

## **‘The Very Life of Things’:**

### **Thinking Objects and Reversing Thought in Bergsonian Metaphysics**

#### **I**

The subject-matter of this introduction is *prima philosophia*, the queen of the sciences, that which lies ‘after’ or beyond physics, ‘meta-physics’. Philosophy’s constant desire, wanted ‘dead or alive’. Dead, or at least completed, ended, in some of the thoughts of Heidegger, Derrida, Lyotard, or Laruelle; very much alive in the works of Deleuze, Badiou, or Barbaras. At the turn of the twentieth-century, however, opinion was less divided. In 1903 Henri Bergson published an essay in the *Revue de métaphysique et de morale*, a journal that was only ten years in circulation and yet whose title still dated it as a product of the nineteenth-century. Bergson’s essay was ‘An Introduction to Metaphysics’. Why did this metaphysics – a 2300 year old discipline – need to be ‘introduced’? This was no student text and there is little mention in it of even the most rudimentary facets of traditional metaphysics (the supersensory, the transcendental, deduction, the *a priori*). So to what was Bergson ‘introducing’ us, what was he ‘leading us into’, in this metaphysics of his? Nietzsche was already three years in the grave, and some would have said that all philosophical pretension to ‘the Absolute’ had gone to the grave with him. In addition to this, Neo-Kantian scepticism was already well-established in the academy, the Husserlian onslaught against the old philosophy was quietly getting under way, and soon enough Bertrand Russell would generalise an anti-Hegelian critique into a widespread attack on all metaphysical research in favour of the twin endeavours of logic and physics alone. Bergson’s essay, then, might well be seen retrospectively as a last ditch defence of a doomed science.

But if Bergson wrote the ‘Introduction’ out of step with the changing times, this is not because he wished either to defend classical metaphysics (Aristotle is cited only in passing

and Plato only in critique), or to bury it, but to transform it with three astonishing but complementary ideas. The introduction is a lead-in to a complete reversal of what we think metaphysics (and philosophy) is, and from where we think metaphysics comes. More than this, it leads us into a total transformation of what and where thinking is: *thinking changes source and direction, passing from things to concepts, and not from concepts to things*. This, the first astounding claim, sounds so simple, as Bergson's ideas so often do. And yet, even now it is difficult to understand fully the meaning of this outrageous reversal, both for thought and for metaphysics (a 'both' that we will see actually disguises a unity as a duality). Bergson's idea is not that we change the 'direction' of our thought *about* things (whatever that might mean), but that metaphysical thinking somehow belongs to the thing. In all that ensued in the history of both Continental and Analytical anti-metaphysics – through Husserl, Heidegger, and Derrida on the one side, or Schlick, Carnap, and Wittgenstein on the other, as well as its later partial rehabilitation in Quine, Richard Taylor, Peter van Inwagen, and Jonathan Lowe, or Deleuze, Badiou, and Barbaras – the alternative approach to metaphysics proffered by Bergson was rarely entertained. Perhaps because Bergson had a knack for suggesting the unthinkable in the most understated fashion – little tone of world-historic destiny can be found in his voice – his modest proposal that we should no longer think of thought as something about things but rather as something *that things do (to) themselves*, passed blithely over the collective heads of most philosophers for more than a century. And yet, this simple idea is completely monstrous and almost unthinkable.

Indeed, Bergson himself, while setting out his ideas, nonchalantly explains why we *cannot* accept them, or are at least most unwilling to do so: strictly speaking, it is because they cause us too much pain. To 'do' Bergsonism properly is to suffer. There is an affect, a feeling, in this idea, which Bergson calls an intuition, that virtually condemns it to neglect. Bergsonian intuition is painful. It takes a violent effort, a huge and difficult struggle that

common sense would ironically dub ‘counter-intuitive’: it is the effort to *bend thought backwards towards its object*.<sup>1</sup> And this is almost impossible: to think as things think themselves. This is not the Husserlian method of *epoché* that would bring thought back to an immediate representation of the *Ding an sich*, but rather the *Ding* itself coming to realise that the thought ‘about it’ is in fact part of its own actuality, its own process. Our struggle is its struggle.

Two things must be said here: firstly, that this is a non-reductive thesis. Bergson is not reducing thought to the brain, which, as a thing, could be the putative non-thetic *cause* of thought. This would not only be a highly uncontroversial move for his time but also the height of common sense. No, it is thought as thought, in all its phenomenal, molar aspect that Bergson renders as simultaneously the thing itself – not ‘of’ the thing, nor caused by the thing, but the thing. Secondly, this thing is not a thing, but a process. It is not a substance but a movement or pure ‘variability’. This principle of the primacy of becoming is Bergson’s second central claim. Hence, intuition too is change, a leading out and a leading in, exoduction and introduction (or induction), ‘differentiation’ and ‘integration’: in each instance of these different vocabularies, what is in question is a movement, a process, or a phase, moving outwards and inwards, centrifugally and centripetally, the thing going away from itself and returning to itself as thought turns on its own direction to become intuition. In Bergson’s *Matter and Memory*, for example, the resolution of the mind-body problem stems from first restating the problem in reversed terms, going from the periphery (the world) to the centre (the brain) and from time to space, before then constituting the *appearance* of a mind that is born from within the brain and a temporality that is creating by spatial objects.<sup>2</sup>

Given this primacy of becoming, we must affirm that the metaphysical is physical. The metaphysical pertains neither to the supersensory, transcendent realm that Plato hypostatized as the eternal εἶδε, nor the impossible objects of knowledge that Kant would

subsequently remove from all existence. Metaphysics is immanent to this world, but it can be so, *contra* both Plato and Kant, only by seeing this world in process: neither the εἶδε nor the impossible objects can ever exhaust the processual and continual creation of novelty, the creation of new possibilities out of reality. What other philosophers might deem the mystery of metaphysics, is nothing more than the mysterious impression that process makes on the intellect, which can rarely comprehend the idea of becoming in itself. Process meta-physics designates the continual change and transformation of *phusika*; what Bergson calls the ‘metaphysical object’ is the thing as it is always going beyond itself, the *Überding*. Physics in process is metaphysics. And metaphysics does not only *know* this, it *is* this, as a part is of a whole. Bergson’s work on the ‘ideal genesis of matter’ in the third chapter of *Creative Evolution*, for instance, implicates his *own* intuitive methodology as a simultaneously vital process, given that matter and intellect, form and content, are said to be both ‘cut’ from an originary ‘stuff’ that he would later call intuition.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, an early review of *Creative Evolution* argued that Bergson was endeavouring to make thoughts not merely know but be the things for which they stand.<sup>4</sup> But again, these things are actually processes.

This priority of process is closely allied with what we can call Bergson’s ‘method of multiplication’ that proliferates the ‘objects’ of his thought: there is not one type of anything, but always a multiplicity, a multiplicity of time (*durée* and spatialised), of memory (virtual, habitual, and representational), of order (vital and geometric), of morality (open and closed), of religion (static and dynamic), of knowing (intuition and analysis), and even of multiplicity itself (qualitative and quantitative). These are not imaginative ‘free variations’ in search of the certain knowledge of a thing’s immutable essence (as in Husserlian phenomenology), but differentiations that lead to a movement (the dissociative movement that generated these multiplicities) that we are integrated into by recreating it for and from ourselves.

Bergson makes this clear throughout the ‘Introduction’: intuition is mereological (a relation of part to whole), it is a thinking that is a part of ‘the real’ rather than an element, rather than a point of view that represents the real. But it can be this only because both thinking *qua* intuition and the real are themselves processes, for it is only processes that can partake, intertwine and part-icipate with each other in a non-representative manner. Neither stands still long enough for the one to ‘stand for’, transcend, or symbolise the other. Bergson’s third central claim, then, is that metaphysics is a science, a knowing, *without symbols*. This knowing, this intuition, must dispense with symbols if it is to be a sympathy, if it is to be ‘within the object’, coinciding with its unique and inexpressible singularity. It is an immanent, temporal movement of part to whole, of phases of things to other phases, of parallel lives; an immediate contact with the absolute, a presence, but only an absolute and presence multiplied by difference or process. It is a contact with what does not stay in contact, a coincidence with what does not coincide. Non-identical in its identity, an original in its origin. Unchanging change. Essential inessence. These names – the contradictory descriptions ascribed to it – are legion and can be multiplied ever further. If metaphysics concerns ‘ultimate’ reality, then Bergsonian metaphysics adds that this ultimate is always evolving, always mutating – not an ‘end’ or final reality, but a never-ending one: a multitude of names, descriptions, images, concepts – what Bergson later called thinking ‘in duration’.<sup>5</sup>

## II

All so simple to say, and yet so difficult to think. Few philosophers before or since have argued anything so heretical as we find in Bergson’s lead-in to metaphysics. Perhaps only François Laruelle today, working under the auspices of a ‘gnostism’, comes close when he argues that his thought emerges ‘*from the thing itself*’. This fantastical claim of identity with the thing or ‘the Real’ (as he also puts it) has so assaulted the philosophical sensibilities of his

time – especially those of Derrida, the anti-metaphysical thinker *par excellence* in popular opinion – that he remains a marginal figure who even regards his own work as ‘non-philosophy’ in view of the inability of the tradition to comprehend his seeming arrogance. Bergson, however, perhaps because of his restrained language, was not cast out from the mainstream because of any arrogance but because of others’ incomprehension. But, for Bergson, this incomprehension of the ‘true metaphysics’ is part and parcel of philosophy itself when faced with the painful effort it requires to turn its back on tradition, to re-integrate itself with the real. The stages by which Bergson recounts his own revolution in thought are suggested quietly and cumulatively, so quietly in fact that it is worth our time to linger over them a while in order to fathom his method – to see that Bergson is in fact doing what he is saying, not out of a desire for consistency, but out of necessity. Intuition is a thinking that is always leading in a direction, suggesting itself, not only to another, but also to oneself.

Bergson begins, as he so often does, with a duality. In this case, it concerns the twofold nature of knowing – analytic or intuitive, symbolic-conceptual or imagistic-pathetic, exterior or interior, static or variable, divisible or indivisible, ready-made or in the making, elemental or in part. The first of each of these couples, as he puts it, ‘implies that we move round the object’; the second, however, enters us ‘into’ it. The second introduces us into the thing. The first is symbolic, the second is a non-symbolic knowledge, a participation, immanent to its object. We are finally told that the first knowing is relative and the second is absolute. But we quickly learn that this absolute is nothing steady, nothing we can take hold of – it is pure flux, movement in itself. Moreover, to speak of such an ‘absolute movement’ is to allow the object its interiority, to restore (in our eyes) its immanent life of heterogeneous change. Bergson here sounds as if this is a projection, a fanciful attribution of a soul onto the inert object. So far, so Aristotelian, one might say. But for Bergson, this ‘life of things’, this vitalism (that would await another four years for its fullest expression in *Creative Evolution*),

is not a thesis concerning a mysterious, immaterial substance dwelling within the inert object, a soul; it is nothing more than the uniqueness of every object when understood as movement, as a precise complexity of changes, evolutions, mutations. The singular object is never seen from the outside, never totalised under a general concept: its singularity must be grasped in the individuality of its movement, for there is no generic model of movement. Bergson is adamant that there is no ‘Becoming in general’, no ‘intemporal essence of time’: these Ideas are both extractions and distortions, points of view, totalisations of the metaphysical object by the concept. Bergsonism is the effort to reverse this procedure. To restore difference. To restore the ‘which’ and the ‘what’ (‘what unity’, ‘what multiplicity’, ‘what reality’), the *qualis*, the quality of each movement (which we will see is always only a movement of *other* kinds of movement, and so on all the way down).

This ‘metaphysical investigation’ of what is ‘essential and unique’ in the object is what Bergson calls intuition. Once it is achieved, once we have *differentiated* the object through the effort to experience it, to sympathise with its movement, we have, at one and the same time, *integrated* our movement into its own: we have participated in its becoming. Two durations resonate or attune themselves as one. We pacify our desire to control the object, to totalise it in our fixed categories as ‘this’ or ‘that’ by attuning our duration to its: as Bergson writes elsewhere, we must wait for the sugar to melt, we must be *patient* with matter.<sup>6</sup> Differentiation and Integration. What guides the mathematical thinking of infinitesimal quantities in differential calculus – the limit of a *constantly changing* system (unchanging change) – Bergson generalises as the fundamental ‘*object of metaphysics*’ and every form of *qualis*, every reality. But knowing this ‘generation of magnitudes’, this constantly changing, *leads one back* into the originating thing or function: integral calculus. Experiencing the myriad becomings of the real and restoring the life of things: these are the two basic operations of metaphysical intuition. Not fanciful projection by us, but pathetic introjection of

us and the object in our *'being made'* – our own and its own co-becoming. That is why the 'true empiricism' is the 'true metaphysics'. There is no leap beyond the world through supernatural perception, but simply the effort to transcend the *status quo*, to experience ourselves making more of our selves; becoming 'more than human' because we have within us much more than what is normatively human (an essence), but objects that are both 'inferior and superior' to what we rigidly classify as 'us'. We can participate in becomings that seem alien to us because becoming allows for all kinds of participation; there is 'contact' with a continuity of durations that we can try to follow by transcending ourselves indefinitely in an 'increasingly violent effort'.

But where I, introducing Bergson's introduction to metaphysics (a metaphysics that introduces us into the life of things) have spilled out these ideas in a rather hurried fashion that, at best, will appeal to the taste for immediate contemporary relevance (Heideggerian *Stimmung*, Laruellian *Réel*, Deleuzian *devenir*), Bergson, by contrast, takes *his* time. The temporality of his writing is vital. The division of the essay into two parts, a duality of continuous, overlapping prose on the one side, and nine seemingly inflexible metaphysical principles on the other, must be taken in part as ironic. Not that we should make the mistake of identifying becoming with continuity alone, on the other hand: duration also has a structure that breaks up any false impression of homogeneity. It is a becoming of novelty, a continuity of heterogeneity. Indeed, the prose that surrounds the nine theses of metaphysics can itself be profitably broken down into thirty two or so further ideas.<sup>7</sup> Even more, such dissections as this can be made in various other ways, more or less numerous: five – 'duality of knowing + images + singularity + effort + reversal', for instance, or just two – 'problem of finding a mode of expression + problem of process', and so on. But whatever the assortment of carved-out ideas, they hark back time and again to the three themes I set out initially: reversing the direction of thought from concepts back to things, things as processes, and

knowing as non-symbolic. Three themes, but actually, all of them interpenetrating to make one idea, one ‘infinitely simple’ movement that Bergson calls an intuition, a reflexive-affect.<sup>8</sup> We can unpack the intuition into nine principles, or thirty two ideas, or, finally, three themes. In isolation, each expression would be no more right or wrong than the other. Each would be a de-composition of the thing itself that, with some effort, can just as well be re-composed by differentiating, multiplying, its images and so re-integrating them into their generative movement. This is what intuition does, restoring the intuition-as-thing. *Its product is its process.*

### III

Bergson’s introduction to metaphysics, then, is not a representation of metaphysics, it is not a new concept of *prima philosophia*, but is itself one of the ‘metaphysical objects’ it talks about, a movement, a rhythm. It turns on itself and thematises its own being, its own possibility as an endeavour to suggest the metaphysical, to direct us into it, to introduce it. And this is most evident in the first part’s discussions of images, effort, and reversal. The ‘Imagist’ movement that the poet, writer, and translator of the ‘Introduction’, T.E. Hulme, helped to establish in the early Twentieth-century would seem to have little to do with Bergson’s use of images in this essay. Indeed, Hulme eventually saw Bergson as an excessively Romantic thinker and disavowed his early enthusiasm for his work. Just as Hulme tried to create a precise and sharp imagery in his poems in preference over what he saw as the artificial and sentimental ornament of the Romantic and Victorian poetry that preceded him, so Bergson appeared to him as a fanciful, ornate writer. But this misconstrues Bergson’s use of images entirely. For it is no one kind of image, simple or ornate, that interests him, but the combination, the interference or attunement between many *different* kinds of images that is vital. Images must be differentiated in order that the *movement* of

images can be discovered in an integratory intuition. The unrolling of a coil, the rolling up of a thread, the myriad-tinted spectrum, the infinitely small elastic body – all of these images of the self (Bergson's example) are incomplete, not much better than concepts in terms of their discrete nature (they do, though, have the virtue of being concrete and so more suggestive). But the specific *becoming* of the self can be suggested through their proliferation: taking 'images as dissimilar as possible' and composing them all 'at once', we can find the *movement* that animates them. And the self *is* this specific becoming.

This *composition* takes effort. The 'attention' needed to discern and then compound (but not synthesise) such differences is exhausting. Whereas concepts 'demand no effort', no patience on our part, metaphysical attention is literally a 'degree of tension', an effort of grasping together, not under a higher conceptual category (by association), but as the affective *re-creation* of the movement of dissociation, the feeling-movement that dissociates itself into these very images. As Bergson would write elsewhere, to understand something is to recreate it again for oneself: but it is a recreation of movements rather than things (in the usual sense), for it can use different materials entirely and yet still participate in what it is trying to suggest. In his last book from 1932, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, Bergson suggests that the philosophical name of 'Socrates' represented less a person than a movement of thought; when a philosopher engages with society, he or she does not represent the Socratic archetype so much as follow the Socratic-movement and thereby bring him back to life.<sup>9</sup> 'Socrates' was and is a gesture in becoming. This echoes the point made towards the conclusion of the 'Introduction': that intuition is an effort to place oneself in a movement, such as that of philosophy itself, which is understood all the better when we consider what is 'living in *philosophers*' rather than what is 'fixed and dead in *theses*'.

Indeed, this idea invokes a final duality in Bergson's metaphysics, namely that between the philosophical inspiration – the momentary act of intuition shared with science –

and its analytical expression.<sup>10</sup> The former belongs to the ‘master’, the latter either to his or her disciples or even to him or herself as the intuition unfolds in symbols, extracted as so many theses, points of view, or concepts. In fact, a truly creative, ‘generative’ intuition, such as inspired the infinitesimal calculus, is betrayed not only by science but equally by any normal, that is, traditional, transcendent metaphysics as well. The normal operation of the understanding looks for stability either in ‘*relations* or in *things*’: ‘in so far as it works on concepts of relations, it culminates in *scientific* symbolism. In so far as it works on concepts of things, it culminates in *metaphysical* symbolism’. Neither science nor transcendent philosophy can stay faithful to the creative event forever. Bergsonian, immanent metaphysics tries to reverse this reifying effect of the understanding, and therewith, become more creative by participating in the variability of the real.

With this in mind, we can even reflect on the significance of different kinds of philosophical commentary, such as on metaphysics or even on an introduction to metaphysics. What Bergson means by re-creating a movement of thought (something he expands on greatly in the lecture ‘Philosophical Intuition’ from 1911) is literally a kind of induction. In(tro)duction as induction – going from the particular to the general (or ‘*integral*’); for instance, explaining the self within and through the movement amongst numerous different images (coil, spring, spectrum, point...). This is a painful, almost violent redirection of the mind back to the thing, a reversal of thought. It contrasts starkly with the commentary of the disciple, which is less an induction than what we might instead call a ‘transduction’, going from the particular to the particular within a ‘system’ of thought, explaining one technical concept in terms of another (Kantian duty in terms of the Kantian noumenal, for example). The latter is an easy movement *across* thought, the facility of those readers already within the closed language of commentary equalling the level of clarity they attribute to it (conceptual clarity being a product of utility). But if to understand, to introduce,

is to be able to recreate the movement with *new* materials, with *new* vocabularies, with one's own *life* even, then the movement must travel inward from thoughts to things rather than across from thought to thought. The generality sought by Bergson, remember, is never a synthesis, summary, or 'generalisation of facts'; it is an '*integral experience*'. *Integrālis*, meaning 'to make up a whole', but for Bergson it is always an *open* whole: hence, the two kinds of philosophy, intuitive metaphysics and analytical expression, cannot be wholly opposed, for the one is a *relatively* open movement, and the other a *relatively* closed one. Neither exist as purities.

This difference in commentary is also a difference in reading and writing. Derrida once said that it was to German and Greek philosophers, rather than French ones, that he returned in his work time and again, for in them there was a 'bottomless' and 'inexhaustible' depth that rewarded and required numerous soundings.<sup>11</sup> This is an instructive impression given the limpidity of Bergson's prose that is not often to the contemporary taste for difficult thought. I suspect that the issue ultimately concerns the duration of one's reading. Heidegger, to take Derrida's own example, is immediately read as difficult because of the challenging concepts he tackles on the page – his profundity, his depth, is extremely visible, in reality a vertical height almost mountainous in scale. And this is always the case with him, the ideas across the page make an immediate, explicit impression that, when engaged, are hugely rewarding. By contrast, Bergson's writing seems to pass us by casually. But this is precisely because Bergson must be read inductively, going from his ideas on the one page into his other works and even into one's own life: any word he might use, any seemingly simple image or concept like 'reversal', 'image', 'composition', 'life', or 'effort', *only begins to make sense within the movements of thought traversing all Bergson's works and even (one's) life itself*. Ultimately, to understand him is not to translate complex, obscure, or abstract terms into either simpler ones or other complex ones – it is to integrate the terms into their original

movement through an act of sympathy that introduces the movements of one's own life (images, affects) into coincidence with the temporality of their unfolding. It is to read them at the correct rhythm and in the correct direction.

To switch to a spatial conceit, one might call Bergson's limpid prose 'centrifugal' rather than 'centripetal': though no page or passage of his writing intimidates like a mountain, each should be seen as the tip of an iceberg that one would be foolhardy to dismiss as 'shallow' or 'straightforward'. Each page, each image, carries within it an implicit, indivisible link with all the others such that its outward movement is precisely what leads the reader *into* Bergson's work *tout court*, into his movement of thought. As we differentiate *his* use of terms from their standard meanings in a centrifugal movement, we also integrate our thoughts with his in a centripetal one. We are introduced to our own Bergsonism slowly and as a (open) whole, as a movement or style of thinking personified in the sum total of the images he uses rather than any one thesis alone (for any *one* thesis is solitary only in appearance). In other words, to read and comment on Bergson, we must do what he does and reverse the usual direction of our thought.

#### IV

And so we come back to the reversal again, and what I have repeatedly maintained is the first of Bergson's three primary claims – to think as a thing: 'either there is no philosophy possible ... or else philosophy consists in placing oneself within the object itself by an effort of intuition.' The object – even when the object is a philosophy – has its own unique concept (that can hardly be called a concept anymore) which 'an empiricism worthy of the name' discovers with effort. Philosophy becomes the search for unique intuitions that only subsequently are expressed, abstracted and extracted, as 'different concepts'. If *knowing* something normally implies employing 'ready-made concepts', then it must be contrasted

with *thinking*, which is a creation of concepts that simultaneously discover their unique object. But how can this be? How can creation or construction also be discovery? The answer is because the object ‘discovered’ is a vital process, it is the ‘*very life of things*’ into which intuition installs itself (Bergson’s second claim), and so to coincide with the object, to find it, is to create, to follow its style of movement with one’s own material. To become a thing, is to *unbecome* oneself, to become variable, for ‘the real’ is what becomes: ‘the real, the experienced and the concrete are recognised by the fact that they are variability itself’. Philosophy is not a representation of its object, but its integration into it – a return, turning thought back to ‘the things themselves’, though in an immanent ontological sense rather than a transcendent epistemological one. Intuition is thinking ‘in duration’, which we must understand as an ‘indefinite series of acts’, ‘multiple and diverse’, that ‘insert themselves in the particular movement of each reality’.

Any becoming, naturally, is always of a ‘particular thing’, a specific reality – there is no ‘Becoming in general’. Yet this thing that becomes is itself temporal – it is a *complexity* of movements. Hence, Bergson does not deny substance, but only reconfigures its meaning: substance is a complexity of change, matter itself being a *kind* of becoming, one at a different rhythm. Indeed, pure immobility, pure inert space, is but a limit, an ideal, ‘reached only, perhaps, in thought and never realised in nature’. If there is anything eternal, then it is the living eternal, the eternity of change.

Before we draw our conclusions, however, there remains one important problem that must be addressed. The third, complementary claim by Bergson, that metaphysics is non-representational, seems to be tempered in the sixth of his nine metaphysical principles (that of reversal or inversion), for here we also find talk of the need for the mind ‘perpetually to revise, or rather to recast, all its categories. But in this way it will attain to fluid concepts, capable of following reality in all its sinuosities and of adopting the very movement of the

inward life of things'. Even earlier Bergson talks of 'fluid representations', and so the question arises of whether or not his metaphysics still retains a trace of the symbolic within it. Does it or does it not strive to dispense with symbols? The easy, instant answer is that the symbolic in question, if retained at all, does not act to refer but to instantiate, to *be* what it 're-presents' by emulating its movement, by entering into it with a kindred movement. The longer, more enduring answer, however, leads us back to the beginning, back to the end of metaphysics. It leads us to the three great critics of metaphysics over the last hundred years, each of whom made *language* their weapon of choice when dispatching the queen of the sciences. I mean, of course, Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and Derrida. In their different ways, they made language the centre of philosophy, a centre consequently with no room for a science that would 'do away with symbols'. Yet the relation of this supersession to Bergson's actual thought is double-edged. It is made more complicated by three awkward facts, each of which corresponds to one of the three claims Bergson makes in the 'Introduction': that intuition is a reversal of thought, that reality is process, and that metaphysics is non-symbolic. Where the last seems primary with respect to the philosophies of language ranged against Bergson, it is in fact only the most explicit (or centripetal) tenet.

With Wittgenstein, for instance, it is more fruitful to compare Bergson than to contrast him, for it is clear that the 'inherent difficulties of metaphysics', its 'contradictions', 'quarrels', and 'antagonisms', are a kind of intellectual disease for the French philosopher no less than for the Austrian one.<sup>12</sup> But rather than apply any therapeutic cure to thought through a reflection on language, Bergson wants to remedy our relation with things directly. Where Wittgenstein dissolves the problems of metaphysics by bringing language back to its roots in the forms of everyday life, Bergson removes *any* extant linguistic intermediary by bringing metaphysics directly back to life – to the life of things. To do this means to reverse the direction of thought rather than the direction of ordinary language (though, of course, for

Wittgenstein, there could be no such distinction). Indeed, for Bergson, it is the rigidity of everyday, public, conventional (ready-made) language that contributes to the problem of an overly intellectualised metaphysics (a mere ‘play of ideas’) in the first place. More broadly still, if the early Wittgenstein inspired Schlick, Carnap, and the rest of the Vienna Circle to replace metaphysics with science, where he in his later work would replace it instead with life, Bergson combines both strategies: metaphysics becomes a science, a valid and serious knowing, *just when it returns to life*. And part and parcel of that process will be the invention of new languages, new representations, and new suggestive images, ‘ready to mould themselves on the fleeting forms of intuition’.

Similarly, Heidegger’s on-off affair with metaphysics (sometimes giving it positive ontological import – as in ‘What is Metaphysics?’, sometimes giving it a relatively negative function – as in ‘The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking’) makes a simple contrast with Bergson no less naïve than any with Wittgenstein. In Heidegger’s own ‘Introduction to Metaphysics’ of 1935, however, the stakes are made clear: metaphysics concerns Being, the ontological question of why there are beings (*die Seienden* – translated as ‘essents’) rather than nothing. This, for Bergson, is not a valid question at all, but precisely one of the aforementioned metaphysical problems that requires remedial work on our relation with things. There are other divergences between the two philosophers, of course, over language and anthropocentrism, for instance: where Heidegger hopes to see the meaning of this question shine through the etymology of words, through the history of thinking virtually enclosed within language, Bergson seeks to remedy the confusions of ontology through a new actual movement of thought and the creation of new languages; where Heidegger sees in Man the ‘coming to the fore’ of the question that thereby gives him a special place amongst beings, Bergson regards the philosophical moment operative only in the ‘effort to go beyond the human condition’, in inhuman, sub-human, and super-human becomings, in the co-

becoming between oneself and the thing.<sup>13</sup> It is not in the ordinary (be it of our language or worldly existence, or the thing's immobility) but in the extraordinary that we are truly thinking with the thing.

But it is the question of Being that divides Bergson and Heidegger more than anything else. 'Being' (*L'Être*) rarely appears in the nominative case in Bergson's 'Introduction', and does so most notably only when qualified as coming in 'degrees'. Bergson more often refers to 'reality' and 'the real', which for him is essentially becoming, mobility, variability, movement. Process over being. By contrast, in his own 'Introduction to Metaphysics' Heidegger regionalises becoming as a mere limit of Being (going so far as to reduce the doctrine of Heraclitus to that of Parmenides): he also 'widens' the question of Being to encompass 'everything that ever was or will be'.<sup>14</sup> Both moves are anathema to Bergson. Years after the 'Introduction', in his *Creative Evolution* and 'The Possible and the Real', Bergson will show how both the question of Being or Nothingness *and* that of possibility (everything that ever was or will be) are born from metaphysical confusions, an abusive use of the intellect. In their place he invokes his own metaphysical method of multiplication by which are discovered only types of beings (degrees of being) rather than no-being or possible-being. Or rather, there is only the becoming of beings, what Whitehead would later describe as the 'being of becoming', but in fidelity to Bergson's theory of stratified reality might better be described as the 'becoming of becomings'. Ironically, Heidegger's later shift into the thinking of *Ereignis* and his attempts to go beyond Being, to cross it out in favour of the Event, will, in a peculiar way, retrace Bergson's own thought. In fact, another name for Bergsonism might well be 'metaphysics without Being', Bergsonism being at heart an attack on Being and, as Jacques Maritain charged, an assault on all ontology.<sup>15</sup>

The third great critic of metaphysics, Derrida, will also put Being ‘under erasure’, crossing it out this time in the name of differentiating language. But where Wittgenstein crushed metaphysics under the weight of a language re-attuned to life, Derrida sees the *aporias* of metaphysics (and so, for him, traditional philosophy *per se*) perpetually reinforced by the ubiquitous generative role of ‘*différance*’. What appears at first to be a critical project consequently reveals itself to be the *restoration* of philosophy *qua* difference to the world, such that, as he once said, ‘I must honestly say that now, less than ever, do I know what philosophy is. [...] It is as impossible to say what philosophy is *not* as it is to say what it is. In all the other disciplines...there is philosophy’.<sup>16</sup> Bergson’s rehabilitation of metaphysics to the world is even more ambitious than this proliferation: philosophy, thinking, becomes the thing. His own differentiations and integrations make the world the subject-matter of philosophy in the most radical fashion imaginable (perhaps too radical even for Derrida, as his encounter with Laruelle might indicate). It is not that philosophy, metaphysics, can be applied to any ‘other discipline’, but that every object has its own metaphysical core, has its own moment wherein, as a becoming, as a movement, it itself *philosophises*.

In truth, perhaps there is no such one thing as ‘metaphysics’, but rather as many different kinds of metaphysics as there are objects in becoming. Philosophy is process, is the event of transformation: whenever the object mutates, there is the moment of philosophy, the intuition, the reflexive-feeling when the thing starts to think. The effort of intuition is the effort of the ‘thing’ as well as the so-called ‘thinker’, the ‘object’ and the ‘subject’, to re-integrate each other through movement or differentiation, to intro-duce each other. The subject-matter of philosophy is the matter itself *becoming* (philosophical). Normally, one thinks of art, history, politics, or any other object becoming philosophical when there is a particular subject that thinks about it in a particular way (its conceptual foundations, presuppositions, objectives), that is, when *we* apply concepts to *it*.<sup>17</sup> Bergson regards this as a

retrospective rationalisation. Before any conceptual expression by the subject, before the expression of traditional philosophy in other words, there is the becoming of the subject-matter itself, and this is the moment of philosophical intuition. Philosophy is immanent to everything in as much as everything becomes, for that is what metaphysics is, the becoming of the object along with the subject. And Bergson's own work in psychology, biology and physics has shown how the objects of even these harder sciences are transformative when followed closely, that is, intuitively.

A sceptic might finally ask, what is the *logic* of this metaphysical movement, what is the *logos* or language of this restorative intuition? *Whose* movement of thoughts is in question? After all, isn't Bergson's own choice of object in the 'Introduction' – the 'simple and privileged case ... the direct contact of the self with the self' – a little too convenient for his own purposes? Of course it is imaginable that introspection might reveal a dissociative movement of the object into images and then concepts, when that object is the conscious subject; of course, we might also speculate that such a process equally occurs in another, when it is his or her mind that is the object. But, continues the criticism, it is sheer fantasy to think that things live, that things have 'states of mind', that there is something it is like to be a thing. Remember, however, that for Bergson things are movements and movement is vital: there is no fixed 'likeness' to any one being, but there is an interiority to the movement that subtends such beings, a movement we can be introduced into with some effort because that is all that composes us too, kinds of movement.

To return to that final problem, then, if metaphysics is non-symbolic, if it has no fixed logic, then that is because it is multiple, it belongs differently to the different things themselves. Metaphysics must keep evolving if it is to survive. This sounds like a formula, and, indeed, it is. For it is the Bergsonians themselves who would be the biggest fools of all if they thought that they had captured the thing and intuition with a just a name like

‘movement’, ‘multiple’, or ‘differentiation’. One might have to say, perhaps paradoxically, that even ‘movement’ itself must keep moving to stay alive. That, in reality, is why metaphysics is an effort, because heterogeneous life itself involves a continual exertion, the difficult resistance against the rising tide of homogeneity and repetition, of cliché and platitude, the ongoing attempt to see and feel difference instead of sameness, to see the life of other things rather than their death.

Metaphysics is dead. Long live metaphysics.

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### Notes to ‘The Very Life of Things’

<sup>1</sup> Though Bergson removes some of the overt language of pain and violence in later editions of the ‘Introduction’, the main contention in the rest of his subsequent work was always that intuition should be regarded as an ‘effort’ (a word whose roots include the notion of ‘force’) and that his philosophy is not one of just passive feeling. See especially the essay entitled ‘Intellectual Effort’, in *Mind-Energy: Lectures and Essays*, translated by H. Wildon Carr (Greenwood Press, 1975), which talks of intuition and imagery in terms of force.

<sup>2</sup> See the first chapter of Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, translated by Nancy Margaret Paul and W. Scott Palmer (Zone Books, 1988).

<sup>3</sup> See Chapter Three of Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution (Bergson Centennial Series)* translated by Arthur Mitchell (Macmillan, 2007). The subsequent naming of this ‘stuff’ as creative emotion or intuition occurs in *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, translated by R. Ashley Audra and Cloudesley Brereton, with the assistance of W. Horsfall Carter (Notre Dame, Indiana, Notre Dame Press, 1977), pp.46, 49, 64. See also my *Bergson and Philosophy* (Edinburgh University Press, 1999), Chapters 6 and 7.

<sup>4</sup> T. Loveday, "Review of *L'Évolution Créatrice*", in *Mind*, vol.17 (1908), pp.402-408; p.408.

<sup>5</sup> ‘Introduction II’ in Henri Bergson, *The Creative Mind: An Introduction to Metaphysics*, translated by Mabelle L. Andison (New York, Philosophical Library, 1946), pp.30-90: p.34.

<sup>6</sup> See Bergson 2007, p.xxx. [CE, p.10/OE, p.502]

<sup>7</sup> They run as follows:

1. Duality of knowing.
2. Two kinds of infinite
3. First reality - the self, as movement
4. Self as flux, not as future nor past (only retrospectively as state of memory)
5. Four images of self – individually weak
6. Effort to invoke numerous different images
7. Concepts are effortless
8. Intuition of singularity of thing
9. Anti-infinite
10. Anti-systems of philosophy
11. Self neither unity nor multiple
12. Uniqueness of how, what
13. Sketches of Paris - static points of view. Covert reliance on intuition to reconstruct from points of view
14. Empiricism and rationalism guilty of same segmentation of psyche into general states
15. Working on zero or infinite
16. True empiricism = true metaphysics – of uniqueness, of novelty
17. Thinking from thing to concept
18. Effort to become a thing
19. State as perpetual, specific becoming (no Becoming in general, or duration in general)
20. Real as variability
21. Pure Immobility, matter, as ideal
22. Clarity as use-value, familiarity, repetition
23. Solving other problems – quarrels of philosophy
24. Painful, violent effort of intuition to reverse, to integrate
25. No empty time or ‘intemporal essence of time’
26. Issue of other minds – of becomings superior and inferior to me, but always a part of me. Transcending the human condition
27. 9 principles or theses: of reality of movement (1, 2); of static, antinomical, and relative intellect (3, 4, 5); of reversing thought in philosophy and science, e.g., calculus as method (6, 7); problem of ‘mode of expression’ for intuition, and unified source of (modern) science and metaphysics (8, 9).
28. Science, metaphysics, and the Platonising mind.
29. Metaphysics without symbols
30. Anti-Kantianism
31. Philosophers as movements, not static theses
32. The method of integration

<sup>8</sup> I am alluding here to the ‘inexpressed’ image closest to the philosopher’s intuition that Bergson discusses in ‘Philosophical Intuition’ in Bergson 1946, pp.107-129. In a note added to the ‘Introduction’ he distinguishes it from the images discussed in the earlier work, but their overall significance is undoubtedly approaching it.

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<sup>9</sup>See Bergson 1977, pp.61-62.

<sup>10</sup> There is a developing history to Bergson's positioning of intuition and metaphysics in relation to intellect and science that he alludes to in the notes from the later edition. What appears as a parallel alliance between science and philosophy later becomes an apparent diametric opposition. However, I discuss and dissolve the starkness of these 'early' and 'later' positions in 'Creative Metaphysics and the Metaphysics of Creativity', in *Bergson Now*, special issue of the *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, edited by John Mullarkey and Stephen Linstead, vol. 35, No.1 (January 2004), pp.68-81.

<sup>11</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Deconstruction and the Other', in Paul Moser and Dwayne Mulder, eds., *Contemporary Approaches to Philosophy* (New York, Macmillan, 1994), pp.368-382: p.373.

<sup>12</sup> See Jean-Claude Pariente, 'Bergson et Wittgenstein', in *Revue internationale de philosophie*, vol.2-3 (1969), pp.183-204.

<sup>13</sup> Martin Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, translated by Ralph Manheim (New Haven/London, Oxford University Press, 1959), p.3.

<sup>14</sup> Heidegger 1959, pp.97, 2.

<sup>15</sup> Jacques Maritain, *Bergsonian Philosophy and Thomism*, translated by Mabelle L. Andison and J. Gordon Andison (New York: Greenwood Press, 1968), p316. See also Mullarkey 2004, pp.78-79.

<sup>16</sup> Derrida 1994, p.373.

<sup>17</sup> For an application of this Bergsonian reversal to four recent philosophers of immanence – Deleuze, Henry, Badiou, and Laruelle – and their usage of drawing/art, see Chapter Five of my *Post-Continental Philosophy: An Outline* (Continuum Press, 2006).