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The Socratic Bergson

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THE SOCRATIC BERGSON

Perhaps the greatness of a great character is best to be seen in the multitude of analogies which it evokes; at any rate, the quality of suggestiveness makes secure draft upon our garrulous human interest and certifies for its possessor some substantial credit. More than any other man Bergson is the butt of our contemporary curiosity; and since Bergson is by profession a thinker, and since a thinker, unlike your man of deeds, is by profession never obvious, it becomes a matter of moment to discover just why he so touches us to the quick. The answer is indicated, I think, by a countryman of Bergson's, Édouard Le Roy, who has put the names of Bergson and Socrates in suggestive collocation. Immediately we grasp the analogy and guess the source of Bergson's suggestive power; for we remember Socrates' own image of himself as a gadfly rousing the noble but somnolent steed to action. We have been long lost in admiration of the mighty thews, the glossy flanks, the high carriage of our intellectual Pegasus; it has remained for Bergson to show him lumbering and scant of breath.

I

"'Know thyself': the ancient maxim has remained the device of philosophy since Socrates, the device which marks at least that initial moment where, bending toward the depths of the subject, it undertakes its proper work of penetration, whereas science continues a surface expansion. To this venerable motto each philosophy, turn by turn, has given a commentary and an application. But M. Bergson, more than any other, has profoundly renewed the sense of this, as of all that he touches." These are words with which M. Le Roy introduces his analogy, and assuredly they are words that merit some pondering by those who are in quest of the well-spring of that humanism which we carry back to the Greeks—too often, I suspect, with the lugubrious conviction that it was dried at the source.

Socrates, Augustine, Descartes, Kant,—yes, and Bergson: each of these men is great because he has sought to know first

of all his own soul. And all, save as yet the last, have inspired great edifices of philosophy, which we count as the treasure-houses of human thinking. They are men of a type: pertinacious questors in their central realm, indifferent to the learning which makes our average pride, eager for some internal truth where others rest content with outward show. The knowledge which they seek bears the better name of wisdom; for it is never that illusion of intellect which dissipates itself in chimerical consumption of second intentions, but always an intimate intuition so bound to conduct that it can point the effective way to men's salvation. It is knowledge that joins to action; it is humanistic knowledge in the only true sense of humanism.

Socrates, Xenophon says, would not dispute of that which the Sophists call "the world" nor yet of the laws which govern the movements of the stars; his interest was in human affairs, above all in justice and courage and temperance and wisdom. He "brought philosophy down from heaven," diverting men's attention from τὸ ὄν to τὸ ἀγαθόν, from ontology to morality. The world "below the Moon" was the world of his concern; and we must remember the sharp division which the ancients made of this sublunary realm; above the Moon is the region of motions eternal and incorruptible, below it is the domain not only of spatial change, of physical motion, but also of that change in time, generation and decay, of which the Moon's own crescence and senescence is, so to speak, an image. Θνατὰ θνατοῖσι κρέπει: surely mortal things befit mortality! and what is more truly ours than this precious transiency of love and birth and death? and what more alien to us than a Being transcendently aloof, whether in space or in thought, from all the change and season of our days? All the ontological scheming and proclaiming of the pre-Socratics—what trivial matter it seems when the "midwife of souls" begins asking after the Good!

In a recent number of the *Revue Néo-Scholastique*, an entirely devout Thomist assails the Bergsonian notion of time. "In reading the long and subtle developments given by the author to this thesis" (the intuition of time), says M. Farges, "it is impossible for a philosopher even a little familiar with the conceptions of general metaphysics and of ontology not to be struck by the number and gravity of the confusions of ideas there encountered. The most fundamental of our classic conceptions have been more or less emptied of their natural meaning, muti-

lated, topsy-turvied at pleasure, to such point of distraction as to seize with vertigo an inexperienced reader. If we may be permitted the expression, we would say—without wishing to impugn in the least the intentions of the author—that it is a veritable ‘sabotage’ of ontology.” *Un vrai “sabotage” d’Ontologie!* And our Thomist goes on to show—with what pious horror best leave to surmise—that Bergson has violated all the categorical conventions which make the philosophy of Aquinas the most categorical and conventional of all philosophies. Bergson will not play the dialectic game—the essence of which is to concede the dialectic ontology. Was it not just so that Socrates shocked the “physicians of ignorance”—Hippias answering questions of astronomy *ex cathedra* and Protagoras sulking because Socrates would not “sail on his sea of words, beyond sight of land?”

Astronomy and dialectic are no doubt noble exercises, befitting the high court of philosophy; but it is God alone who can always geometrize. For mere mortals the urgency of conduct is fundamental in life; leisure for thought follows after; ethics is the essential science; ontology and logic are luxuries of the fortunate. And if at times we lose ourselves in the fatuous game of abstraction, forgetting the human scale of values and sacrificing our energies in hybriatic attempts upon the empyrean, then surely the best gift of philosophy is a recall to the senses. “Socrates autem primus”—these are the famous words of Cicero—“philosophiam devocavit e caelo et in urbibus conlocavit et in domus etiam introduxit et coegit de vita et moribus rebusque bonis et malis quaerere.”

II

The mind in search of analogies must surely be struck by the many analogies between pre-Socratic Greek philosophy and the philosophy called modern. Not a school of the one but finds its analogue in the other. The Milesian evolutionists could not have missed their kinship with Herbert Spencer, and τὸ ἄπειρον is clearly cousin german to the “Unknowable.” Heraclitean flux and Sophistic scepticism find their parallels in modern sensationalism and the scepticism of Hume. The relationship of the Pythagoreans to our mathematical physicists is as obvious as that of the Democritean atomism to our own prevailing materialism. The Eleatics are the veritable archetype of German

Absolute Idealism; and if Hegel is the modern Parmenides, we no less securely identify a modern Zeno in Mr. Bradley, who with triumphant dialectic reduces his master's teachings to absurdity. I need not speak of the new school of Protagoras; they are everywhere self-proclaiming.

Plainly, the stage is superbly cleared for a modern Socrates—provided, of course, that we still have something to hope from philosophy; for to a certain type of mind the Greeks have long since pronounced the final philosophic dicta; henceforth human experience can but exemplify what they, in their primal wisdom, once for all enunciated. As Santayana expresses it—with an apodictic austerity which brooks no question—"the age of controversy is past; that of interpretation has succeeded." It seems to me that this is a familiar note; the gaunt and corded physiognomy of Mediæval thinking rises before me, ascetically humble before the oracular Authority of the Past, but savagely intolerant of the plastic and vital flesh which alone can give the impress of character to what else must be but caricature of our essential humanity. The main difference is that where your Mediævalist lays his stress upon the omniscience of Providence, our classicists extol the omniscience of the Greeks—and as the Greeks were undeniably human, *ipso facto* their disciples are humanists (indeed, I should add *the* humanists).

And human it is—to sigh for Saturn's golden reign, to remember Paradise with tears,—for dreams such as these mark the unconquerable idealism of a race which, mired in the black and stinking present, must yet project its vision of perfection into some roseate dawn of life. But is it less human to look forward? Canaan, Utopia, the Celestial City, which we can strive for as well as innerly see,—are not these, too, humane? and because they are inspirations to effort as well as patterns of delight, should we therefore cast them forth? If contemplation is the only virtue, if action is necessarily base, I am one who is not ashamed to be reckoned in with the anthropologists—horrific folk who, remembering that the Greeks anointed their bodies with ointment from flasks of gracious form and delicate design, with the same thought recall the strong butter which enriches the shining beauty of the black African, and thank their benignant stars that creams and pomades are more reticent than of yore.

Unquestionably Socrates would have enjoyed a voyage to Laputa. What a fine ironic speech he would have made about

it! But would he have discovered wisdom amid the stargazers? "One man makes a vortex all round, and steadies the earth by the heaven; another gives the air as a support to the earth, which is a sort of broad trough. Any power which in arranging them as they are arranges them for the best never enters into their minds; and instead of finding any superior strength in it, they rather expect to discover another Atlas of the world who is stronger and more everlasting and more containing than the good;—of the obligatory and containing power of the good they think nothing and yet this is the principle which I would fain learn if any one would teach me."

I am not affirming that Bergson is in every respect the Socrates of to-day. In many respects William James seems more nearly to hold the character—with his eager and many-sided inquisitiveness, his wilful insistence upon the concrete, his inability to see ideas other than as principles of action, his power to seize and inspire his fellow men. James is like Socrates in all this; but the Socrates of to-day is a temper rather than an individual; it is actuating the thought of many men, demanding of them that their philosophic search be a search after the good, and a good that shall be not an object of contemplation but a pattern of conduct. In France—a nation whose social genius makes it a natural field for the Socratic spirit—this temper is most marked; and it is in France that Bergson has performed the needful and characteristically Socratic office of confuting the Laputians. The modern mind has been afflicted with a kind of spiritual astigmatism, impelling it to bifocalise the world from every angle of observation—"physical and psychical," "mechanical and teleological," "appearance and reality," all the nonsensical compartmentalising which we have been accustomed to call philosophy,—and invariably, as it would seem, to make the worse choice of some cosmic *Ansicht* the measure of our wisdom. Bergson protests against this. He reminds us that discursive reason is at best but a preparation for more thorough understanding, for completer *sense*, and that man's part is to know first of all his proper self. His "anti-intellectualism" gives much pious offense, but he seems to me only to be saying that genuine knowledge is humanly assimilable knowledge, *νόησις* rather than *διάνοια*. "By intuition," he says, "is meant the kind of *intellectual sympathy* by which one places oneself within an object in order to coincide with what is unique in it and consequently

inexpressible. Analysis on the contrary, is the operation which reduces the object to elements already known, that is, to objects common both to it and other objects. To analyse, therefore, is to express a thing as a function of something other than itself." Is not this plain statement of plain fact? If it be not so, the fault lies not in the fact stated, but in our own grotesque prepossession with that cellularisation of the mind which we call psychology, wherein we seek to reduplicate by art the artificial cellulae into which we would compress the world. Plato's was a better inspiration; from the world of Ideas we can come with illuminated eyes to the spectacle of materiality, but never from the material world can we surmise the nature of that being whose definition is power. As Bergson puts it, from intuition to analysis we readily pass, but from analysis to intuition never.

III

From a different approach to the problem of knowledge Henri Poincaré made quite as sharp a distinction of intuition from analysis as does Bergson; and for the same fundamental reason. "In mathematics," he says, "logic is called *Analysis* and to say analysis is to say *division, dissection*. It can have no other instrument save the scalpel or the microscope. Logic and intuition have each its necessary rôle. Both are indispensable. Logic, which alone can give certitude, is the instrument of demonstration; intuition is the instrument of invention." This is the distinction. The reason why it is radical Poincaré states clearly in another connection, where he is contrasting the analytic with the intuitive elements in our conceptions of spatial continua. After resuming the analytical definition of a continuum of n dimensions (*viz.*, "an ensemble of n co-ordinates"), he proceeds:

"This definition makes a ready disposal of the intuitive origin of the notion of continuity, and of all the riches which this notion conceals. It returns to the type of those definitions which have become so frequent in mathematics since the tendency to 'arithmetise,' this science—definitions mathematically irrefragable but philosophically unsatisfying. They replace the object to be defined and the intuitive notion of this object by a construction made of simpler materials; one sees indeed that one can effectively make this construction with these materials, but one sees

also that one can make many others. *What is not to be seen is the deeper reason why one assembles these materials in just this, and not in another fashion.* The 'arithmetisation' of mathematics is not a bad thing, but it is not all."

Poincaré diagnoses precisely the weakness that besets all abstractive thinking. In mathematics it is "arithmetisation"; in philosophy—and, I suspect, at times in criticism—it is the scholastic passion for dichotomising. Over-conceptualisation, the word for the reality, the letter for the spirit—fascinated by the ease with which we can palm and shuffle the airy mintages of our intellect, we yield to the gaming instinct and stake our all . . . only to lose, say Poincaré and Bergson, for truth is cast in the firmer mould of active experience. If philosophy stood for no more than mental dexterity, it would have been long perished. But a living philosophy means life, as Plato knew,—and in the *Parmenides* what lordly sport he made of your unredeemed dialectic!

The "arithmetisation" of mathematics, which Poincaré contrasts with "intuition," represents, I believe, the last stand in a process of regressive abstraction which has been going on since the Hellenes first formulated the idea of physical science. It is a process so apt of application that I would briefly resume it.

The starting-point is figured by Archimedes' demand for a $\pi\omicron\upsilon\ \sigma\tau\acute{\omega}$ from which to move the world. Such a $\pi\omicron\upsilon\ \sigma\tau\acute{\omega}$, such an immovable core of physical reality, seemed to the Greek physicists an essential of science. It is axiomatic, says Dercyllides, a truth "accordant with reason," that in the Universe some bodies are mobile and some immobile; that all are either mobile or immobile is beyond reason. Greek physics was reared upon this assumption. The unmoving Earth was placed at the centre and about it the revolving panorama of the Heavens. The Pythagorean suggestion of an Earth and a Counter-Earth revolving in unison about a central fire is only a variation of this, for Hestia, the Hearth of the Cosmos, but takes the place of the unmoving Earth. Even the atomism of Democritus and Lucretius accepts the same principle; for while the Cosmos takes its form from the swirl of sweeping atoms, this is entirely because their motion is a gravitational, a *downward* flow: the universe possesses an "up" and a "down," a fixed spatial frame within which all motions can be measured and computed.

The Greeks never passed beyond this conception; and indeed,

it is only to-day that we moderns—mainly under the guidance of Poincaré—have come to realise the fictive and conventional character of our formulation of the Cosmos as a function of absolute time and space. We have long been taught that Copernicus accomplished the great translation from the Old to the New; and in the field of morals (little as that was in his intention) this is near the truth, but I greatly doubt if the real life of his influence is not to be found in the stimulated interest in mechanical motions, which resulted in Newtonian physics. Newton made definite once for all the conception of a frame of absolute time and absolute space within which all change could be reckoned. He carried to its consequence Greek astronomy. The material $\pi\omicron\upsilon\ \sigma\tau\acute{\omega}$, in its gross planetary form, disappears, but its place is taken by the hardly less material shape, spatial and temporal, by which all possible events are measured and circumscribed. The cosmic stage is cleared for the action, and it remains only for Laplace, with his nebular gyres, to complete the *mise en scène*.

More effectually than any other, Poincaré has pricked this bubble. The axiom of Dercyllides, which in Newton's thought is denied for everything excepting the empty frame of Creation, he has negated *in toto*. Time and space, he has shown, are as relative and fluxional as atoms and ions; they expand with our grandeurs and contract with our modesties—or at least, we cannot know if they do not. To put it in other terms, there is a limit to our outer and physical knowledge, and that limit is set, not by the stations of the stars, but by our frail and changing human needs.

And the "arithmeticians?" Blind to the fact that the central meaning of life must be the concrete experience of living, and step by step driven from the vivid $\phi\upsilon\sigma\iota\varsigma$ of the Greek naturalists, on through the welter of atomism, and thence out into the chill vacancy of absolute time and space—from this last resort banished, they still pursue their restless process of standardisation in a chaos of abstraction so transcendental that there is nothing left to standardise. They seek a Station and a Frame, altogether oblivious of the fact that their sole content is a chimæra *in vacuo bombinans*.

In a characteristic and eloquent passage Poincaré says: "Le continu physique est pour ainsi dire une nébuleuse non résolue, les instruments les plus perfectionnés ne pourraient parvenir à la

résoudre; . . . c'est l'esprit seule qui peut la résoudre et c'est le continu mathématique qui est la nébuleuse résolue en étoiles." The stars themselves are apparitions, singled by our limitations out of a Nature whose essence is fathomless to our gaze.

IV

From the ancient axiom of the mobile and the immobile, Aristotle derives a corollary of the utmost moment. "Evidently," he says, "those who say all things are at rest are not right, nor are those who say that all things are in movement. For if all things are at rest, the same statements will always be true and the same always false. . . . And if all are in motion, nothing will be true, nothing false." In other words, the frame of the physical world is also the frame of the logical; truth and error lock step with time and space.

The Greeks invented and Aristotle formulated logic. Like their mathematics it has proved a potent sharpener of the world's thought—but, as in the case of mathematical thinking, the blade is in some danger of being whetted to a nub. The "arithmetising" of mathematics finds its parallel in the scholasticising of the intellect. In each case the error is that of identifying reason with the form rather than with the matter of intelligence, forgetting that what makes our thought living thought is not its power of abstract construction, but its intuitive ability to perceive why experience assembles its materials "in just this, and not in another fashion."

The Greeks were many things, but no one will deny that they were not philologists. For them speech was barbarous or Hellenic; and as speech, so experience. This has been the misfortune of logic, which in a large sense has been merely a refinement from Hellenic discourse. That it has adapted itself to the like-tempered tongues of western Europe is perhaps as much due to the autocracy of Hellenic thought as to their own native genius. In any case, the analytic tendency, fostered in Low Latin, and carried to its extreme in tongues developed under Latin patronage is little more than the bitter exemplification of category and syllogism in their unredeemed application to human discourse. A highly inflected language like the Greek could sustain the syllogistic analysis without utter loss of life; but the lapidary zeal of the Scholastics, cutting, sawing, polishing their concepts

to nicest exclusion and closest interlocking, has tended to convert our instrument of speech into a cunning mosaic rather than the fluid reflection of thought; it is, as Plato might say, "thrice removed from the king and from the truth."¹

The consequence to modern speech has been to make it hard and mechanical; language has become an *index rerum*, a kind of notation of experience, whose curious affinity to mathematical notations is hourly bringing mathematics and logic into more indiscriminate communion. Undoubtedly for practical affairs, for business, analytic speech is the most efficient human instrument ever created,—but the walls of the counting-house are not yet the pillars of the firmament; to the business of living there is to be added the art of living well. Our danger is a mere external fascination in the click and glitter of our highly polished verbal machine; so that our thinking resolves into a drone of Aves and Paters, each told by an undeniably solid bead and each devoid of all spiritual significance. The most horrible monument I have ever beheld is the Mormon temple in Salt Lake City; it is built with deadly symmetry of line and angle, every joint conspicuous and every unit in relief,—exactly as a child might build with blocks; and what makes it so horrible is just that it is infantile in conception and monstrous in size, the work of beings in stature men, who had yet never been able to put away childish things; we get from it the very shiver which the deeds of the Cyclopes gave the Greeks. Under the stringency of a logic which was no doubt a valuable criticism of a more plastic speech, our modern discourse, and the thought of which it is the image, tends constantly to sink into a like monstrous infantilism.

Aristotelian logic in its iron demand that words shall have that constancy of meaning—conceived by Aristotle as a sort of conceptual essence—which they never have in living speech, has constructed for the intellectual world a kind of frame, analogous to that established by Greek mathematics in the physical realm, with the principle of identity for its $\tau\omicron\upsilon\ \sigma\tau\acute{\omega}$. It has enabled rigid thinking, but in substituting concepts for intuitions it has too often purchased elegance at a cost of sincerity and power. There is another form of expression, belonging to barbarous

¹A crisp presentation of the relation of thought to language is A. D. Sheffield's *Grammar and Thinking*, esp. the section on "Analytic and Inflected Speech," while Aristotelian logic is exuberantly pilloried in F. C. S. Schiller's *Formal Logic*.

tongues, disdained of the Greeks, which it is worth while to hold in mind if only that we may gauge the distance we have travelled. Polysynthesis or holophrasis, it is called, and a pertinent example, which I borrow from Jane Harrison, is the Fuegian *mamihlapi-natapai* "looking-at-each-other, -hoping-that-either-will-offer-to-do-something-which-both-parties-desire-but-are-unwilling-to-do." The vital situation is the thing designated (if "thing" it may be called), the expression being moulded to suit just this, and not any possible, mutuality. If speech can hit off intuition, we can hardly imagine an apter conformity.

The so-called "anti-intellectualism" of Bergson is no more than a fundamental insistence that experience is primarily holophrastic. His criticism of the logomachies of the concept-mongers, his asseveration that the test of reason is intuition, above all his contention that *la durée réelle*, gathering in itself before and after, is the focus of reality, all this is but his studied protest against the artifice and inconsequence of our mental legerdemain. He is telling us—what we have often suspected—that the human spirit is never garrulous nor elegant in its tense moments of growth, but is rather awkward and stammering, frail of speech but gifted with a power more than of tongues to stir in men's hearts a responsive understanding. What, I wonder, would become of our tragedies, and the living strength of them, save for that energy of situation and action which always at the last outpasses the eloquence of words?

The lifelessness, the dramatic sterility, with which the mathematical method has invested the physical universe is the butt of Poincaré's criticism. The similar lifelessness and dramatic sterility with which our philosophy has been infected is the object of Bergson's attack. In each case the disease—which might well be called the fallacy of the "dividing intellect"—is of Greek origin, though arithmetisation and concept-polishing have alike gone far beyond the surmise of any Greek;—and that the disease is one and the same is well enough evidenced by our contemporary blurring of the boundary between logic and mathematics,—an identical bent is leading to identical conclusions.¹

¹ "Mathematics as a science commenced when first some one, probably a Greek, proved propositions about *any* things or about *some* things, without specification of definite particular things." A. N. Whitehead, *Introduction to Mathematics*. *Fons et origo* of logic and mathematics are thus explicitly identified.

Bergson and Poincaré have each ministered to our ailment, starting respectively from its inner and its outer symptoms, but finding an identical cure in their critiques of our apprehensions of time and space, with the single implication of the primacy of intuition. Thus at last the *καὶ σῶ*—whether of Archimedes or Aristotle—is rightfully banished to the realm of illusion.

As for the reputed "mysticism" of Bergson's notion of time, of *la durée réelle*, I may best reply by citing the naïve antagonism of my excellent Thomist. "At first glance," he says, "it would seem subtle and indeed paradoxical to wish to found a whole philosophy upon the notion of Time. But upon reflection, and especially remembering the marvellous Peripatetic synthesis entirely erected upon the notion of Movement—a concept so neighboring that of Time, one is tempted rather to give credit to the author,—not to be sure, without some misgiving, for if Movement is a phenomenon patent to the senses, this is not true of Time, the most obscure and mysterious perhaps of all natural phenomena. This contrast was indeed already remarked by the ancients when they said, 'Motus sensibus ipsis patet, non autem tempus.' Hence we may very reasonably fear that sophism could find naught more easy than to conceal itself amid these profound shades, and that in place of building upon a rock, as Aristotle, M. Bergson erects his house upon the shifting sands of conjecture." Proceeding, he quotes Aristotle's definition of time as the number of motion in relation to before and after, ἀριθμὸς κινήσεως κατὰ τὸ πρότερον καὶ ὕστερον, adding in comment: "This definition has regard for the time *which measures*. As to the time *which is measured*, it is no other than movement, in that it falls under the measure of the before and after. It is the same distinction as that of the *numbering* number and the *numbered* number, τὸ ἠριθμημένον, τὸ ἀριθμητόν."

Truly, a completer justification of Bergson's intention could not be required. Bergson had diverted attention from the numbering to the numbered; he has recalled us from the formal measure to the reality which is measured; and he has given us to see that that reality is itself a movement which outruns all our measures in its creative evolution of a world. Ontology destroyed is cosmology redivivus.

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