Bergson and William James

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William James is the source of some of the most effusive praise Bergson's work has ever received. In a letter to his brother Henry, he wrote that Bergson "is an exquisite genius, perhaps the most so among the living" (CWJ III 331) and told C.S. Strong that his *L'Évolution créatrice* was "the absolutely *divinest* book on philosophy ever written" (cited in Perry 1935: 604). But did Bergson have a significant influence on William James's philosophy? Many commentators have suggested that for all this praise he did not. James's student and biographer Ralph Barton Perry claimed that James had a tendency to write effusively about those whose views were close to his own, but nonetheless, in this case, as in many others, there was no genuine influence (1935: 601). In 1905, Bergson himself wrote that "the "Bergsonian" influence counts for nothing in the development of his philosophy" (1905: 229-30). More recently, Mark Sinclair has claimed that the influence may flow the other way around and that James's 'stream of thought' was an influence on Bergson's theory of duration rather than vice versa (2020: 13). In this chapter, I shall argue that Bergson's philosophy did have a very important impact on the development of James's thought. The reason why commentators often fail to recognise this impact is because they have not realised just how much James's philosophy changed in the last few years of his life. Those who deny the influence, including Bergson himself, often do so because, correctly, they see only a superficial similarity between James's theory of the 'stream of thought' (at least as found in his early works), and Bergson's theory of duration. However, Bergson's work from 1903 onwards, and his 1907 *L'Évolution créatrice* in particular, convinces James to make some hugely important changes to his understanding of the stream of consciousness. The aim of this chapter is to provide a sketch of these changes.[1]

In §1, I discuss James's early philosophy, the influence of the French *phenomenist* Charles Renouvier, and the sharp contrast between his theory of the stream of consciousness and Bergson's duration. In §2, I argue that even though there are some surface similarities between James's 1903-1904 philosophy of pure experience and Bergson's pure duration, this contrast remains. I show that James's was committed to a logical principle that he believed prohibited the defence of a Bergsonian understanding of experience. In §3, I argue that in 1906, James started to reconsider his philosophical methodology and that after reading Bergson's *L'Évolution créatrice*, he was convinced he could renounce the aforementioned logical principle and undergo a full

[1] For a more detailed presentation of some of the arguments made in this chapter, see Dunham 2020 and *forthcoming*.

methodological shift. In §4, I conclude that this led to a global change in his philosophical worldview.

I

William James was well-tuned in to the French philosophical scene a long time before he encountered the work of Bergson. Like many generations of French students taking the *agrégation* including Bergson, James carefully studied Félix Ravaisson's 1867 report on the progress of nineteenth-century French philosophy.[2] However, while many of those French students would be swept away by Ravaisson's evocative and powerful call for a new "spiritualist positivist", which makes up the report's final chapter, James was most intrigued by the discussion of the rather unorthodox *phenomenist* Charles Renouvier. Renouvier ticked all of James's boxes. He argued for the primacy of practical reason, a philosophical method that was consistent with the scientific method, and he defended a form of empiricism that nevertheless did not shy away from metaphysical postulations. Most famously, James found in Renouvier the argument that freedom is something in which we must freely choose to believe.[3] But Renouvier exerts a much more pervasive influence than just this and few aspects of James's philosophy were not affected by his attempts to think through Renouvier's system.

Renouvier's *phenomenist* system is based on two key claims. The first is epistemological: "[o]nly phenomena exist for knowledge". The second, metaphysical: "phenomena and their laws (which are also phenomena but constant or constantly assembled or reproduced phenomena) are reality itself" (ECG III.i 3). The first claim places Renouvier in the British empiricist tradition to which James was already sympathetic. The second is much more unusual. When Renouvier claims that phenomena are 'reality itself', he is not defending a form of subjective idealism whereby all that exists is the phenomenal content of our minds. Rather, he is presenting a panpsychist metaphysics according to which the fundamental nature of reality also has a phenomenal character. There is no in itself without a corresponding for itself. Just as a chain of phenomena proceeding 'from next to next' according to the laws of thought constitutes our personal identity, so too for all the other beings in the world. For this reason, he often refers to his metaphysics as a revised monadology (ECG II.i.22). Nonetheless, he argues that this is a *phenomenist* position because the chain of phenomena is the only kind of existence that we have

[2] James made notes on the report in his *Index Rerum* notebook. This notebook is in the Houghton library, Harvard, reference bMS Am 1092.9
[3] See PP 1890: 948, and Richardson 2006: 121

direct knowledge of, so we can either postulate that reality must be analogous to the phenomena we know, or deny that knowledge is possible.

For Renouvier, our consciousness *qua* phenomenon is constituted by a series of 'pulses' of experience that come into consciousness and then pass away once replaced by another. Furthermore, Renouvier's world, "so far as it is real, is like an immense pulsation composed of a number (unassignable though at all times determinate) of concerted pulsations of different grades" (ECR 441). James believed that Renouvier's analysis of experience offered a richer conception of each "pulse" than the one found in classical empiricism. Classical empiricists like Locke and Hume are interested in the ideas that make up an experience (the ideas of green, round, etc. that make up my experience of a green plate), but they show little interest in the experience itself. The same is not true for James and Renouvier. For both, the entire thought is the basic fact with which we should deal – including not just the object of thought, but also its relations, tendencies, and duration.

In his 1890 *Principles of Psychology*, James tells us that the stream of consciousness is like a 'bird's life' and is thus made up of both "flights" and "perchings" (PP 236). This points to a major difference between James's and Renouvier's philosophy. The perchings are the resting places in the stream of consciousness. They are the pulses or phenomena recognised by Renouvier. However, while Renouvier only admitted *disjunctive* relations between phenomena, James argued that we must also admit the existence of flights – these are transitive or conjunctive relations between these pulses or phenomena. Empiricism, James argued, should be a doctrine that admits only the data of experience, but it must also not exclude any data given by experience. When we reflect on our inner experience "our fields of consciousness seem to run continuously into one another" (MEN 32). And when we reflect on our personal histories, we recognise that they are "processes of change in time, and *the change itself is one of the things immediately experienced*" (ERE 25). The problem with *classical* empiricism (and Renouvier's *phenomenism*) is that ignores the experience of *transition* or *conjunction*. Radical empiricism is radical precisely because it refuses to exclude this crucial datum.

With the distinction between flights and resting-places established, we not only establish a key difference between James and Renouvier, but also an important contrast between Bergson and James. Bergson wrote to James that, "I see *places of flight* in the *resting-places* themselves, rendered apparently immobile by the fixed gaze of consciousness" (M 580). This points to a crucial distinction between the kinds of philosophical traditions that James and Bergson were working within. Although James found in Renouvier an improved form of empiricism, Renouvier's work is still very much part of the classical empiricist tradition. This is because he

agrees with them that the analysandum is *an* experience, i.e. experience as a *noun*. An experience is something that is *presented to* an observer.[4] James's early work treats experience in the same way. He is interested in the analysis of *an experience* and consider the one that one experience is followed by another. "Each pulse of cognitive consciousness, each Thought', James writes 'dies away and is replaced by another" (PP 322; cf. CWJ XII 278). However, to return to Ravaisson's report, one of the reasons why many generations of students were swept away by its manifesto for a spiritualist positivism is that it offered an alternative way of thinking about experience. It encouraged us to think of experience *as an activity*, as *lived through*, not as a noun but as a verb in the active voice.[5] This is an understanding of experience that finds *flights* even in the apparent resting places.

From Bergson's 1888 *Essai sur les données immediate de la conscience*, it is clear that his philosophy belongs in the lineage of French spiritualist philosophy (See Sinclair, 2020). The experience of duration necessary for a proper understanding of time is this experience as activity, experience as *lived through*. As he writes, "[p]ure 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). Conscious experiences do not replace each other or stand alongside each other, but rather,

> the past and the present states into an organic whole, as happens when we recall the notes of a tune, melting so to speak, into one another. Might it not be said that, even if these notes succeed one another, yet we perceive them in one another, and that their totality may be compared to a living being whose parts, although distinct, permeate one another just because they are so closely connected? (TFW 100)

The crucial thing about the understanding of experience being presented here by Bergson is that there is no sharp divide between one experience and the next. In *L'Évolution créatrice*, he writes: "Our duration is not merely one instant replacing another; if it were, there would never be anything but the present—no prolonging of the past into the actual, no evolution, no concrete duration. Duration is the continuous progress of the past which gnaws into the future and which swells as it advances" (CE 4-5). This is an understanding of experience that the early James cannot defend. The reason why is that he is firmly committed to the 'intellectualist' principle of identity and he thinks that this prohibits something from being both *one* and *many* at the same time. To be *many* is to not be *one*, and to be *one* is to not be *many*, so to postulate that something

[4] I have borrowed the distinction between experience as *presented to* and experience as *lived through* from Hallie, 1959.
[5] I have borrowed the distinction between experience as a noun and experience as a verb in the active voice from Phemister, 1994

can be both at the same time is, for the early James, a contradiction – "the abstract concepts of oneness and manyness must needs exclude each other" (PU 127). The defence of such a strong mereological nihilist position might seem odd, but it allowed him to undertake a war on two fronts. Against the associationist psychologists, he used it to deny that complex experiences are made up of simple ideas and instead argue that they are indecomposable unities. Against the Hegelians, he used it to argue that reality cannot be fundamentally a monist Absolute because it is contradicted by the evident real multiplicity of everyday experience. However, the principle prevented James from defending a Bergsonian view of experience, because he believed it to show that, "[**d∫istinct mental states cannot "fuse"**" (PBC 177. Bold in original). If the associationist psychologists were right, then we would have a single experience that had constituent parts – the simple ideas, if Bergsonian psychology were right then a present experience would have previous experiences as constituent parts. Both would result in a situation where a current experience would be one (insofar as it is a whole) and many (insofar as it is made up of parts - whether simple ideas or previous experiences) – at the same time, and James is convinced that this would be to admit a contradiction into his philosophy.

II

The publication of Bergson's "Introduction à la Métaphysique" in January of 1903 inspired James to re-read Bergson's works and he became increasingly more sympathetic to the French philosopher's ideas (See CWJ X 187-189 and 203-4). At this point, James had started to defend a philosophy of 'Pure Experience' and he wrote enthusiastically to Bergson and others about the great potential of Bergson's ideas and the possible conciliation of them with his own philosophy of pure experience (See CWJ X 203-4 and 495). *Prima facie* there are some parallels between James's 'pure experience' and Bergson's pure duration, but closer examination shows them to be irreconcilable. For James, pure experience is the primary matter out of which all else is formed; "there is no stuff but pure experience-stuff" (ERE 1904, 31). Unlike *actual* experience, pure experience is neither consciousness nor matter but it is potentially or dispositionally either (MEN 1903–4, 26–7), and becomes one or the other (or both) by means of its relations to other experiences. Pure experience qua pure is only experienceable in states where our conceptual categories are not readily available to cast it within their net. He tells us that only new-born babies, or men in semicoma from sleep, drugs, illnesses may have a 'pure experience' because they are having an experience "without a definite *what*" (ERE 1904, 46). (In other words, they

are having an experience that has not been captured conceptually). Whatever this somewhat mysterious 'pure experience' stuff is, it seems to exist at the future fringe of our present experience, and is molded into its consequent conceptual form by means of its relations with antecedent experiences.

In 1903 Bergson argues that the method of 'intuition' allows us to direct our attention inward and get below the solidified crust of ordinary experience—the habitual world of ordinary concepts and symbols—to a dynamic rather than static, absolute rather than relative, and ultimately more profound understanding of reality. Bergson uses the example of watching an arm rise through geometrical space. Although when I watch your arm rise up, I can conceive of it as moving through defined spatial positions, and it is as if I could cut up each of these positions into distinct moments, the same is not true of my inner experience of moving my own arm up in the air. The latter exposes the fiction of the former. As I lift my arm, I cannot divide the experience up into distinct replaceable moments. It is a continuous process where the past (the intention) continues to live on throughout until my arm reaches the desired position. As *lived through*, we understand it as one single continuous process with concrete duration, even though as *presented to* (from the outside) the lifting of an arm may appear as if it is merely passing through a succession of individual static moments.[6] For Bergson, when we understand experience as lived through, we shift our focus away from the "*already-made*", the "*being-made*" (CE 250). The 'being made' is not a series of entitative units, one replacing the other, but rather a 'continual flux'. In this continual flux, we do not experience one discrete moment being replaced by another (although this is how we must understand it when we reflect upon it), but rather a pure continuity where every moment extends into every other. This is what Bergson calls 'real duration'. Metaphysics, he tells us, is the science that dispenses with symbols and by doing so puts us into contact with the dynamic, continuous, yet creative really real.

On the face of it, then, it sounds a little like both are pointing to a pre-conceptual metaphysical reality that is more real than the world of ordinary experience. However, in James's case this is not right at all. In his 1903-1904 writings on pure experience, there is no sense in which this experience qua pure puts us into a more direct relationship with reality. In fact, quite the opposite. We can see in a note written circa 1905 on his personal copy of Bergson's *Essai*,

- [6] In Bergson's later works, he says that although we may think that we *perceive* space in such a way, we do not. It is only ever *conceived* in this way (CE 165). Such an idea "symbolizes the tendency of the human intellect to fabrication" (CE 65). This is because "The moving body is never really *in* any of the points; the most we can say is that it passes through them… They are simply projected by us under the movement, as so many places where a moving body, which by hypothesis does not stop, would be if it were to stop. They are not, therefore, properly speaking, positions, but "suppositions". (IM 44)

that James himself became aware of this crucial distinction. The key difference, he wrote, is where each consider the 'truth' to lie:

> I, in my way of dealing with pure experience, should say that the pure bits of durée (queer word for what is supposed to change!) 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.[7]

Insofar as an experience is at the 'pure' stage, it is a mere germ for James, because it "is only virtually or potentially either object or subject as yet. For the time being it is plain unqualified actuality or existence, a simple *that*" (ERE 23). What a pure experience will be depends on the relations it enters into and only once it has entered into a relation will it be a developed object. I take it, then, that when James says that only new-born babies, or those in semicoma from sleep, drugs, or illnesses can have a pure experience, he isn't telling us that there's some sort of higher metaphysical experience going on here from which we could learn such as we might obtain from a well-practiced form of Bergsonian intuition. Rather, he is pointing to the fact that pure experience only comes to those who lack the self-consciousness necessary to report on it. The James of the 1903-4 radical empiricism writings is a direct realist who believes that, as Timothy Sprigge puts it, "the perception of a physical thing is its literal presence as an element in the perceiver's stream of consciousness" (1993: 138). Crucially, contra Bergson there is no 'truer' understanding of time to be gained on from such experience, real objects, conscious-experiences, and a time succession of things are only formed from the stream of self-conscious and conceptualized experiences. The transitions between experiences where pure experience lies, James says, occupy "no time" (MEN 70).

This leads us to James's exclamation concerning the queerness of using the word *durée* for that which is supposed to change. The word 'duration' is more typically used to refer to the length of time during which something continues to be. James himself regards our stream of consciousness as built up from 'duration-blocks'. Our experience of the present moment has its own duration. He approvingly cites Reid, who argues that duration could not be made up of elements without duration any more than extension could be made of elements without extension (PP 575n.4). "The unit of composition of our perception of time", he writes, "is a *duration,* with a bow and a stern, as it were—a rearward- and a forward-looking end" (PP 574). It is not that we experience the parts of this duration one after another and then synthesise them. Rather, we experience them all at once: "we seem to feel the interval of time as a whole, with its

[7] Ref WJ 607.75 at the Houghton library, Harvard

two ends embedded in it" (PP 574). It is clear here from James's use of metaphors where experience is referred to as 'blocks' or 'units' that he is treating experience as a *noun* and duration is the length of time that each of these units or blocks last. The experience of change, for James, is not the experience of duration, but the experience of one duration block being replaced by another. This is why he argues from our experience of change to the existence of transitive or conjunctive relations, the flights that link our resting places or duration-blocks together.

III

We can see from James's correspondence, notebooks, and marginalia that he had been reading Bergson carefully throughout the first decade of the twentieth century. However, a notebook entry from September 12th 1906 marks a significant moment in his engagement with Bergson's work. This entry is crucial because, for the first time, we see James start to reflect on the methodology that he uses to understand experience and to self-consciously consider the distinction between treating experience *as a noun* and *presented to*, as he has done, and treating it *as a verb* and *lived through* as Bergson does. "May not my whole trouble", he writes, "be due to the fact that I am still treating what is really a living and dynamic situation by logical and statical categories?" (MEN 104). He considers the example of perceiving a pen. Didn't his previous view, he asks himself, treat this perception as "so much flat 'content,' immediately given, and, as such, fixed for the time being?" And 'Did n't [sic] I leave the mechanism of their givenness behind the scenes? Ditto the mechanism of their 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).

The example of the kinetoscope is of paramount importance. A kinetoscope was an early cinematic device where an individual could look through a peephole and see a motion picture produced by a series of images on a strip of film. The illusion of motion is the result of a quick succession of static images. James was concerned that he had been treating experience in the same way, i.e., he treats experience *as a noun*. However, through reading Bergson, James started to realise that this might not be the right way to think about experience, and that rather than think of experience *as one experience and then another*, we should consider it as a verb in the active voice as *continuous*. In the same entry, he writes:

> 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? For the conjunctive relations, as I have talked of them so far, are inactive, they do but represent the fruits of relating activities elsewhere performed. (*ibid*)

It is clear in these 1906 entries that James found Bergson's understanding of experience extremely tempting. He was clearly unhappy with his older views and was certainly considering a major distinction in the direct of Bergonism. However, it wouldn't be until he read Bergson's 1907 *L'Évolution créatrice* that he would finally have the confidence to do so. The reason why is that James, at this point, still believed that things—whether psychological or physical—do not compose because it would entail the supposed contradiction of one thing being at the same time many things. However, after James had read *L'Évolution créatrice,* he was convinced that this 'intellectualist' principle could finally be abandoned. This provides us with the context for understanding James's exclamation when he reports that in Bergson's book: "the beast intellectualism" had been "killed absolutely *dead!*" (CWJ XI.378). The beast intellectualism (or conceptualism) is the doctrine that we understand the underlying nature of the world by means of static intellectual concepts. It is the view that the *intellectual* or *logical* has ultimate priority over other forms of comprehending the world. James's claim that one thing cannot be at the same time many things is intellectualist because it, in Peircean language, put a roadblock in the way of inquiry: no matter what experience might tell you, the logic is clear and cannot be contradicted.

The key claim of *L'Évolution créatrice* is that if the intellectual is given this priority, evolution cannot be understood. The intellect thinks the world through mathematics—especially geometry. It does this because it is *practically useful* to do so. Our mathematical conception of space allows us to plan our possible interactions with the world. But, nonetheless, such a geometrical space is not something we could ever *perceive*, but only *conceive.* It is "an idea that symbolizes the human tendency of the human intellect toward fabrication" (CE 165). As I watch your arm rise, and represent it as moving through geometrical space, I catch this movement in a conceptual net. The positions I represent your arm moving through, however, are not *real* positions that actually exist, but rather *suppositions*. The problem is that because it is practically useful to *think* space mathematically, scientists end up overemphasising the spatiality of objects and they start to think of them as they are *in themselves* in terms of discrete measurable units. They substitute the signs they have developed to *comprehend* these beings for the original beings themselves.

This is especially problematic, Bergson argues, when time is considered in the same way, and thought of as 'spatialized', i.e., cut up into a succession of discrete units. This intellectualist understanding of time could never explain how evolution could occur, since the latter "implies a real persistence of the past in the present, a duration which is, as it were, a hyphen, a connecting link" (CE 24). Evolution, he claims, requires the continuation of the past into the present. Furthermore, to understand evolution we must account for the emergence of real novelty and no matter how elaborate our mathematical formulae may be, Bergson insists, there is no way they could introduce the slightest bit of novelty into the world. All new moments would be mere rearrangements of past moments. Consequently, the intellectualist understanding of time fails to do justice to both the past and the future.

There is, however, an alternative. We can understand life and evolution through intuition. Through intuition—in the 'depths' of our experience—we come into contact with pure duration, creative life, and the unceasing swelling of the 'absolutely new'; an inner life of the mind that cannot be represented by images or concepts. This intuition requires us to turn away from the faculty of seeing and become one with the act of willing. This means turning away from the evidence of the 'external senses', and focusing on the inner sense, because it is in inner sense that we can most understand our experience as an activity, as a verb in the active voice, as a 'continual flux'.

On the 13th June 1907, after reading *L'Évolution créatrice*, James wrote to Bergson to tell him that he felt 'rejuvenated' (CWJ XII 376). By showing that even the most instantaneous moment of experience is dynamic, Bergson shows that:

> no element of it could be treated as a 'piece' or stable grammatical subject, but that whatever *is* has the durcheinander character, meaning by that that when you say it is anything, it obliges you also to say not only that it is more and other than that thing, but that it *is not* that thing, both the is and the *is not* implying at bottom only that our grammatical forms, condemned as they are to staticality and alternation, are inadequate, if we use them as literal substitutes for the reality. (MEN 123)

If we want to understand how this can be "without paradox", he writes, we can so only by "awakening sympathy with it". While "logic makes all things static. As living… all radiate and coruscate in many directions" (MEN 123). Contrary to what James had previously thought, if we follow Bergson's method of intuition, we directly experience one thing being many at the same time as being one.

James most clearly defends the importance of *intuition* as a method in the 1909 *A Pluralistic Universe* lectures. He tells his audience to "dive back into the flux itself" (PU 113), to "place yourself at a bound, or *d'emblée*, as M. Bergson says, inside of the living, moving, active thickness of the real" (PU 116), and to "put yourself in the making by a stroke of intuitive sympathy with the thing" (PU 117). However, for all these literary flourishes, the key thing James is doing is simply highlighting Bergson's distinction between the 'already-made' and the 'being-made'. He says that "[w]hat really exists is not things made but things in the making", and what he means by 'intuitive sympathy' is simply to put oneself from the perspective of the one raising their arm, rather than the one watching the arm being raised. It is to experience oneself as becoming something that one is not—something new—while at the same time remaining what one was, and to experience the past being retained into the present through memory and will. In short, experience as a verb, rather than as a noun. Insofar as we recognise that we become what we are not, while remaining what we are, we have direct experience of 'manyness-in-oneness' despite what the 'logic of identity' might say. Therefore, "each of us actually is his own other", and "to that extent", James maintains, "livingly knowing how to perform the trick which logic tells us can't be done" (PU 115).

IV

The effect of Bergson's philosophy on James's thought is seriously underestimated if we consider it to merely lend support to his already existing views. It did not. It fundamentally changed them. As we have seen above, it made him reconsider the appropriate introspective method for psychology and as a result led to a complete rethinking of his understanding of the stream of consciousness. His understanding of time, concepts, intentionality, and personal identity would all have to change as a consequence. It's often underemphasised, but there is an important sense in which James was a systematic thinker and if these aspects of his philosophy changed, then that would lead to important changes in his pragmatism and the theory of truth, amongst other things, too. Unfortunately, James died only a few years after his Bergsonian conversion, but he still left enough post-conversion work behind for scholars to work with and to start to make full sense of Bergson's impact and to evaluate whether ultimately that impact was positive or negative. I can do no more than speculate here, but one reason to think that it should be positive is that one of the most pertinent critiques of James's philosophy is that it leads to a kind of "subjectivistic madness" where there is no room for an objective reality—a sense of how things really are (Russell, 1909). Whatever may be true of James's pre-conversion

philosophy, it is clear that Bergsonian intuition puts James into direct contact with an objective reality beyond the phenomena. Whether or not this would be enough to satisfy his critics, however, must be a topic for another paper.

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Abbreviations

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