

HENRI BERGSON: A SOLUTION TO THE MIND-BODY PROBLEM?

CARLOS BLANCO-PÉREZ¹

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ABSTRACT: This paper aims to outline the principal philosophical dimensions of Bergson's idea of mind and its relationship with physical reality. I will examine the treatment of this long-standing metaphysical problem in the works of this philosopher, and I will show that no clear solution to this perennial question of Western thought emerges from Bergson's account of the nature of mind and matter.

KEY WORDS: Bergson; mind-body problem; élan; intuition; consciousness.

Henri Bergson: ¿una solución al problema mente-cerebro?

RESUMEN: Este artículo investiga las dimensiones filosóficas fundamentales de la idea bergsoniana de mente y de su relación con la realidad física. Un examen de cómo el filósofo francés aborda este inveterado problema metafísico pone de relieve, sin embargo, que de su visión sobre la mente y la materia no brota ninguna solución clara a una de las cuestiones perennes del pensamiento occidental.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Bergson; problema mente-cerebro; élan; intuición; conciencia.

1. SCIENCE AND CONSCIOUSNESS

Few philosophers have achieved the popularity and recognition of Henri Bergson (1859-1941). Admired for works like *Essai sur les Données Immédiates de la Conscience* (1889), *Matière et Memoire* (1896), *L'Évolution Créatrice* (1907) and *Les Deux Sources de la Moral et de la Religion* (1932), the celebrated French philosopher, winner of the 1927 Nobel Prize for Literature,

¹ Universidad Pontificia Comillas. Correo electrónico: cbperez@comillas.edu.

developed an original approach to philosophical thinking in which his concern about the idea of «life» and its metaphysical implications was vividly underlined.

Bergson's interest in the nature of life and its evolutionary genealogy, together with his broader treatment of classical philosophical questions from the theory of knowledge, the methodology of science and the fundamentals of ontology, inevitably led him to consider the inveterate mystery of the union between mind and matter. Indeed, Bergson addressed the elusive connection between matter and spirit in numerous articles and books, some of which expressly dealt with this apparently insurmountable abyss that seems to fracture the universe. His notion of «life» —in particular his concept of «*élan vital*» (Bergson, 1948, pp. 88-98; Linstead-Mullarkey, 2003, pp. 3-13; Merleau-Ponty, 1978)— was thought to build a valuable bridge between the traditionally opposed Cartesian terms of *res cogitans* and *res extensa*, and between the parallel antagonism confronting mechanism and finality. However, did Bergson actually outline a rigorous attempt at solving the puzzling mind-body problem, or did he just conceal this ultimate difficulty faced by any ontology behind his speculations about the nature of living forces?

The first difficulty that emerges is epistemological in nature. According to Bergson, the character of the positive sciences is the principal impediment for the philosopher's goal of understanding the intricacies of the mind, given that «*la science positive a pour fonction habituelle d'analyser. Elle travaille donc avant tout sur les symbols (...)*» (Bergson, 2011, p. 5). But this primarily analytical goal darkens the correct frame in which the philosophical treatment of life and spirit should be placed. Modern science is a daughter of mathematics and it remains infused with its spirit, because it seeks to measure reality.

Inspired by the unity of nature, a majority of philosophers has tried to represent «*cette unité sous une forme abstraite et géométrique*» (Bergson, 1948, 191). Compelled by the ubiquity of the law of conservation of energy, some of them have denied the efficacious power of the will. But the spirit cannot be measured (Bergson, 2009, p. 70; Bergson, 1948, p. 192), and it is dubious that the law of the conservation of energy is actually satisfied in the realm of consciousness (Bergson, 2009, p. 7; this remark had been extensively examined in his earlier work *Essai sur les Données Immédiates de la Conscience* —Bergson, 1961, p. 115f.—). Moreover, the mathematical language used by the natural sciences is incapable of grasping the «*durée*», as Bergson remarked in one of his last publications («*Le possible et le réel*», in Bergson 2009). The concept of time used by sciences like physics and astronomy does not point to «*durée*» in its deepest sense but to a relationship between

fixed quantities, to «*un rapport entre deux durées, un certain nombre d'unités de temps (...), un certain nombre de simultanéités*» (Bergson, 1961, p. 145).

Following a perspective that resembles Wilhelm Dilthey's (Dilthey, 1970, p. 142), Bergson believes that analysis is unable to grasp the intimate nature of the phenomenon of life. The principle of causality, which shapes our scientific view of the world, evokes a series of regularities observed in the past. Nevertheless, there is no reason to believe that this principle should be applied to the mental realm. The facts of consciousness are not related in a causal manner, as it happens with external phenomena. Empirical facts reproduce themselves in a homogeneous space and may be subsumed into general laws, while deep psychological facts «*se present à la conscience une fois, et ne reparaitront jamais plus*» (Bergson, 1961, p. 164). Analysis detaches itself from intuition, but life can only be apprehended through intuition, through our «*placing ourselves*» in life as it is. This movement demands the abandonment of any relative viewpoint in order to reach «*l'objet lui-même*» (Bergson, 2011, p. 5), liberated from any subjection to symbols, like the ones employed by the positive sciences in their intellectual assault on the structure and functioning of physical nature.

For Bergson, consciousness is inextricably connected with memory (Bergson, 2009, p. 5), while the unconscious retains nothing from its past; rather, it constantly perishes and resuscitates. Consciousness is capable of anticipating the future and it is «*avant tout mémoire*» (Bergson, 2009, p. 27). Unlike the body, confined into a perennial present, consciousness is aware of the past (Bergson, 2009, pp. 4-5), and «*quand je dis 'je' ou 'mois', je fais d'abord allusion à un être qui est affecté en ce moment d'une certaine manière, mais je pense aussi à mon histoire passé (...). Ce que je suis est en grande partie ce que j'ai été*» (Bergson, 1992, p. 286). It joins that which has been and that which will be. Thus, although consciousness is «*incontestablement liée au cerveau chez l'homme*» (Bergson, 2009, p. 7), the idea that the brain is indispensable for consciousness is not intellectually clear. The thesis of the equivalence of brain and consciousness (according to which «*tout état de conscience correspond à un certain ébranlement des molécules et atomes de la substance cérébrale;*» Bergson, 1961, p. 5) is seriously mistaken and ultimately leads to contradictions (Bergson, 2009, p. 21), even if it permeates a significant part of modern philosophical thinking (Bergson, 2009, pp. 191-210).

In Bergson's view, elucidating the different cerebral structures and the fundamental neurobiological mechanisms does not render a complete understanding of the nature of consciousness. A psychological fact can determine its concomitant brain state, but the opposite thesis does not hold,

because «*au même état cérébral correspondraient aussi bien des états psychologiques très divers*» (Bergson, 2009, p. 193). Already in *Essai sur les Données Immédiates de la Conscience*, Bergson had written: «*plus on descend dans les profondeurs de la conscience, moins a le drot de traiter les faits psychologiques comme des choses qui se juxtaposent*» (Bergson, 1961, pp. 6-7), for it would forget (in a Kantian perspective) the unity of the subject that perceives. And «*précisément parce qu'un état cerebral exprime simplement ce qu'il y a d'action dans l'état psychologique correspondant, l'état psychologique en dit plus long que l'état cerebral*» (Bergson, 1948, p. 263; see also Bergson, 2009, p. 3). More eloquently, «*il y a infiniment plus, dans une conscience humaine, que dans le cerveau correspondant*» (Bergson, 2009, p. 14) and «*la vie de l'esprit déborde de même la vie cérébrale*» (Bergson, 2009, p. 19), such that «*considérés en eux-mêmes, les états de conscience profonds n'ont aucun rapport avec la quantité*» (Bergson, 1961, p. 102). Therefore, the brain cannot determine thought (Bergson, 2009, p. 15). Against materialism, perception «*dépasse infiniment l'état cerebral*» (Bergson, 1953, p. 201). Any form of psychological determinism rests on an associationist conception of mind and it thus must be rejected (Bergson, 1961, p. 117). However, and in opposition to the idealist stance, the French philosopher claims that «*la matière déborde de tous côtés la représentation que nous avons d'elle*» (Bergson, 1953, p. 201). Correlation should not be confused with causation: brain and mind show solidarity, not equivalence (Bergson, 2009, p. 208), because experience simply confirms a certain relationship between brain and consciousness.

According to Bergson, both realism and idealism lead to irreconcilable contradictions in their treatment of consciousness and matter. The realist identifies mental representations with material movements inside the brain, as if the external world were reproduced inside the cerebral cortex, in some sort of «*chambre noire*» (Bergson, 2009, p. 207; here we find an intelligent anticipation of Kenny's «*homunculus fallacy*» —Kenny, 1971, pp. 155-165—). Yet, he subtly surrenders to idealism, because even if he is conceiving of everything in spatial terms (as *res extensa*), he is still placing representations and cerebral states in parallel, as if they constituted two different substances. Thus, a «*parallelist*» depiction is forced to oscillate between realism and idealism. These incongruities stem from a series of metaphysical hypotheses which cannot be proven, like the understanding of causality in purely mechanical and mathematical terms and the idea that in order to reach the «*thing in itself*» —beyond its representation— it suffices to reduce the imagined representation to its «*mathematical*» components (Bergson, 2009, p. 208).

In the context of the contemporary idea of «*multiple realizability*» (Bechtel-Mundale, 1999, pp. 175-207), it is interesting to notice that Bergson

thinks that even if our body of neuroscientific and psychological knowledge became significantly increased in quantity and quality, «*nous pourrions deviner ce qui se passé dans le cerveau pour un état d'âme déterminé; mais l'opération inverse serait impossible*» (Bergson, 2009, p. 15), because we would have different, equally appropriate mental states (one might wonder if the inverse thesis is not true: namely, that various cerebral states could be involved in the same psychological fact). Hence, it seems that the motions that articulate the act of thinking do not exhaust its ultimate essence. Thinking is far subtler than a soliloquy in which one merely speaks to oneself, as Bergson explains in «*De la sélection des images pour la représentation. Le rôle du corps*» (Bergson, 1953).

2. INTUITION, DURÉE, AND LIFE

Intuition plays a central role in the Bergsonian universe. Indeed, his whole thinking can be regarded as an attempt at vindicating the philosophical prominence of this category. The importance of intuition is present in some of his earliest works, like *Essai sur les Données Immédiates de la Conscience*, as well as in his latest writings (as in «*L'intuition philosophique*», a lecture given in Bologna in 1911, included in Bergson, 2009b, pp. 117-142). It lies behind his criticism of the psychology of John Stuart Mill, Hippolyte Taine and other exponents of a naturalistic approach to the study of mind, in which internal life is regarded as an aggregate of chemical elements (Bergson, 1992, pp. 291-296).

Nevertheless, such an emphatic underscoring of intuition underlines one of the most relevant difficulties of Bergson's apparent «solution» to the mind-body problem, for what does this reliance upon such an elusive notion actually imply? According to the French philosopher, an analytical approach cannot reach the 'self'. It barely stops at the «states of the 'self'». The analytical perspective tries to find the 'self' within its psychological states, but is unable to arrive at the 'self' itself, because the latter is reduced to a series of symbolic representations. Thus, it loses its «wholeness.» Likewise, any constructivist perspective, which attempts to look for the object by «joining» its decomposed fragments, is condemned to lose the entire picture of that which it seeks to understand. This perspective artificially reconstructs the psychological fact as the result of the association of ideas and impressions, confusing «*l'explication du fait avec le fait même*» (Bergson, 1961, p. 123). As Bergson remarked in one of the courses on psychology that he taught at

Lycée Henri-IV in 1892-3, an empiricist theory of abstraction is prisoner to a vicious circle that involves abstraction and generalization (Bergson, 1992, p. 390). The 'self' is regarded as «*un vain fantôme*» (Bergson, 2011, p. 5; Bergson, 2009, p. 5). Here it is easy to find resemblance with recent authors like Thomas Nagel (Nagel, 1974, pp. 435-450).

Nevertheless, Bergson's discontent with any analytical and empirical treatment of the 'self' and consciousness in general («*qui dit esprit dit, avant tout, conscience;*» Bergson, 2009, p. 4) does not make him advocate rationalism, Kant's formalism (given that Kant reduces consciousness to «*une existence purement formelle;*» Bergson, 1992, p. 296) or Berkeley's idealism (for a criticism of Berkeley's theory of mind, according to which «*la matière est coextensive à notre représentation*», see Bergson, 2009b, p. 125f). Rationalism, in his view, reifies the 'self' as «*un lieu où les états se logent*» (Bergson, 2011, p. 20), as a spiritual substance that tends to shape another world of potentially infinite nature and scope. Instead, what Bergson defends is a «*true empiricism*», which, as he claims in vivid and poetic words, «*se propose de server d'aussi près que possible l'original lui-même, d'en approfondir la vie, et, pour une espèce d'auscultation spirituelle, d'en sentir palpiter l'âme*» (Bergson, 2011, p. 20). This true empiricism is also the true metaphysics needed to understand the spirit and its life. The 'self' cannot be apprehended through the narrow lenses of traditional philosophical categories like unity and multiplicity, because it challenges conceptual divisions and scholarly disputes. Concepts must adapt themselves to things, instead of shaping things in accordance with their demands. We have to grasp «*la vie même des choses*» (Bergson, 2011, p. 40). The connection with Husserl and the phenomenological movement seems clear (On the connection of Bergson's philosophy with phenomenology, see Mullarkey, 1999, p. 22f).

In any case, and even if intuition is regarded as a fundamental intellectual tool paired with reason and experience, a philosophical approach to the nature of the spirit should lead to at least one crucial idea, capable of comprising its more significant features. This idea is, according to Bergson, that of «*durée*». In very general terms, «*durée*» can be defined as that which is susceptible to «*tension*» (Bergson, 1953, pp. 226-235). The tension of the *durée* of a conscious being would measure «*sa puissance d'agir, la quantité d'activité libre et créatrice qu'il peut introduire dans le monde*» (Bergson, 2009, p. 17). The orientation of consciousness towards action summarizes the fundamental law of human psychological life (Bergson, 1953, p. 200). The states of the soul are subject to constant change, but an internal «*durée*» remains which is «*la vie continue d'une mémoire qui prolonge le passé dans le présent*» (Bergson, 2011, p. 24). Any state must be seen as a continuous form

of becoming. The analytical approach operates upon unmovable entities, while intuition is capable of grasping mobility itself. «*Durée*» thus stands as the synthesis between the multiplicity of successive states of consciousness and the underlying unity that incorporates them all. Hence, intuition represents the only way to reach that «*durée intérieure*» which is «*la vision directe de l'esprit par l'esprit*» (Bergson, 2009b, p. 27; I have also reflected on the importance of this aspect for a theory of the self in Blanco, 2013, pp. 158-166).

In Bergson's view, consciousness is coextensive with life, and its properties should not be limited to human intelligence (Bergson, 1948, p. VIII); thus, he clearly inserts human intelligence within the evolution of animal intelligence (see Bergson, 1948, pp. 188-189; Bergson, 1953). This intimate link between consciousness and life obeys the spontaneous movement of life that defines the whole evolutionary process (Bergson, 2009, p. 8). With the birth of life, unforeseeable movements emerge. Life constitutes the bridge between matter —understood as necessity— and consciousness —contemplated as freedom (Bergson, 2009, p. 13)—. Life reconciles both necessity and freedom. Life is freedom «*s'insérant dans la nécessité et la tournant à son profit*» (Bergson, 2009, p. 13), a topic to which the third chapter of *L'Évolution Créatrice* is consecrated. But at this point, Bergson becomes imprisoned by the same dualism which he has repeatedly criticized (Bergson, 1953, p. 297). Indeed, he abruptly separates matter and consciousness and he reintroduces the latter into the former (life as «*conscience lancée à travers la matière;*» Bergson, 2009, p. 13), instead of following the development of matter itself. Bergson speaks in terms of a force inserted into matter (Bergson, 2009, p. 17), but this can be done only metaphorically, for what kind of energy is actually liberated, as to be considered equal in power to matter itself? Moreover, Bergson claims that the voluntary act (defined in the following way: «*L'act volontaire (...) n'est pas autre chose qu'un ensemble de mouvements appris dans des expériences antérieures, et infléchis dans une direction chaque fois nouvelle par cette force consciente don't le rôle paraît bien être d'apporter sans cesse quelque chose de nouveau dans le monde*» —Bergson, 2009, p. 2—) is capable of creating some kind of energy that escapes any attempt to measure it (Bergson, 2009, p. 7).

Bergson clearly states that both types of existence, matter and consciousness, derive from a common source (Bergson, 1948, p. 239; Bergson, 2009, p. 18). At some point he identifies it with «*pur vouloir*» (Bergson, 1948, p. 239), an idea in which it is inevitable to find reminiscences of the philosophy of Schelling's 1809 essay *Über das Wesen der menschlichen Freiheit*. The common procession of matter and consciousness indicates their mutual dependence: matter needs consciousness and consciousness requires matter,

and Bergson sees «*dans l'évolution entiere de la vie sur notre planète une traversée de la matière par la conscience créatrice, un effort pour libérer, à force d'ingéniosité et d'invention, quelque chose que reste emprisonné chez l'animal et qui ne se degage définitivement que chez l'homme*» (Bergson, 2009, p. 18), a view later adopted by Teilhard de Chardin (Teilhard, 1955). In the initial pages of *L'Évolution Créatrice*, Bergson writes: «*L'histoire de l'évolution de la vie, si incomplete qu'elle soit encore, nous laisse déjà entrevoir comment l'intelligence s'est constituée par un progrès ininterrompu*» (Bergson, 1948, p. V). The adherence to a teleological view is clear. The evolution of life would culminate in the birth of the human species, in which the creative display of life would have reached its pinnacle. In fact, Bergson thinks that matter and consciousness, instead of constituting two absolutely antagonistic realities, represent different degrees of complexity or intensity of the same underlying force (Bergson, 1948, p. 191). Both materialism and creationism are unable to grasp reality as growth, as an «*accroissement*» (Bergson, 1948, p. 192), which is not given in advance. Materialism regards matter as the absolute reality, while creationism places the ultimate source of existence in the spiritual realm. However, these two philosophical approaches contemplate their respective objects as given entities, instead of apprehending the «*élan de vie*», the interlacing dynamics of matter and spirit that leads to the display of the creative power of life, thus reaching the highest possible degrees of indeterminacy and freedom (Bergson, 1948, p. 241).

In any case, this highly sought reconciliation between matter and spirit, by subsuming them into an underlying but hardly effable entity, does not really overcome its merely metaphorical formulation. The theoretical problems have only begun to arise. Bergson himself admits that such a synthesis is a mysterious operation (Bergson, 2011, p. 31). So, what do we gain by posing «*la durée*» as the fundamental category upon which any attempt of solution to the mind-body problem should be founded? If everything responds to intuition and cannot be summarized in any «*objective*» statement, shall we surrender and accept that the relationship between mind and brain will ever remain enigmatic? Bergson prefers to remain in some sort of deliberate ambiguity concerning this point, although he dares to offer a series of principles that sustain, in his opinion, this intuitive process which philosophy cannot renounce. These principles assert that an external reality exists and that it is immediately given to our spirit, a reality that essentially consists of mobility (things are in their making), such that any form of reality involves «*tendance*». The spirit looks for permanent structures, for «*states*», but this claim generates the insurmountable problem of trying to reconstruct reality—which is movement—through concepts whose nature and whose function

evoke lack of movement (Bergson, 2011, p. 35). The only way of escaping from this fatal destiny to which analytical thought seems to be condemned lies in striving for «*s'installer dans la réalité mobile*», in order to follow its flow in an intuitive manner. Any kind of change, any form of movement, is essentially indivisible («*La perception du changement*», lecture given at Oxford in 1911, included in Bergson, 2009b). It is therefore necessary to contemplate everything *sub specie durationis* (see Bergson, 2009b, p. 11).

Not surprisingly, Bergson offers no real clue on how this grounding upon a reality which is mobile can be achieved (likewise, he does not demonstrate that the essence of reality ultimately consists of movement). He has denounced the scientific method as being unfit for the study of mind, without suggesting any universally accessible way of grasping that «*durée*» (which, in his view, defies the power of analysis), other than the problematic idea of intuition. Thus, he is admitting a profound fracture within the scientific view of the world. Moreover, and even if it were taken to its ultimate consequences, it is not clear that Bergson's metaphysical ambition would increase our knowledge of reality, instead of simply broadening our imagination. Intuitions are essentially mutable and volatile. They change from one subject to another. The «*expérience intégrale*» (Bergson, 2011, p. 51), to which the French philosopher appeals, is as elusive as the quest for the 'self' through the reconstruction of its mental states. Although in Bergson's time some fundamental discoveries about the physical-chemical nature of life (specially the elucidation of the structure of DNA and the evidence accumulated about its key role in the transmission of genetic information) had not been made, some outstanding findings in the realm of the chemical nature of life had already taken place. Thus, the path towards its «analytical» reduction seemed firm. Hence, how should we justify his philosophical mystification of life? Perhaps by invoking the fear that science could penetrate domains that had been monopolized by philosophical reflection?

The obscurity of some of the expressions used by Bergson cannot conceal the fundamental problem, which is left unsolved. According to the French philosopher, the brain is an organ of «pantomime», and cerebral activity could be compared to the baton of an orchestra, mental activity being the symphony (Bergson, 2009, p. 19). But Bergson does not elucidate how the whole process is set off. And the contradictions are numerous. For example, Bergson admits that although mental activity is not confined to cerebral structures, there is at least one function of thought which can be located in the brain: memory, especially the remembrance of words. The discoveries of Broca and Wernicke (Broca, 1865, pp. 377-393; Wernicke, 1874) had already opened new and vast horizons for neuroscience

by demonstrating how certain cortical regions are narrowly connected with some mental functions, like speech production and processing. For Bergson, this solidly grounded fact is reasonable: «*les souvenirs sont là, accumulés dans le cerveau sous forme de modifications imprimées à un groupe d'éléments anatomiques*» (Bergson, 2009, p. 23). However, he also claims that «the remembered» (*souvenir*) is not conserved inside the physically limited continent —since it is intangible and invisible— but «*dans l'esprit*» (Bergson, 2009, p. 27). Although he warns that this is a metaphorical expression which is not intended to support the existence of a mysterious entity, he fails to explain its nature.

Likewise, and despite his constant attempts at placing himself in some sort of *via media* between idealism and materialism, Bergson does not offer any systematic account of how this aspiration could be satisfied. Rather, he defends the necessity of returning to an idea of «*durée pure*», which grasps the continuous flux of reality, because movement («*en tant que passage d'un repos à un repos*» —Bergson, 1953, p. 209—) is not susceptible to being decomposed. But we get no hint on how this could be done. Bergson insists that the true nature of reality consists of a continuous movement, not of static «instantiations.» This continuity also affects our conception of space: a thing cannot be separated from its surrounding environment, and «*l'étroite solidarité qui lie tous les objets de l'univers matériel, la perpétuité de leurs actions et réactions réciproques, prouve assez qu'ils n'ont pas les limites précises que nous leur attribuons*» (Bergson, 1953, p. 235). Beyond the notorious fallacy hidden here (is Bergson suggesting that there is no «center of action» in a given body?; the fact that reality can be arbitrarily divided does not mean that it is susceptible to any kind of division), the most «legitimate» conclusion drawn from his proposal should encourage us to conceive of mind as an indivisible extension of matter, such that splitting the world into two substances, matter and mind, would be a misguided goal. But is this Bergson's true aim? Does he mean that mind is a highly developed version of matter, as he suggests in *Matière et Mémoire*, when he claims that an infinite number of degrees (which measure «*une intensité croissante de vie*» —Bergson, 1953, p. 249—) between matter and a spirit «*pleinement développé*» (Bergson, 1953, p. 249) is possible? Again, we find ourselves crossing an inscrutable ocean.

3. CONCLUSIONS

The brilliance of some of Bergson's philosophical reflections about the nature of life and consciousness cannot hide a reality: although he addressed

the old and persistent problem of how mind and body are related, he did not offer any systematic solution to this perennial and profound mystery.

Concealed behind his exaltation of the creative force of life and its inextricable connection with consciousness, Bergson did not actually commit himself to any ontological claim beyond his exuberant vitalism, according to which the traditional opposition between *res extensa* and *res cogitans* should yield to the primacy of life and its élan towards higher degrees of freedom and indeterminacy. But the actual way in which mind and body interact was never elucidated. His dissatisfaction with the prevalent positions of materialism and dualism, as evident as it may appear in most of his writings, did not lead to the development of a systematic ontological account, capable of overcoming the ambiguities of ideas like «intuition», *durée* and life itself when applied to the mind-body problem.

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