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Flights in the resting places: James and Bergson on mental synthesis and the experience of time

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ABSTRACT

The similarities between William James' *Stream of Consciousness* and Henri Bergson's *La durée réelle* have often been noted. Both emphasize the fundamentally temporal nature of our conscious experience and its constant flow. However, in this article, I argue that despite surface similarities between the OP theories, they are fundamentally different. The ultimate reason for the differences between the theories is that James believed that we should reject psychological explanations that depend on synthesis within the mental sphere. This is because such explanations are incompatible with empiricism. Instead, we should look to the physiological mechanisms underpinning mental states. In contrast, Bergson was an adamant defender of a form of mental processing which he called *qualitative synthesis*. Duration itself, for Bergson, is a form of qualitative synthesis. However, in 1906, less than five years before James died, Bergson convinced him to change his mind. This results in a huge shift in James' thought. Unless we understand how far apart James and Bergson were prior to this shift, we will not have a proper picture of the full influence of Bergson on James' thought, nor of the major changes to James' philosophy that occurred near the end of his life.

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In the 1880s, William James and Henri Bergson independently developed highly original accounts of our experience of time: the former's *stream of consciousness* and the latter's *la durée réelle*. The similarity between these two accounts has often been noted.[1] Despite this, Bergson himself emphasized a fundamental difference between the two. James said that the stream of consciousness was like a bird's life, made up of flights and resting places.

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[1]See Čapek ("Stream of Consciousness"), Girel ("Un braconnage impossible"), Teixeira ("The Stream of Consciousness"), and Sinclair (*Bergson*), for example.

Bergson, on the contrary, claimed that there are *only flights*. There are, he says, "flights in the resting places" (M 580/KW 357). Scholars, including Milic Čapek ("Stream of Consciousness") and Matthias Girel ("Un braconnage impossible"), have argued that Bergson's attempt to distinguish his theory from James was based on a misunderstanding. "Obviously", Čapek wrote, "the opposition between the true duration of Bergson and stream of consciousness of James is more apparent than real" ("Stream of Consciousness", 336). In this article, I argue that Čapek and Girel are wrong and Bergson was right.[2] It is the *similarity* between the two theories that is more apparent than real. This is important because it is only if we understand the real distance between the two philosophers during this period that we can grasp the depth of influence Bergson had on James' thought towards the end of his life. Towards 1907, just a few years before he died, James converted to Bergson's theory of time and radically altered his understanding of the stream of consciousness.[3] I argue that James could not have defended a view like Bergson's before this point because he strongly denied that there could be any form of synthesis or causation within the sphere of the mental. The explanation for such processes, he argued, should rely on physiological rather than psychological mechanisms. Around 1906, however, James became increasingly convinced by Bergson's theory of *qualitative* mental synthesis and this resulted in a radical shift in James' understanding of consciousness, and consequently temporal experience.

This article proceeds in three stages. In §1, I examine James' arguments against mental synthesis in his 1890 *Principles of Psychology* and show how these form the underpinnings for his understanding of the experience of time. In §2, I assess Čapek and Girel's reasons for rejecting Bergson's claim that there is a 'fundamental difference' between his and James' understanding of time and show why, on the basis of the exposition in §1, these reasons do not stand up to scrutiny. In §3, I argue that, around 1906, James became convinced by Bergson's arguments for mental synthesis and that, as a result, this led him to defend Bergson's theory of time as duration.

1. James' rejection of elementarism

At first glance, James and Bergson present descriptions of consciousness and the experience of time's flow that seem to point to deep theoretical similarities. James tells us that consciousness "does not appear to itself

[2]Both Čapek's and Girel's papers are rich and interesting and cover a lot of ground. Although I disagree with them on this point, I learned a lot from both.

[3]There is a significant literature on the relationship between James and Bergson. However, most works treat James' work as if there were no change at all (e.g., Allen, "The use of useless knowledge", Kallen, *William James*; and Marrati, "James, Bergson, and an Open Universe") or play down its importance (e.g., Myers, *William James*; Perry, *The Thought and Character*; and, Townsend, *Manhood at Harvard*). Sprigge (*James and Bradley*) is an important exception.

chopped up in bits … It is nothing jointed; it flows. A 'river' or 'stream' are the metaphors by which it is most naturally described" (PP 233). Bergson also emphasizes the flow and flux of time. He tells us that the "real, concrete, live present … necessarily occupies a duration" (MM 176). We experience continuous change or "perpetual becoming" (TFW 130). The similarity between the two theories have even encouraged accusations that one of the philosophers simply 'poached' the theory from the other.[4] Yet despite the apparent similarity, there are fundamental differences between the two philosophers' positions. These fundamental differences follow from their disagreement concerning mental processing. In this section, I will briefly outline some of James' key methodological commitments in *The Principles of Psychology* so that this disagreement becomes clear.

One of the main aims of James' *Principles* is to show the implausibility of *elementarism*[5] in psychology. Elementarism is a commonly held position in associationist psychology from Locke onwards. The elementarist argues that our mental states are composed of more basic mental elements. For example, you would be an elementarist if you regarded a mental state including a representation of a red and white pen to be composed of red ideas and white ideas as well as shape ideas, and possibly many other ideas obtained by touch, and if you believed that these ideas could be rearranged to create different representations. The elementarist, in James' words, explains experience as an "arrangement of … elements as one explains houses by stones and bricks" (PP 15). In his *Principles*, James subjects elementarism to what Alexander Klein has called a "galaxy of criticisms" ("The Death of Consciousness?", 299). James insisted that although it is true that we can analyse our states and describe these individual features (we can talk about the *redness* of the pen, for example), that is no reason to believe that the mental state is therefore composed of these features as parts. In fact, the assumption of a collection of simple *ideas* in conscious life that continually reappear but in different combinations is entirely baseless. Here, I shall focus on two of James' arguments for this baselessness that, as we will come to see, are particularly relevant to his understanding of temporal experience.

The first argument is from introspection: elementary ideas are not found in experience. When we reflect on our experience, we are never faced with a

[4]The idea that either Bergson or James took their theory from the other is implausible. Although James had published a discussion of 'thought's stream' in an 1884 article "On Some Omissions of Introspective Psychology", Bergson was unaware of the piece and James' *Principles of Psychology* was not published until after *Time and Free Will*. James did read *Time and Free Will* soon after it was published, but by that time he had already written most of his *Principles*, and, of course, already published his 1884 article. On the impossibility of theoretical theft, see Girel, "Un braconnage impossible", 27–39.

[5]The handy term 'elementarism' is not James' own, but is borrowed, following Alexander Klein ("The Death of Consciousness?"), from Edwin Boring (*Sensation and Perception*). See Klein's article for an excellent discussion of James' most important arguments against the position. The discussion in this section owes a lot to Klein's work.

single idea standing out on its own. Rather, our mental states are always indecomposable wholes from which individual ideas can only be produced by means of an artificial process of abstraction. Despite having a history, then, that is closely entangled with the rise of empiricism,[6] elementarism turns out to be incompatible with it. Associationism posits mental atoms that never actually appear in experience.

The second argument turns to the physiological underpinnings of experience: since our sensations correspond with changes in the brain, the same idea appearing in two different experiences would depend on the same brain action. Yet, James insists, the brain is plastic and continually changing in its form. Such a numerically identically brain action would be a physiological impossibility (PP 227). Our ideas cannot be 'bricks' that are reused from one experience to the next, because our physiology is never the same twice. Therefore, a "permanently existing 'Idea' which makes its appearance before the footlights of consciousness at periodical intervals is as mythological an entity as the Jack of Spades" (BC 144).

So far, James does not sound too far removed from Bergson. Bergson is also a critic of the "inert and juxtaposed … discontinuous multiplicity of elements" posited by the associationists (MM 171). Echoing James, he writes that "psychic facts are bound up with one another, and are always given together to immediate consciousness as an undivided whole which reflexion alone cuts up onto distinct fragments" (MM 216). However, James objects not just to the atomistic conception of ideas, but also to the thought that the mind itself could work on such ideas to generate complex experiences from them. If the mind created complex ideas from simpler ones, this would mean that there is unconscious processing going on: mental inferences or syntheses that are not apparent to conscious reflection. Again, James regards such processes as unavailable to introspection and thus incompatible with empiricism. Psychology should be concerned with experiences as they appear or are presented to us (see Klein, "The Death of Consciousness?", 302). It should not posit psychological mechanisms that cannot be empirically verified.

In sharp contrast to James, mental synthesis is central to Bergson's conception of duration, but he posits a *qualitative* rather than *quantitative* form of mental synthesis. The key difference between the two is that the latter can, while the former cannot, be understood in terms of spatial combination. Mental synthesis as *qualitative* synthesis is hard to understand because the intellect naturally thinks of experience in spatialized terms. I will need to spend some time delving into Bergson's theory of duration in order to explain it.

[6]Many of the most important figures in the history of empiricist philosophy defend such a form of associationism. Locke and Hume are perhaps the most famous.

Bergson's theory of duration is the result of his concern to refute those theories of time that understand it in terms of space, i.e. as an "unbounded and homogenous medium" (TFW 99). Time, thought of as "a homogenous medium in which our conscious states are ranged alongside one another as in space, so as to form a discrete multiplicity … ", he argues "[is] a sign, a symbol, absolutely distinct from true duration" (TFW 90). Bergson's objection to associationist psychology too is that it *spatializes* our conscious experience, as James explained with his use of a metaphor of a house made of bricks. The reason why this is a problem for Bergson is that such spatialisation hides the true nature of time. While space is purely *quantitative*, he argues that duration is purely *qualitative*. It is a continuous, growing, heterogeneous flow that is only understood as homogenous clock time by means of an act of the intellect. This act imposes the idea of space onto the otherwise unceasing flow of duration, and thus divides it up into discrete numerical moments. Associationism posits a mental mechanism that works through what Bergson would call a *quantitative* synthesis. Numerable mental atoms are combined together to form a mental whole. For Bergson, any clear idea of number[7] implies "vision in space". Since numerical units are ultimately indistinguishable, to have a clear idea of them we must think of them as co-existing in extended space. If we think of time as composed of units, then we spatialize it in such a way that these moments must be thought together in an extended space. This is the wrong way to understand time. To understand time in the right way, we must think *succession*, not *co-existence*. To understand time, therefore, we must turn away from the quantitative to the qualitative.

For Bergson, our conscious states are a kind of organic whole where former states are not set aside each other and patched up, but rather permeate each other or melt together. James himself gives a good example of this in terms of a single conscious state when he talks about the taste of lemonade. When we take a sip of a good lemonade, the flavour is sweet and sour. Yet, this flavour is 'extremely unlike' the sweetness of the sugar and the sourness of the lemon taken individually (EP 87n.15). The flavours have permeated each other and melted together to form a single flavour. A lemonade where you could taste the two original flavours as if they were individual immutable components would be a bad lemonade. This is an excellent example of the unique way that qualities can be synthesized. However, because of James' blanket rejection of all unconscious mental processing, he did not think that this synthesis could occur within the sphere of the mental. Each experience is a new whole that is the product of physiological

[7]See Robert Watt's excellent article "Bergson on Number". Watt's shows that Bergson's reference to number is in terms of 'pluralities' and not abstract numbers. Furthermore, Watt's article includes a very insightful logical analysis of this part of the argument.

changes in the brain. Bergson's view, on the contrary, is that conscious states themselves permeate and melt into each other and that past states accordingly continue to have an active effect on present states.

The experience of listening to a song you know well is instructive here. When you listen to it, you are not hearing a bunch of notes stitched together, but a melody. The melody makes sense, not just because of what you are hearing at this very moment, but because, in the middle of listening to it, the past, present, and future are one. This is why he says that the "psychical state, then, that I call 'my present', must be both a perception of the immediate past and a determination of the immediate future" (MM 177). You know where the melody has come from and where it will go, and this knowledge of it *as a whole* affects your experience of it at every individual moment. The present experience of listening to the song is 'intermingled' with our memories of listening to it in the past and our expectation of the future. Memory plays as important a role as our present sensations. We have deeper experience of the song with every listen. We are better able to dive into the music, focus in on a particular instrument, notice the sound of the player's fingers against the guitar strings, etc., in ways that we could not upon first listen. This process cannot be explained if we think of the role of memory as a bunch of individual chunk-like memories simply added to our present experience. The experience simply is the organic whole formed from the inseparable interlacing of memory and perception. Such an example should show, he insists, that we can "conceive of succession without distinction, and think of it as a mutual penetration, an interconnection and organization of elements, each one of which represents the whole, and cannot be distinguished except by abstract thought" (TFW 101). This mutual penetration, interconnection, and organization is what Bergson calls synthesis and as a synthesis it is active, but, as Mark Sinclair puts it, it is "an act that is as passive as it is active". This is because:

> It happens whether I like it or not. There is nothing outside of consciousness that synthesises duration for it, and so the synthesis occurs "in" consciousness; but this synthesis occurs prior to, and is in fact, the condition of, explicit acts of will and reflective thought.
>
> (*Bergson*, 52)[8]

We are now at a position where we can start to grasp the difference between quantitative and qualitative mental synthesis for Bergson. *Quantitative synthesis* would bring together separate spatially distinct units into a combination that would not affect their original identity. A brick does not cease being a brick when it is a part of a house. In *qualitative synthesis*, the 'parts' or qualities melt together and intermingle such that what they are

[8]See Sinclair (*Bergson*, 47–53) for excellent discussion of qualitative synthesis, and also Riquier (*Archéologie de Bergson*, 292–3).

depends on their relation to other qualities. As they intermingle and melt together, their identity changes. Qualitative synthesis should not be thought of as a combination of originally distinct parts, but as a reorganization of relations within an organic whole. *Quantitative synthesis* requires a combiner external to the synthesized parts. For *qualitative synthesis,* the process is immanent to consciousness itself.

Whether or not the synthesis is quantitative or qualitative, such mental processes, which occur within consciousness but under the threshold of explicit reflective thought, are exactly the kind which James rails against in the *Principles*. This is because of the supposed incompatibility with empiricism. Synthesis, for James, must be a physical, not a psychical, process. However, mental synthesis is essential for Bergson's theory of duration. Duration is a continuous growing flow because the present and past are forever synthesized.

James' anti-elementarism is the crucial underpinning of his understanding of temporal experience. In the time world, he writes, "the first known things are not elements, but combinations, not separate units, but wholes already formed" (PP 585). The language James is using here is important. When the Jamesean psychologist investigates time, they are looking for 'known things', these are mental states that James refers to as 'wholes already formed'. While Bergson's duration is also an organic 'whole', it is a whole that is forever transitory. James' wholes, on the other hand, are the *products* of physiological synthesis. When James reflects on experience, he treats it as a count noun (as opposed to a mass noun).[9] He examines *an experience*, a unified, indecomposable, yet analysable whole that will die away and be replaced with another. Our conscious life is actually a series of discrete countable blocks of experience. It is important to keep this in mind when reading his famous description of what he calls the "unit of composition of our perception of time". This unit, he says, has:

> a *duration*, with a bow and a stern, as it were—a rearward and forward-looking end. It is only as parts of this *duration-block* that the relation of *succession* of one end to the other is perceived. We do not first feel one end and then feel the other after it, and from the perception of the succession infer an interval of time between, but we seem to feel the interval of time as a whole, with its two ends embedded in it. The experience is from the outset a synthetic datum, not a simple one; and to sensible perception its elements are inseparable, although attention looking back may easily decompose the experience, and distinguish its beginning from its end.
>
> (PP 574)

It is clear that James puts temporality at the center of conscious experience. We cannot focus our attention on some timeless moment of experience, any

[9]I'd like to thank an anonymous reviewer for highlighting the importance of the distinction between a count and mass noun for the point that I am arguing for here.

experience we reflect upon will be temporal; it will span some short stretch of measurable clock time. This stretch is variable but "fairly steady" because, he writes, "of some fairly constant feature in the brain-process to which the consciousness is tied. *This feature of the brain-process, whatever it be, must be the cause of our perceiving the fact of time at all.*" (BC 250). We shouldn't be misled by James' talk of the stream of consciousness being 'nothing jointed'. Each 'unit of composition' is a product caused by a brain process that must be, admittedly not quite 'stitched together' with the next unit, but at least replaced by it such that our experience of the flow of time is made up from the movement from one unit to the next. This is made clear when James introduces another metaphor to describe temporal experience: the bird's life. He writes:

> [A]s we take, in fact, a general view of the wonderful stream of our consciousness, what strikes us first is this different pace of its parts. Like a bird's life, it seems to be made of an alternation of flights and perchings … Let us call the resting-places the "substantive parts," and the places of flight the "transitive parts," of the stream of thought.
>
> (PP 236)

The resting-places or substantive parts described here are the units of composition or duration-blocks as James described at PP 574. They are indecomposable wholes that have their own duration. The flights are the changes from one of these wholes to the next. The flights are what allow the stream of consciousness to feel continuous. This is what allows James to say that "the law of time's *discrete flow*" is the "composition out of units of duration" (PP 585). Yet, it's important to remember that because of James' anti-elementarism, any 'composition' can only be an intellectual construction. We can point to individual 'beats' of time, but any attempt to perceive time accurately by introspection alone soon becomes very difficult. Our sense of time is, James says, "quite vague" (PP 586). Each individual duration block has a "feeling of pastness" intrinsic to it and, as we move from one to the next, the memory of the previous block merges with that feeling to create a wholly new one. However, since this is not a composition of distinct durations with a particular length, t^1 is not simply *added* to t^2, we cannot obtain a clear perception of time in itself from it. "Our only way of knowing it accurately", James insists, "is by counting, or noticing the clock, or through some other symbolic conception" (PP 586).

Now that I have presented James' understanding of temporal experience, I can evaluate whether or not Bergson interpreted it correctly.

2. Did Bergson misinterpret James?

In a letter to James from 1903, Bergson latched onto the metaphor of the bird's life in order to highlight the key difference between their two views.

He wrote that "I see *places of flight* in the *resting-places* themselves, rendered apparently immobile by the fixed gaze of consciousness" (M 580/KW 357). Outside of the friendly exchange with James, in a 1923 letter to Floris Delattre, Bergson claims that the analogy between the two views "not as great as you might think, and it covers up a fundamental difference" (M 1418). This is because "in the *real duration* where I operate, there is only *flight*, there is no *rest*, and furthermore, there are no *places*, no more of *flight* than of *rest*" (M 1418). Čapek and Girel think these comments show that Bergson has missed out on something quite simple about James' view. They suggest that Bergson understands James' places of rest and immobile and static. Yet, they remind us that James' places of rest are only places of *relative* rest. It is not that they are durationless, but that they are 'slower' than the places of flight. Girel calls them "rhythmic pauses" ("Un braconnage impossible", 51). Čapek reminds us that James' "shortest sensation lasts at least 0.002 of a second. 'At once' never amounts to a mathematical durationless instant" ("Stream of Consciousness", 334).

Everything that Čapek and Girel say about James is, of course, correct. James' resting places or substantive parts do not lack duration. These are 'duration-blocks' with a temporal span. As James puts it, the "smallest effective pulse of consciousness, whatever else it may be consciousness of, is also consciousness of passing time" (EP 76). In fact, at least once, James suggests that it is the *flights* that occupy "no time" (MEN 70). This would mean that if the places of rest were not temporal, there would be no flow of time at all. However, I do not think that Bergson would have missed something so basic. I think that Bergson recognized that he and James meant very different things at this point when they referred to 'duration'. James certainly realized this. He was surprised by Bergson's use of the word 'durée'. Towards the end of 1902,[10] he expressed his astonishment by writing on his copy of *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience* that it was a "queer use … for what is successive" and a "queer word for that which is supposed to change!".[11] At the back of his copy of *Matière et mémoire*, he made himself a note "durer = changer, croître, devenir". He had to remind himself that 'duration', for Bergson, means to change, to grow, to become. As Frédéric Worms puts it in *Le Vocabulaire de Bergson,* "*Duration* consists in the continuous succession of content whatever that may be" (*Le Vocabulaire,* 20). And, F.C.T. Moore wrote that "my sense is that the French word [*durée*] can more readily be applied to *the fact or property of going through time* than the

[10] I infer that James wrote these comments around this time from the content of his December 14th 1902 letter to Bergson in which he says that he has just given both his *Essai* and *Matière et mémoire* a careful read (CWJ X 168–169).

[11] James' personal copies of his Bergson books are available at the Houghton library, Harvard. Ref. WJ 607.75.

English 'duration'". Moore encouraged (albeit unsuccessfully) the translation of *durée* with the archaic English word 'durance' instead' (*Thinking Backwards*, 58–59). Consequently, I think that in contrast to Bergson, James would probably have understood 'duration' to mean the length of time during which some thing or action lasts. When James refers to the duration of an experience, he is talking about the fact that *an* experience lasts for a certain length of time which we can measure by use of a clock. He is not trying to highlight the fundamentally processual nature of the experience itself. There is, of course, change going on within these experiences. It would be a rather strange phenomenological description if not. However, the key issue is that James does not identify this change with time in the way Bergson does. In fact, he quite clearly distinguishes between the two: the "intuited duration", he says, "stands permanent, like the rainbow on the waterfall, with its own quality unchanged by the events that stream through it" (PBC 250). Change "fills time" (EP 77). There is no suggestion that his stream of consciousness refers to a sense of time resistant to spatializing thought whatsoever.

In the 1923 Delattre letter, Bergson makes the important point that James' theory of the stream of consciousness, at least in the 1890 *Principles*, is a psychological theory, whereas Bergson's understanding of *la durée* has a deeper metaphysical concern. When Bergson theorizes duration, he is concerned not just with our experience of time, but time *in itself*. It is not easy to determine what James' view on time itself was or even whether or not he had a fixed view until very late in his life. In a letter to Renouvier from 1880, he asks, "[i]f time and Space are not *in se* do we not need an enveloping ego to make continuous the times and spaces, not necessarily coincident, of the partial ego?" (CWJ V 149) That is, if time and space do not exist as things in themselves, then doesn't this spell victory for the absolute idealist? Since James saw himself as in sharp opposition to the philosophy of the absolute idealists, this suggests that James does believe in a fixed time *in itself*. But then four years later, in another letter to Renouvier, he seems quite clearly to state that he believes time not to be a "chose en soi" (CWJ V 525). At the very least though, the James of the 1890 *Principles* does seem to make the *assumption* that time has a fundamental reality which is *extra-subjective*. He writes that "*time-and space-relations,* however, *are* impressed from without—for two outer things at least the evolutionary psychologist must believe to resemble our thoughts of them, these are the time and space in which the objects lie. *The time-and space-relations between things do stamp copies of themselves within*" (PP 155). The *Principles* is supposed to eschew metaphysical speculation and as a result instead of arguing for metaphysical position a priori, James starts by stating several assumptions that the psychologist 'must believe' to proceed in their science. One of these is a "physical world in time and space" (PP 7). Even

if this is only an assumption, it is one that is quite contrary to Bergsonian psychology, let alone Bergsonian metaphysics.[12]

As a note on his copy of Bergson's *Essai*, James writes,

> B[ergson]'s effort seems to result in a theory that puts all disconnection in the physical and all connection in the mental world. Then by "endosmosis" they share their properties. The common view would on the contrary give continuous and identical "duration" to the physical.[13]

In the first two sentences, James is referring to the fact, for the early Bergson, there is no time, strictly speaking, in the physical world taken by itself. In space, he says, "there is never more than a single position of the hand and the pendulum, for nothing is left of the past positions" (TFW 108). It is a present which is "always beginning again" (MM 178). Without experience, there would be no time. It is only because "I *endure* … that I picture to myself what I call the past oscillations of the pendulum at the same time as I perceive the present oscillation" (TFW 108). It is the mind that weaves together the perpetual presents of space. Without the mind and its reservoir of memories there would be no time-succession whatsoever. The final result comes from what Bergson calls a kind of endosmosis between duration and space. 'Endosmosis' is a biological term referring to the movement where a fluid moves through a permeable membrane to mingle together with another fluid of different density. The process or 'mingling' Bergson describes is a kind of mutual interaction where what we call clock time emerges from the mixing together of the purely quantitative space and the purely qualitative duration. Without the contribution of quantity, we could not isolate distinct moments since this requires numeration. Without the contribution of qualitative *endurance,* we could not think the succession of these moments. 'Succession', according to Bergson "exists solely for a conscious spectator who keeps the past in mind and sets the two oscillations or their symbols side by side in an auxiliary space" (TFW 108–109). In contrast, it seems safest to associate James' view with what he calls in the last sentence of the note the 'common view'. Continuous and identical duration exists in the physical world, and the psychological realm is the realm of the discontinuous. For James, the time relations are impressed on our thought from the external world, but each "original intuition of time covers but a few seconds" (EP 77n.6). This means that the mind must piece together these temporal parts in order to form an idea of time in general. By an "ideal piecing together and construction we frame the notions of immensity and eternity, and suppose dated events and located things therein, of whose actual intervals we grasp no distinct idea" (EP 77n.6). The continuity of

[12]For an informative discussion of these assumptions in James' psychology, see Klein ("Divide et Impera!").
[13]See note 11.

James' stream is pieced together from segments. This is one of Bergson's main concerns with his theory of consciousness. It is divisible into distinct (albeit temporal) parts in a way that is completely anathema to him. Bergson affirms "the absolute indivisibility of the real envisaged as continuity in time", whereas, he writes, "there would be divisibility on the contrary if *flight* was punctuated by *rest*" (M 1418).

There is one final response which could bring James' and Bergson's theories of consciousness closer together. As we've seen, James noted that Bergson's *durer* = *changer* and he does highlight that "inside of the minimal pulse of experience which, taken as object, is change of feeling, and, taken as content, is feeling of change" (EP 77). We might think that what the two philosophers share is the emphasis on the fundamental processual nature of experience, with only the difference that Bergson identifies this flux with the true nature of time, while James does not. Bergson insisted on the heterogeneity of duration, the way that it feels as if it moves at different speeds at different times, and that by means of our perception and conception, we sometimes 'freeze' the real, giving us rest as a "a snapshot of a transition" (M 1418). If we put time *in itself* to the side for a moment, isn't this enough for a distinction between *flights* and *resting-places*? Again, I think that if we try to focus on the analogy here, we will miss the fundamental difference. This is that for Bergson and James here what we identify for both as the flights and resting places refer to two different levels of reality and that each philosopher considers the levels in a way that is upside to the other. On another revealing note written on his copy of Bergson's *Essai*, James wrote:

> I, in my own way of dealing with pure experience, should say that the pure bits of durée … are germs and that the developed "objects" which they change into, including among these the notion of a time succession of all things, even of themselves, are truer, and supersede them. B[ergson]'s description of "durée" seems to be true only if reality be a timeless solipsism.[14]

This is James' way of using the analogy that we have just sketched to highlight the fundamental difference. James' flights, here identified with pure duration, are lesser developed elements of reality. They are mere germs. They are the movement from one resting-place to the next, but it is in the resting places that we find real objects and the true time succession. Even if this time succession is an 'ideal construction', it reflects time in itself in the extra-subjective world. In contrast, Bergson sees the resting places as abstractions made from the real which is the pure transition of the flights; "transition", he says, "is the reality itself" (M 1418). For Bergson, it is when we free ourselves from the abstracting tendencies of the spatialized intellect

[14]See note 11.

that we come into contact with the pure transitional nature of time. Duration "is the form which the succession of our conscious states assumes when our ego lets itself *live*, when it refrains from separating its present state from its former states." (TFW 100). This is time *in itself*, but because, for Bergson, the physical realm is a perpetual present, James claims that Bergson makes of reality a 'timeless solipsism'. I think then that we can conclude from this that even to the extent that Bergson uses the analogy of *flights* it hides a fundamental difference. Bergson's flights are very different to James'.

At this point it is worth summing up just how different the two philosophers' views are. James rejects all forms of synthesis within the mental sphere. Although Bergson rejects 'quantitative synthesis' in the mental realm, what he calls 'qualitative synthesis' is an essential part of his understanding of duration. It is the continual interlacing of the past and present. For James, the stream of consciousness has units of composition with distinct durations measurable in clock time. These units are produced by means of physiological processes that occur in the brain. The time-relations which constitute the sense of duration within these units are impressed on us from outside. For Bergson, in contrast, the physical 'outside' only has time because we synthesise its present 'moments' by means of our own inner duration. This inner duration is truly continuous in a way that James' stream cannot be. A moment of time does not die away to be replaced by a new one in the present, but lives on virtually as time grows continuously. Any breaks in this continuous flow are due to the work of perception and conception. They in no way affect the continuous transition going on underneath their action. In this sense, there are flights within the resting places. It is when we free ourself from perception and conception and are at one with this flow that we come into direct contact with the true nature of time. For James, on the other hand, the true nature of time is revealed in the places of rest not the flights. The flights are mere germs of a truer reality yet to be.

For all of these radical differences, though, James did, in his later life, convert to Bergson's understanding of duration. However, we can now see just how a major the change in James' thought must have been for this to occur.

3. James' conversion to Bergsonism

James was fascinated by Bergson's philosophy before he was convinced by any of it. The two had sent each other copies of their works prior to the beginning of the twentieth century, but they had never met, nor had they engaged in a detailed correspondence. This changed in 1902 when James dedicated himself to a more detailed reading of Bergson's works. Following this, he wrote to him to say that he finds his philosophy to be a "work of exquisite genius" (CWJ X 168). But James was not afraid to highlight his concerns. A

few months later, after establishing the friendly correspondence, he wrote that "your unconscious or subconscious permanence of memories is in turn a notion that offers difficulties, seeming to be the equivalent of the "soul" in another shape" (CWJ X 203). James' explanation of memory in the *Principles* relied heavily on the development of physical pathways in the brain. The idea of there being subconscious memories somehow connected to our present experiences without being immediately available to it would have been incompatible with his empiricism. Bergson's most helpful response to James' worry comes almost two years later. He tells him that,

> I cannot avoid making a very large place for the unconscious … This existence of a reality outside of all actual consciousness is, no doubt, not the existence-in-itself of the older substantialism; and, nevertheless, it is not the actually-presented to a consciousness. It is something intermediate between the two, always on the point of becoming or of again becoming conscious, –something intimately mingled with the conscious life, "interwoven with it," and not "underlying it" as substantialism would have it.
>
> (TC 612)

Here Bergson restates the mutual penetration, interconnection, and organization in the mental world which he refers to as 'qualitative synthesis'. In §1, we saw why James is resistant to such an understanding of synthesis. Slowly, however, Bergson does start to convince James that his view of the 'permanence of memory' is an viable new option occupying a place in logical space between the substantialism of souls and his own version of empiricism.[15] We can see how important this realization is to James when we look at the notebook he kept between 1905 and 1908, which scholars now refer to as "The Miller-Bode Objections" (MEN 65–130).[16] The important thing about this notebook for our present purposes is how James expresses his worry about his earlier view of consciousness, comes to realize its weaknesses, and starts to take Bergson's view of qualitative synthesis more seriously. In an important entry from the 12th September 1906, James reflects on his ongoing reluctance to allow for active mental processes to occur within the sphere of the mental. Such processing, he has always thought, would require us to postulate some sort of mental substance, like a soul, which he here calls the 'scholastic self':

> The scholastic self violated the principle of representability, in radical empiricism, so I always shied away from it in spite of its conveniences. But did n't

[15] James and Bergson met for the first time a few months following this letter on May 28th and no doubt this would have given Bergson the opportunity to present his position to James even more clearly (see TC II 614).

[16] This is because much of the notebook is taken up with his attempts to develop a response to objections to his philosophy developed by Dickinson S. Miller and Boyd Henry Bode. It's beyond the scope of this article to look at these objections. However, I have dealt with them in more detail in Dunham "On the Experience of Activity" and "James and the Metaphysics of Intentionality".

> [*sic*] I at the same time stick to "pen," "me," & "you," and to the relations "co" and "ex," in a purely static manner? Did n't [*sic*] I treat them as so much flat as so much flat "content," immediately given, and, as such, fixed for the time being? Did n't [*sic*] I leave the mechanism of their givenness behind the scenes? Ditto the mechanism of change, in the sense of their being superseded by new contents given? Substituting the kinetoscopic for the continuous view of the world? Which is the living common sense view?
>
> (MEN 104)

As I've shown above, the early James treated experience *as a noun* (in particular, a *count noun*). We examine *an experience* as an indecomposable *whole*. Experience itself is a series of such wholes. We can see, in this passage, James reflecting on the fact that although he was unwilling to postulate the soul because of his empiricism, the 'static' count noun-like manner according to which he treated his experiences may be just as contrary to ordinary experience. He treated his experiences as *products*, the result of physiological processes rather than psychological ones. But the result of this is a 'kinetoscopic' view of the world. A kinetoscope was an early motion-picture device which produced moving images by means of sequential static images. James was concerned that his 'mechanism of change', the brain, was starting to look very much like the kinetoscope and only capable of a rather artificial presentation of change. James' notebook entry continues:

> If I did all this, and did it wrongly, would n't [*sic*] the remedy lie in making activity a part of the content itself, reintroducing agents, but not leaving them behind the scenes? Vivify the mechanism of change! Make certain parts of *experience* do work upon other parts! Since work gets undeniably done, and "we" feel as if "we" were doing bits of it, why, for Heaven's sake, throw away that *naif* impression, and banish all the agency and machinery into the region of the unknowable, leaving the foreground filled with nothing but inactive contents?
>
> (MEN 104)

Here we see James for the first time come to suggest that mental activity might be rather less problematic than he has maintained. He had previously always insisted that activity or agency is not something that we *feel* or sense in experience, but here he seems to turn back on this view. This would result in quite a shift in James' understanding of experience. It would mean no longer understanding experience *as a noun*, but *as a verb*.[17] It would mean treating experience as active and continuously changing. This is, what James calls the 'dynamic' rather than a 'static' view of experience. Two days later, James starts to think through this 'dynamic' theory of experience by reference to Bergson. He writes:

[17]I borrow this distinction between experience as a noun and experience as a verb from Phemister "All the time and everywhere".

> B[ergson]. gets the permanent agency that common sense gets by his supposition of a mind with its memories. This can be translated into phenomenal terms, if we restore dynamic form to the phenomenon. The phenomenal mind is a subconscious reserve growing in time by addition & intussusception of new memories; passing into attentive consciousness and acting from moment to moment, in obedience to desire; calling, and effectively calling, on new parts of experience to come, while other new parts come without being called.
>
> (MEN 106)

In the third sentence, James points out that Bergson's phenomenal mind is not dissociable from memory. It continuously grows with the addition of new memories. These new memories actively combine by 'intussusception'; another biological term which refers to a serious condition where parts of the intestine slide into each other. By means of this unpleasant metaphor, James is trying to highlight the fact that these memories are not simply added together like apples in a fruit bowl. They merge to form a new whole. Since this new whole includes our present perception, these memories have an ongoing effect on our experience. Certain 'parts' of experience act on others. In perception, Bergson claims,

> our mind notes here and there a few characteristic lines and fills all the intervals with memory images which, projected on the paper, take the place of the real printed characters and may be mistaken for them. Thus, we are constantly creating or reconstructing. Our distinct perception is really comparable to a closed circle in which the perception-image, going towards the mind, and the memory-image, launched into space, career the one behind the other.
>
> (MM 127)

Perception has a particular subjective character that is unique to the perceiver because so much of it is influenced by our pre-existing memory. As I glance at the plant of my desk, my senses grasp just a few minor details, which my memory is then able to fill in to provide me a full-bodied meaningful experience. For Bergson, then, memory does a lot more work here than the data revealed by the senses. Perception is the ongoing work of qualitative synthesis.

Bergson's philosophy does not require the postulation of the 'soul' or 'scholastic self', but he does make a distinction between 'the superficial self' and the 'deeper self'. The superficial self experiences the world in terms of numerical, well-defined states, which sound rather like the conscious states James focuses on in his *Principles*. However, 'below' this self is the deeper self whose states melt into one another and form an organic whole (TFW 128). The superficial self breaks up the continuity of consciousness and duration in order to grasp the world in terms of clear discrete concepts and symbols. This has a clear practical use and enables us to communicate and live within a social world. It only becomes problematic when we start to treat the concepts and symbols as if they are direct copies of reality itself rather than merely practical tools which enable us to deal with reality

more easily. It is because of our tendency to take them for reality itself that we lose sight of the deeper self. "In order to recover this fundamental self", Bergson writes,

> a vigorous effort of analysis is necessary, which will isolate the fluid inner states from their image, first refracted, then solidified in homogenous space. In other words, our perceptions, sensations, emotions and ideas occur under two aspects: the one clear and precise, but impersonal; the other confused, ever changing, and inexpressible, because language cannot get hold of it without arresting its mobility or fit it into its common-place forms without making it into public property.
>
> (TFW 129)

William James credited his reading of Bergson's *Creative Evolution*, published in 1907, as the cause of his intellectual transformation (CWJ XI 377). Yet, it is the two-self theory and the understanding of qualitative synthesis already found developed in *Time and Free Will* that have the greatest influence on his thought. In his *A Pluralistic Universe* lectures from 1909, James makes this clear. He writes that his

> present field of consciousness is a centre that shades insensibly into a subconscious more … What we conceptually identify ourselves with and say we are thinking of at any time is the centre; but our *full* self is the whole field, with all those indefinitely radiating subconscious possibilities of increase that we can only feel without conceiving, and can hardly begin to analyze.
>
> (PU 130)

We can see that James is making a distinction between the 'centre' of consciousness, which is Bergson's 'superficial self', which we identify ourselves with through the use of concepts, and the 'full self', Bergson's 'deeper self'. "Every bit of us at every moment", James writes, "is part and parcel of a wider self" (PU 131).

This two-self view is also central to James' very last unfinished book *Some Problems of Philosophy*. Much of this work is taken up by James outlining a distinction between 'percepts' and 'concepts'. He argues that the "intellectual life of man consists almost wholly in his substitution of a conceptual order for the perceptual order in which his experience originally comes" (SPP 33). Percepts are our direct contact with the original continuous flux of life. Concepts are artificial creations carved out of this original flux used to comprehend and manage the world. Essential as they are for practical life, they are "forever inadequate to the fulness of the reality to be known" (SPP 45). If we try to understand ourselves in terms of these concepts, we end up with a fractured view of ourselves, the superficial view. From this, it is impossible to put the pieces back together again in order to obtain a continuous picture of personal identity. To avoid this problem, we must recognize the deep self's power of qualitative synthesis. As Sinclair

sums up the theory, the self "*is* the change that it synthesises in duration" (*Bergson*, 58).

With this Bergsonian two-self view firmly at the center now of James' philosophy, a Bergsonian understanding of time follows naturally. As James puts it, "the times directly *felt* in the experiences of living subjects [i.e. the *percepts*] have originally no common measure" (PU 104). The continuity felt in the 'perceptual order' is heterogenous. Time flies, after all, when you're having fun. But while all these "*felt* times coexist and overlap or compenetrate each other thus vaguely",

> the artifice of plotting them on a common scale helps us to reduce their aboriginal confusion, and it helps us still more to plot, against the same scale, the successive possible steps into which nature's various changes may be resolved, either sensibly or conceivably.
>
> (PU 104)

James had already started to develop this view of time in his *Pragmatism* lectures. There he writes that "[e]verything that happens to us brings its own duration … surrounded by a marginal "more" that runs into the duration … of the next thing that comes" (P 87). The "one Time we all believe in" is a human conceptual construct which unifies the world, but ultimately it is an artificial form which we inherit and acquire during our primary development.

We can already see how much of James' philosophy must have changed to get to this point. James sums this up nicely in a letter to the British psychologist James Ward,

> the centre of my whole anschauung … has been the belief that something is *doing* in the Universe, & that *novelty* is real. But so long as I was held by the intellectualist logic of identity … I thought that a world in which discrete el[e]ments were annihilated, and others created in their place, was the best descriptive account we could give of things … Bergson's *synechism* has shown me another way of saving novelty and keeping all the concrete facts of law-in-change.
>
> (CWJ 12 279)

For the James of the *Principles*, the resting-places were the sights of reality, while the flights were only their germs. Each of these resting places, each "pulse of cognitive consciousness, each Thought", James maintained, "dies away and is replaced by another" (PP 322). Now, the resting-places have become "snap-shots taken, as by a kinetoscopic camera, at a life that in its original coming is continuous" (PU 105). It is this ultimate continuity that James refers to as *synechism*. The snap-shots are themselves the product of a form of mental synthesis that was originally rejected for apparently being incompatible with empiricism.

For all of these changes, however, James does not stop referring to himself as an empiricist. Why does he now think that mental synthesis is compatible with empiricism? There are two reasons. First, as we have already seen, James now treats empirical reflection in a slightly different way. In his *Principles*, as a psychologist, he was concerned with experience as it appears, as it is *presented to us*, and that turned out to be a static picture of experience, experience *as a count noun*. Bergson convinced him to consider experience from the 'dynamic' point of view, that is as *lived through*, or *as a verb*. This gave him a more active picture of experience and as such the idea of there being active synthesis occurring within it no longer seems as incompatible with introspection. The second reason is that James thought that Bergsonian synthesis was revealed to us in cases of *mystical* experience. In his late article "A Suggestion About Mysticism", his suggestion is that mystical experiences should be understood in terms of Bergson's two-self theory. States of mystical intuition, he writes, "may be only very sudden and great extensions of the ordinary field of consciousness … an immense spreading of the margin of the field, so that knowledge ordinarily transmarginal would become included" (EP 157). James' description of the 'ordinary field of consciousness' is particularly vivid and helpful for our purposes. He tells us that:

> The field is composed at all times of a mass of present sensation, in a cloud of memories, emotions, concepts, etc … Its form is that of a much-at-once, in the unity of which the sensations, memories, concepts, impulses, etc., coalesce and are dissolved. The present field as a whole came continuously out of its predecessor and will melt into its successor as continuously again, one sensation-mass passing into another sensation-mass and giving the character of a gradually changing *present* to the experience, while the memories and concepts carry time coefficients which place whatever is present in a temporal perspective more or less vast.
>
> (EP 158)

When the threshold of consciousness is extended, then we do not come into contact with a greater 'sensation-mass', since this requires stimulation from outside. "But", he says, "with the memories, concepts, and conational states, the case is different"

> My hypothesis is that a movement of the threshold downwards will similarly bring a mass of subconscious memories, conceptions, emotional feelings, and perceptions of relation, etc., into view all at once; and that if this enlargement of the nimbus that surrounds the sensational present is vast enough, while no one of the items it contains attracts our attention singly, we shall have the conditions fulfilled for a kind of consciousness in all essential respects like that termed mystical … It will be of reality, enlargement, and illumination, possibly rapturously so. It will be of unification, for the present coalesces in it with ranges of the remote quite out of its reach under ordinary circumstances; and the sense of *relation* will be greatly enhanced. Its form will be intuitive or perceptual, not conceptual, for the remembered or conceived objects in the enlarged field are

> supposed not to attract the attention singly, but only to give the sense of a tremendous *muchness* suddenly revealed.
>
> (EP 158–159)

We could read James here as saying that what we deem mystical experience does not necessarily get us in contact with anything mystical, strictly speaking, but what it does do is open us up to an experience of the deeper workings of our mind, workings that go on at every moment whether we experience them or not. In this sense, then, even though normal introspection does not necessarily put us into contact with these qualitative syntheses, it is at least possible to experience them (and James claims that he has had several of these 'mystical experiences') and thus is not in conflict with empiricism per se.

4. Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that despite the apparent similarity between the stream of consciousness view in James' *Principles* and Bergson's *la durée*, there is, as Bergson claimed, a fundamental difference. The importance of this for the understanding of the experience of time is that Bergson believed that the real experience of time is revealed in the continuous 'flow' that is disclosed to us when we abstract ourselves away from the static concepts of ordinary perception. For James, there is no sense that anything is revealed to us outside of ordinary experience. Our sense of time is 'copied' from time itself which has a real existence in the physical world. The 'flights' or 'changes' in between our concrete experiences are mere 'germs'. However, as I've shown, around 1906, Bergson's works convince James to change his mind. In the *Principles*, James claimed that each experience had a fairly steady duration dependent on a consistent underlying brain process. James was at pains to emphasize the importance of physiological over mental mechanisms for psychological explanations, including the explanation of temporal experience. The main effect of Bergson's work on James is to convince him of the importance of processing occurring within the sphere of the mental. Bergson convinces James that memories, emotions, and feeling have an ongoing subconscious existence within the mental sphere and that these continually synthesize with the mass of sensation to generate our present experiences. Once James is convinced of this, he no longer emphasizes the steadiness of duration, but rather the heterogeneity and incompatibility of each individual's original experience of time. Our one clock time, James now theorizes, is merely a conceptual construction created for practical use. The real source of our feeling of change, duration, and succession is perceptual rather than conceptual. Real time is revealed in the feeling of our mental states 'melting into each other' and most explicitly to our deeper self when the 'threshold of consciousness' is lowered.

Bergson's influence on James' understanding of temporal experience, therefore, was considerable.[18]

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Abbreviations

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[18]Although I have only given a sketch of James' Post-Bergsonian philosophy in this article, I hope to have laid the groundwork in order to develop the sketch in more detail in later work.

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