being not merely what idealists call representations, nor fully what realists call things, but a sort of intermediary between the two. Russell notes that, for Bergson, images can exist unperceived (as unconscious mental states). Furthermore, in connection with images, 'the difference

²² Russell (1912a, 339-341) thinks that, by extension, Bergson is mistaken in applying these views to his solution of Zeno's paradox; see also Carr 1914, 30-31; Russell 1914c, 137-143, 150-152, 165.

between being and being consciously perceived is only one of degree' (344). Russell clarifies that:

The distinction which Bergson has in mind in the above is not, I think, the distinction between the imaging as a mental occurrence and the thing imaged as an object. He is thinking of the distinction between the thing as it is and the thing as it appears, neither of which belongs to the subject. The distinction between subject and object, between the mind which thinks and remembers and has images on the one hand, and the objects thought about, remembered, or imaged — this distinction, so far as I can see, is wholly absent from his philosophy. (345)

In other words, according to Russell, both in the case of memory and in the case of imaging, Bergson's failure to acknowledge the distinction between subject and object leads him to various inconsistent positions. For example, Russell points out that for Bergson unperceived images are both what matter consists of, and also simultaneously somehow unconscious mental entities. Russell also questions whether it is consistent for Bergson to argue that his theory of images makes no metaphysical claims, while also implying 'that every reality has "a kinship, an analogy, in short a relation" with consciousness' (345).

According to Russell, through the absence of the distinction between subject and object in both the case of memory and imaging, Bergson's theories lead to the strange conclusion that whatever I remember or picture is here and now. Russell presents Bergson's fallacious line of thought as follows:

- 1) Subjective thoughts, whether they are memories or images, exist in me here and now.
- 2) If objects and subjects are indistinct, then they must have the same spatiotemporal location.
- 3) Therefore, the remembered or imaged object exists in me here and now.

The above mistaken conclusion, Russell claims, is a consequence of Bergson's failure to distinguish between subject and object in his conception of memory and of images. Once the distinction between subject and object is correctly conceived, the fallacious conclusion can be avoided.

With this, we return to Russell's initial claim, namely that without a reliable conception of time and space, Bergson's anti-intellectualism seems unfounded. Or at least, as Russell points out, it may seem to lack any argumentative grounding. However, Russell admits that one of the difficulties in dealing with what he takes to be an anti-intellectualist like Bergson's is precisely that proof through argument could not play the role we usually expect it to play when we are engaged in philosophising.

a large part of Bergson's philosophy, probably the part to which most of its popularity is due, does not depend upon argument, and cannot be upset by argument. His imaginative picture of the world, regarded as a poetic effort, is in the main not capable of either proof or disproof. Shakespeare says life's but a walking shadow, Shelley says it is like a dome of many coloured glass, Bergson says it is a shell which bursts into parts that are again shells. If you like Bergson's image better, it is just as legitimate. (Russell 1912a, 346).²³

²³ A variant of this same view, presented in very similar phrasing, is used by Neurath (1973, 160) against Spengler; see Vrahimis (forthcoming).

Thus Russell's contention is that, given his critique of Bergson's conceptions of space and time, 'esthetic' reasons can be the only criterion for choosing whether or not to follow Bergsonism. Such reasons, as Russell has pointed out, are not questionable by means of intellectualist arguments. Thus, Russell's final move against Bergson is to relegate his claims to the domain of poetry, rather than of philosophy (see also Vrahimis 2019a).

5. Carr's reply and Russell's response

The officially sanctioned Bergsonian response, as noted above, was authored by H. Wildon Carr, who had recently published his *Henri Bergson: The Philosophy of Change* in 1911. In what follows, I will look at Carr's reply alongside Russell's response to it.

Carr's defence of Bergson divides Russell's criticisms into two main parts, namely the theory of space and the theory of time. Bergson's anti-intellectualism, Carr agrees with Russell, relies on these two theories, which he seeks to defend against the Russellian offensive. Undertaking the defence entails restoring Bergson as a metaphysician, and Carr clarifies that Bergson's poetry does not appeal to him (1914, 32).

Carr opens his reply by rejecting Russell's characterisation of Bergson as a visualiser. Carr thinks this is a psychological hypothesis which each can examine for themselves through the means of introspection. Carr thus claims to have resolved this question by quasi-experimental means: he asked Bergson whether he is a visualiser, which Bergson denied (1914, 28). In his reply to Carr, Russell happily accepts the information that Bergson is not a visualiser, acknowledging his mistake concerning Bergson's psychology. He nonetheless insists on the occularcentrism characteristic of Bergson's philosophy, which he continues to think does indeed prioritise vision.

Carr suggests that Russell's mistake arises from his misunderstanding of the peculiar use to which Bergson puts the concept of 'image'. According to Carr, Bergson

uses the word image for what Mr. Russell calls a sense datum and other philosophers a presentation; and perhaps the greatest disadvantage of Bergson's term is that it suggests something exclusively visual. (1914, 28).

In other words, Carr thinks that Russell's confusion can be cleared away once it is acknowledged that Bergsonian 'images' are not visual perceptions.

The accusation of being a visualiser is tied to Russell's criticisms of Bergson's conception of number. In defence of Bergson, Carr suggests that there may be an 'order of knowing' (1914, 28) involved in the three senses of number outlined by Russell. Carr questions whether Russell intends to say that one can be acquainted with a universal number (e.g. the number 12) without having been acquainted with particular collections to which a number is applied (e.g. 12 apostles or a dozen eggs). Carr sees Russell as conceding Bergson's view that conceiving of a number 'implies a visual image in space' (Carr 1914, 28), but only in the sense of number as a particular collection to which a number is applied. Carr then proceeds to argue that, if the order of knowledge moves from particular collections to universal numbers to the concept of number in general, then all subsequent levels rely on the spatial image involved in acquaintance with particular collections.

In reply, Russell clarifies that his critique did not concede Bergson's point concerning collections, as Carr assumes. In response to Carr's hierarchy for the three senses of number, Russell protests that this question is 'logically irrelevant' (Russell 1914b, 34). Russell nonetheless clarifies that he is not committed to the view that we need to be acquainted with a particular dozen in order to be acquainted with the universal number 12, as would be clarified

in the example of being acquainted with the number 34,361 without ever being acquainted with 'a collection of 34,361 units' (34).

Carr's reply also addresses the second prong of Russell's attack, i.e. the critique of Bergson's theory of duration. Russell, Carr points out, mentions Bergson's picture of the universe that 'changes from nothing to nothing' (Carr 1914, 31). Here Carr suggests that Russell has misunderstood Bergson's idiosyncratic use of the word 'nothing' to stand for a 'pseudo-idea' (31). Russell acknowledges that Bergson sees 'nothing' as a pseudo-idea, and that he agrees with this view 'though for different reasons' (Russell 1914b, 35) than Bergson's. He clarifies that in the passage Carr quoted he did not intend to use the word 'nothing' in this technical sense, but rather 'as it ordinarily would be used, as an abbreviation for the phrase "not from anything and not to anything"' (Russell 1914b, 35).

More central to Russell's critique is Carr's hesitation concerning Russell's depiction of Bergson as obliterating the distinction between subject and object. Carr here points to a demarcation between two types of account Bergson offers: his epistemological account of intellectual acts of knowing, and his theory of intuition. In Carr's view, the Bergsonian epistemology of intellect clearly acknowledges the distinction between subject and object. Bergson's anti-intellectualism in fact relies on this account of the separation of subject and object in the ordinary intellectual relation between the two. As Carr points out, it is only in those rare instances of intuitive grasp that the ordinary separation breaks down and the subject enters into the object. In intuition, which only very rarely occurs, the act of knowing and the thing known become identical, because intuition is an act of knowing that 'itself knows its knowing' (Carr 1914, 32). In other words, the act of knowing and the thing known are one and the same in intuition. Carr argues that Bergson's account of the fusion of subject and object in this rare reflexive case of intuitive knowledge cannot be the result of confusion – it is, instead, essential to the doctrine. Carr thus concludes that a critic like Russell could, instead of calling it confused, justifiably doubt whether this type of knowledge is possible.

Russell agrees with Carr that the blurring of subject and object is essential to Bergson's thesis, but insists that this does not mean it is not a confused blurring. Russell claims that anyone who understands the subject-object distinction will see that it cannot find exceptions, even in Bergson's conception of intuition:

In the case of memory, this seems particularly evident, since it becomes necessary for Bergson to identify remembering with what is remembered, and therefore to say that whatever is remembered still endures. To say that such identification is of the essence of his doctrine is no defence; the only valid defence would be to show that remembering is in fact identical with what is remembered. (Russell 1914b, 35).

Russell had opened his response to Carr by noting that his paper did not, as Carr suggests, attempt to show Bergson's philosophy to be false. Russell acknowledges that even if the two main lines of argument in favour of Bergson's philosophical conclusions, i.e. the theories of space and time, are shown to be fallacious, this does not falsify those conclusions. Showing the arguments supporting them to be fallacious simply renders such conclusions 'mere imaginative possibilities to be placed alongside of the thousand other possibilities invented by cosmic poets' (Russell 1914b, 33). Russell closes his response to Carr by repeating the conclusion of his paper, acknowledging the futility of attempting to refute an anti-intellectualist like Bergson:

if the intellect is in fact misleading, as Bergson contends, it is useless to employ it against him. It is true that Bergson continually employs it in his own defence, by advancing arguments which plainly are intended to be intellectually satisfying. But this perhaps is a

concession to the unconverted: when his philosophy has triumphed, it is to be supposed that argument will cease, and intellect will be lulled to sleep on the heaving sea of intuition. But until that consummation the protests of intellect will continue. (36)

6. Costelloe-Stephen's reply

Costelloe-Stephen's reply to Russell overlaps with Carr's on various points, which, for the sake of brevity, I will not address here.²⁴ Instead I will focus on one point of criticism original to Costelloe-Stephen, which is the charge that Russell's objections are based on a misunderstanding of Bergson's conception of the process of change. This central misunderstanding is derived from Russell's failure to correctly differentiate between what Costelloe-Stephen calls the mathematical description of change and real change *qua* process. According to the former, change is nothing but a series of different discreet static states. Bergson's conception of change, by contrast, relies on the assumption that the mathematical description cannot but leave out that which is essential to change, namely the fact that it is a process. Change *qua* process is a dynamic flux, not reducible to a series of static elements.

Bergson's anti-intellectualism derives from his view that the intellect is unable to conceive of change as anything other than a series of discreet states, thus always leaving out change *qua* process. The intellect cannot grasp change while in process, but only as change completed, i.e. a phenomenon which can be analysed according to the mathematical description. If the intellect cannot live up to the task, then some other explanation is required for how anyone might come to be acquainted with such a thing as a process of change. As Russell does recognise, Bergson's epistemology leaves the task up to intuition. Yet, Costelloe-Stephen points out, we need to qualify what Bergson means by intuition in order not to misunderstand him as Russell does.

In Costelloe-Stephen's view, Bergson's conception of intuition is really that of a special type of introspection. Intellectual introspection can, of course, acquaint us with sense data *qua* elements of perception already broken down by intellect into discreet units (what Costelloe-Stephen elsewhere calls complexes of sense data (Costelloe 1915)). Bergson does not deny the possibility of intellectual introspection, but, according to Costelloe-Stephen, develops another type of intuitive introspection. This conception of intuitive introspection concerns our immediate acquaintance with a flux that is yet to be differentiated. A particular example of this is found in Bergson's account of duration. According to Bergson, we learn through introspection that in memory the past mingles with the present, in the sense of being in a continuous process of change. Costelloe-Stephen's point, following Bergson, is that upon introspection what we find is not a separation of past and present into 'a series of distinct units joined by relations' (Costelloe 1914, 151), but a blurring of the two where it is never clear where precisely to draw the line which distinguishes them. This is what is meant by Bergson's use of 'duration'.

Russell's objection against a confusion of the remembered past with the real past is thus irrelevant to Bergson, Costelloe-Stephen argues. Bergson is only concerned with our introspective awareness of past and present, and is at pains to argue that these are in a continuous process of change. Costelloe-Stephen claims that in order to object to Bergson, Russell would have to show that, upon introspection, we do not find such a process of change in the sense described by Bergson (Costelloe 1914, 151); this is simply not addressed by Russell's critique.²⁵ Russell is right, Costelloe-Stephen shows, to accuse Bergson of a

²⁴ For an extended account of Costelloe's response, see Vrahimis (2019b).

²⁵ This is, as we saw above, roughly what Russell had originally intended to address in his Presidential Address to the Aristotelian Society.

confused conception of the past as it occurred – but his mistake is of little consequence to Bergson’s conception of duration (Costelloe 1914, 152).

7. Russell rereads Bergson

Russell’s encounter with Bergson’s work is not limited to the 1912a article and his debate with Carr (Russell 1914a). Russell’s work throughout the 1910s and 1920s will keep returning to Bergson as an interlocutor. Russell’s stance towards Bergson varies depending on the issue at hand, and ranges from qualified agreement (e.g. Russell 1914, 230; 1988, 5) to, as we shall see, some very aggressive polemics. In what follows I will divide his responses into three types. The first deals with the political consequences of Bergsonism, in which case Russell seems to be at his most polemical. The second deals with the positioning, both historical and systematic, of Bergsonism among other philosophical trends. The third concerns particular systematic positions upheld by Bergson, which Russell treats primarily critically.

7.1. *The political manifestations of Bergsonism*

Russell’s polemics against Bergsonism is epitomised in his review of Luce’s *Bergson’s Doctrine of Intuition* (Russell 1988, 413-415). Here, Luce’s Bergsonist anti-intellectualism is depicted by Russell as ‘nothing but an invitation to abandon self-control in certain cases in which it is painful’ (1988, 414). Russell claims that Luce’s version of Bergsonian intuition is manifested in the Futurists’ stance towards art, and ‘in politics as the belief in violence’ (414). Instead of contesting Luce’s reading of Bergson, Russell in fact is content to agree with it. He thereby concludes that its brand of anti-intellectualism can be used to excuse various failures to employ the intellect, with disastrous consequences. Russell bleakly agrees with Luce that Bergson’s philosophy is in harmony with ‘the spirit of the Western world today’ (415), and that the proper response to this is to ‘note the fact and seek elsewhere for something less tainted’ (415).

Scott (1919) had developed the view that what he perceived as a philosophical realism in both Russell and Bergson had provided a theoretical foundation for Syndicalism. In response, Russell (1988, 326-328) rejected the view that Bergson is a realist, and questioned his connection to Sorel’s Syndicalism, noting that the only Sorelian who connected Syndicalism to Bergsonism was T. E. Hulme. And though Russell himself was indeed both a realist and favourable to Syndicalism, he notes (referring to himself in the third person) that ‘there is, in fact, no logical connection between his philosophy and his politics’ (Russell 1988, 328). Russell thus wholly rejects this attempt to connect his philosophical and political views to Bergson’s.

In *Power*, Russell (1938, 268-269) portrays Bergson’s politics as a kind of metaphysical ‘power-philosophy’. Despite, as we have seen, having been criticised for this by both Carr and Costelloe-Stephen, Russell repeats earlier claims concerning Bergson’s aversion against the intellect in favour of instinctual intuition. Russell concludes that from Bergson’s views, ‘it follows that men should be passionate and irrational; fortunately for Bergson’s happiness, they usually are’ (269). Russell (1938) groups the work of Bergson together with the pragmatists and Nietzsche as ‘power-philosophies’, a view which finds its most famous expression in his *History of Western Philosophy*.

Here, in 1946, Russell briefly returns to the theme of Bergsonist politics in what is essentially a republication of his 1912a Monist paper with slight modifications. The modifications consist primarily of the addition of a prequel discussing Bergson’s political affiliations. Russell mentions that Bergson had some influence on Sorel’s syndicalism. He

claims that nonetheless ‘the main effect of Bergson’s philosophy was conservative, and it harmonized easily with the movement which culminated in Vichy’ (Russell 1946, 819) (without mention of Bergson’s refusal to accept an exemption from the Vichy regime’s anti-Semitic laws). Russell also notes that Bergson’s philosophy did influence other currents that were not politically aligned to conservatism or Vichy. In the bigger picture of Russell’s (1946) taxonomy of contemporary philosophy, Bergson (like Nietzsche and others (819)) falls into a line of influence stemming from an irrationalism which ‘is a natural sequel to Hume’s destruction of empiricism’ (699), and which Russell sees as having dire political consequences.

7.2. Bergson’s place in twentieth century philosophy

Russell seems to have held a view of French philosophy as having been in decline since early modern times. In private, he expresses this in correspondence with Lucy Donnelly from April 1913, where he writes:

since Descartes, or at any rate since Malebranche, there has been no competent philosopher in France. I know most of the present lot personally, & tho, I have received much kindness from them, I don't know one who seems to me any good, not excluding Bergson. [...] On the Continent, I am inclined to think Austria the best country for philosophy at present--Germany was ruined by Bismark [*sic*].’ (Forte 1988, 204)

Russell (1988, 435-437) expressed similar views in public writings, such as his 1922 review of Gunn’s *Modern French Philosophy* which places Bergson’s philosophy within a bigger picture of the decline of French philosophy since the 18th century. Russell’s overgeneralisations on this matter include such caricatures as that ‘French philosophers tend to be what James called “tender-minded”, and what a less kindly person would call “soft”’ (1988, 435).²⁶ Russell contentiously depicts French philosophy as falling prey to a ‘combination of sentimentalism and party spirit [...] ever since the days of Madame de Maintenon, to whom, no doubt, it is largely due’ (435). What he calls sentimentalism is attributed to Jesuit education, which, he seems to indirectly suggest, lay the foundations for subsequent anti-intellectualist views. The Jesuits, according to Russell, taught ‘boys to arrive at opinions by feeling rather than thought’ (1988, 435). Russell also says that the Jesuits ‘invented propaganda’ (435) and thus accuses them of politicising the formation of opinions, making it a matter of belonging to a group rather than of individual rational choice. Though it is of course clear that there is much to criticise in Russell’s oversimplified misconception of the history of French philosophy, it helps to clarify the bigger picture in Russell’s mind in his opposition against Bergson. For example, it may explain a certain picture of the history of philosophy that Russell might have in mind in accusing Bergson for offering no arguments for his views.

Russell may not have responded to Costelloe-Stephen’s reply to his critique, but he did review her analysis of Bergson in *The Misuse of Mind* (Stephen 1922). The review, titled ‘Analytic and Synthetic Philosophers’ (Russell 1988, 406-410) not only inaugurates the use of the term ‘analytic philosophy’ in its title, but also announces an early rendition of what has subsequently been called the analytic-continental divide (see Vrahimis (2019b)). Russell contrasts Moore as what he calls an ‘analytic’ philosopher to Costelloe-Stephen’s work as philosophy of ‘the synthetic type, which has been almost exclusively dominant on the Continent’ (Russell 1988, 406). Russell here takes Costelloe-Stephen, along with Bergson, to

²⁶ In Russell (1914b, 13), Bergson is identified as ‘tender-minded’.

task for having ‘no belief in argument’ (407), and for a preference for mysticism over scientific knowledge. Whereas Moore’s type of philosophy can ‘seem humdrum and pedestrian’ (407), Bergsonism allows for grand narratives and thus ‘appeals to “idealists”, i.e. to people who wish to think mankind greater and grander than they are’ (410). Interestingly, Russell here corrects his earlier mistake (pointed out by both Carr and Costelloe-Stephen’s replies; see also Stebbing (1914)) of identifying Bergson with a kind of pragmatist appeal to action. Instead, Russell clarifies (1988, 409-410) that pragmatism and Bergson point to opposed directions on this matter. Strangely enough, though he admits this error, he goes on to repeat it in subsequent references to Bergson (e.g. he does not retract the claim in the 1946 reprint of his 1912a article (Russell 1946, 820)).

As highlighted at the beginning of this chapter, Russell’s ‘Philosophy in the Twentieth Century’ (1928a) presents his own approach and that of Bergson as two sides of a general revolt against idealism. We have seen, in Russell’s critique, that he paints Bergson’s revolt against idealism as incomplete by comparison with his own. Russell suggests that Bergson unwittingly reverts to the old idealist modes of philosophising, e.g. in his account of perception, or in his understanding of mathematics which Russell sees as relying on outdated Hegelian ‘muddles’ (1946, 857).

A complementary map of his contemporary philosophy, focusing however on systematic rather than historical issues, is given in *Our knowledge of the external world*. The book opens with a division of its contemporary metaphilosophical scene into three parts: (i) the traditional idealist view of philosophy, (ii) what Russell calls the ‘evolutionist’ (1914c, 4) view, and (iii) his own ‘logical atomist’ position. He classifies Bergson’s intuitionism as a type of evolutionism, which Russell attempts to debunk. Repeating the familiar claim outlined above, Russell notes the performative contradiction involved in Bergson’s development of anti-intellectualism as an intellectual position (1914, 18-25). His attempt to illustrate the fallibility of intuition attacks a strawman of Bergson’s conception of intuition as reducible to instinct. Russell can thus easily show instinct to lead to deception, such as in cases of self-knowledge’s blindness to vices, or love causing people to falsely ‘think they see into another soul as into their own’ (Russell 1914c, 24). These are clearly not the examples of purportedly indubitable introspective awareness that, as we have seen, Carr and Costelloe-Stephen show Bergson to have in mind when speaking of intuition. The misunderstanding here becomes clear when Russell goes on to talk of direct acquaintance as requiring no additional ‘special faculty of intuition’ (1914c, 25). If what Bergson means by intuition is what Russell means by direct acquaintance (see e.g. Costelloe 1915), then they are talking at cross purposes.

7.3. Systematic objections

Having opened by demarcating Russell’s own ‘logical atomist’ position from that of the ‘evolutionists’, *Our knowledge of the external world* goes on to discuss a number of other systematic views defended by Bergson. Throughout the book, Russell repeats various criticisms of Bergson’s view of continuity in motion (similar to those developed in *The Monist* article). Russell also discusses Bergson’s brand of scepticism about causation (229-233).²⁷

According to Russell, causation requires that the same cause will have the same effect. In Russell’s account, Bergson denies this possibility for mental events, since each moment grasped by a mind is completely unique (as determined by the different memory involved in

²⁷ This was originally published as in Russell (1912d).

each moment).²⁸ The example discussed by Russell is that of the repetition of the reading of a poem. Bergson would say that each time I hear the poem is different, given that the present state of my memory will be different each time. From this, Bergson

infers that every mental event is a genuine novelty, not predictable from the past, because the past contains nothing exactly like it by which we could imagine it. (Russell 1914c, 230).

Though Russell admits that Bergson is right concerning the novelty of mental events, he points out that his conclusions concerning causality are not justified by his conception of novelty. Russell argues that we need only talk of kinds (instead of specific detailed descriptions of mental events) in order to bring back causality. If a certain *kind* of cause can bring about a certain *kind* of effect, it does not matter whether that kind was part of one specific mental event rather than another. Thus, Russell argues, once the principle of causation is stated in terms of kinds, the problem Bergson raises is overcome. Furthermore, Bergson's objection relies on the assumption that a cause is a single event, rather than a series of discreet events or a continuum. According to Russell, Bergson's argument is based on a discussion of a limited choice of cases concerning the determination of mental events by single past causes, and is therefore inconclusive.

Russell's 1946 reworking of his systematic objections to Bergson in the *History of Western Philosophy* faces a difficulty not encountered by the original in 1912a, namely the fact that Russell had in the meanwhile changed his mind about one of his two basic criticisms of Bergson. Russell does seem to hold on to his argument concerning the analysis of 'number', which is in fact repeated in subsequent sections (Russell 1946, 858). Nonetheless, Russell changed his mind concerning the subject-object distinction, on which his most basic criticisms of Bergson rely.²⁹ One only needs to turn to the next chapter of the book to find Russell's verdict on William James' critique of the distinction between subject and object. Russell confesses to having become convinced by William James and his followers not only that he is right in this, but that James would 'on this ground alone, deserve a high place among philosophers' (Russell 1946, 840). Despite this change of heart which contradicts his verdict against Bergson, and despite, as we have seen, having had his misinterpretations of Bergson corrected by subsequent interlocutors, Russell in 1946 chose to republish his 1912a positions on Bergson without substantial revisions. Upon discovering this mistake, Broad commented that 'Jupiter sometimes nods' (Broad 1947, 263).

8. Conclusion

Despite the mistake, Russell's criticism of Bergson in *The History of Western Philosophy* remains to this day quite well known. By contrast, what I have outlined above is an oft forgotten sustained engagement with Bergson's views throughout Russell's work. Bergson, as we have seen, did not enter into the debate, while Carr's limited set of objections was presented as conclusively dismissed by Russell. A more promising chance for dialogue was that opened by Costelloe-Stephen. However, Russell's later review of Costelloe-Stephen's work refuses the dialogue, pointing instead to a rift between 'analytic' and 'synthetic' philosophy that subsequent philosophers came to perceive as an obstacle to dialogue.

²⁸ Russell (1915, 229-230) again discusses Bergson's view of novelty.

²⁹ This inconsistency is first noted in Broad's (1947, 263) review of Russell; see Wahl (2019, 52).

Russell had ended his 1912a paper on Bergson by arguing that his work should be read as poetry rather than philosophy. The claim derives from the most basic problem Russell presents anti-intellectualism as facing, namely the requirement that it somehow appeal to the intellect which it is meant to undermine. He would repeat similar claims in his later commentaries on Bergson. Furthermore, this claim sets up a pattern that was to be repeated in various subsequent ‘analytic’ attacks against ‘continental’ philosophy (see Vrahimis 2013). As we have seen, this purported anti-intellectualist conundrum did not stop Russell from critically responding to a number of philosophical positions developed by Bergson. In other words, though Russell’s polemical rhetoric suggests that we should stop reading Bergson as a philosopher and simply see his work as literature, Russell does not appear to have followed his own advice.³⁰

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