

HENRI BERGSON'S *THE CREATIVE MIND*

by Alex Scott

Henri Bergson's *The Creative Mind: An Introduction to Metaphysics* (1946) is a collection of essays and lectures concerning the nature of intuition, explaining how intuition can be used as a philosophical method. Intuition is described as a method of 'thinking in duration' which reflects the continuous flow of reality. Bergson distinguishes between intuitive and conceptual thinking, explaining how intuition and intellect may be combined to produce a dynamic knowledge of reality.

Bergson distinguishes between two forms of time: pure time and mathematical time. Pure time is real duration. Mathematical time is measurable duration. Real time is continuous and indivisible. Mathematical time is divisible into units or intervals which do not reflect the flow of real time.

According to Bergson, real time cannot be analyzed mathematically. To measure time is to try to create a break or disruption in time. In order to try to understand the flow of time, the intellect forms concepts of time as consisting of defined moments or intervals. But to try to intellectualize the experience of duration is to falsify it. Real duration can only be experienced by intuition.

In the intellectual representation of time, a succession of distinct states or events is presented as a spatialized form of time. Time is conceptualized as an ordered arrangement of defined events, rather than as an endless flow of experience in an indivisible continuity. The intellect analyzes time as having measurable duration, but the flow of real time can only be known by intuition.

Bergson says that reality has extension as well as duration. However, space is not a void or

vacuum which is filled by reality. Things are not in space, space is in things. Thus, emptiness can only be conceptualized by suppressing a space-occupying reality. Similarly, nothingness can only be conceptualized by suppressing the awareness of being. According to Bergson, emptiness cannot be directly perceived, it can only be conceptualized.

Bergson also argues that intellect and intuition are capable of different kinds of knowledge. Scientific principles are intellectual, while metaphysical principles are intuitive. However, science and philosophy can be combined to produce knowledge that is both intellectual and intuitive. Such knowledge can unify divergent perceptions of reality.

The existence of time may explain the indeterminateness of things. Time as duration may explain why indeterminate things may later be able to be determined. Things that can be determined may also become indeterminate. If time did not exist, all things could (theoretically) be determined simultaneously. The indeterminateness of things means that the outcome of some events may change, and that there may be freedom of action. Freedom can be experienced by direct intuition.

According to Bergson, the reality or actuality of something is not necessarily preceded by the possibility of that thing. When something is real or actual, we can say retrospectively that it was possible. But whatever is possible does not reveal what is real or actual. Whatever is real or actual reveals what is possible.

Intuition is a form of knowledge that reality is continuous and indivisible, and that reality is always changing. If this form of knowledge is more widely utilized, then philosophy can be complementary to science as both a practical and speculative mode of inquiry.¹

If reality is always changing, then this variability contradicts the theory that every event is causally determined, and that every event must necessarily happen the way it does happen. If reality is not a succession of static moments or immobile states of being, then there is an indeterminateness and uncertainty in events which produces a freedom of creative possibility.

Time is not a multiplicity of moments, nor is it an abstract eternity. Both of these concepts of time fail to recognize its movement and variability, which cannot be properly understood by representing time as a succession of immobile stages of specified duration.

Bergson says that intuition is not the same as instinct or feeling. Intuition is a mode of reflection.²

Intuition is not a single act, but is a fluidity of psychological action. According to Bergson, the intuitive method transcends the limits of idealism or realism.

Bergson agrees with William James that truth is a dynamic relation between an idea and an existing reality. Truth is not a static property inherent in an idea or judgment. Truth is something which happens to an idea, and which has practical consequences for action. The truth of an idea can tell us how to respond to events, and how to develop plans for action. Truth is not a static relation of correspondence to an unchanging, preexistent state of being. Truth is an active relation between an idea and events that may change according to the flow of reality.

To summarize some of the principles of Bergson's philosophy, as outlined in *The Creative Mind* : 1) ultimate reality is changing, rather than unchanging; 2) ultimate reality is knowable by direct intuition; 3) intellect and intuition provide two different kinds of knowledge, which can be integrated to produce a unified knowledge of reality; 4) intellectual knowledge is relative knowledge, intuitive knowledge is absolute knowledge; 5) intuition is a direct perception and experience of the continuous flow of reality, without the use of any intellectual concepts; 6) the flow of time as real duration can be experienced only by intuition; 6) the intellect may falsify the perception of reality by substituting stability for mobility, and by substituting discontinuity for continuity; 7) many philosophical problems are caused by the use of conceptual instead of intuitive thinking, and are resolved by the use of intuition as a philosophical method.

¹Henri Bergson, *The Creative Mind: An Introduction to Metaphysics*, (New York: Kensington Publishing Corp., 1946), p. 129.

²*Ibid.*, p. 88.

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