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THE METHODOLOGICAL PRINCIPLES OF PLATO AND BERGSON

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Striking similarities in certain aspects of the doctrines of Plato and Bergson support the claim that, for both, intuition is the sole method of apprehending the ultimate object of epistemological certainty.

† † †

INTRODUCTION

One of the historically recurrent problems in philosophy concerns the idea of the Real: What is the Real and by what means (if any) can it be known? These fundamental metaphysical and epistemological questions have assumed central importance throughout the writings of most philosophers but are treated with especial brilliance and novelty in the philosophies of Plato and Bergson. For Plato, knowledge of the Real consists in the dialectical movement along the "upward path" from the world of appearances to the world of the immutable, unchanging Forms. Bergson, on the other hand, argues that the Real is pure duration, a heterogeneous, qualitative multiplicity that can be known only through an intellectual conversion whereby one gains an intuitive understanding of the Real. Although Plato and Bergson disagree as to the nature of the Real, there is a striking resemblance in methodology that both men advocate. This similarity in methodology is not historically interesting, but may well serve as a stepping stone in the unraveling of a supposed ambiguity within the Platonic Corpus. Whereas Bergson is quite explicit in setting forth a theory of philosophical method, Plato treats the issue in a rather cursory manner at various places in the Dialogues. Consequently, many interpretations have been put forth in an attempt to render consistent the various passages throughout Plato's works. But striking similarities in certain aspects of the doctrines of Plato and Bergson suggest an interpretation of Plato that does justice to the various relevant passages scattered throughout the Dialogues. Thus, I shall first make some general remarks about the methodologies of Bergson and Plato in order to set the stage for the comparison that I hope will shed light on Plato's method. Of course, in undertaking such a task, one must proceed in a vigilant manner, being careful not to force the thought of one philosopher into the Procrustean Bed of another. We must, in Bergson's words, "grasp the thought of a philosopher for what it really is" (1946:108).

I

Bergson, as is well known, distinguishes two profoundly different ways of knowing a thing: the way of analysis and the way of intuition. Analysis is the understanding of a thing through what it is not. It expresses the nature of an object in terms of other objects that are already taken to be known. It uses universal concepts only, and, therefore, by this method one can know of an object only by what it has in common with other objects, never by what is unique in it. Any object is more than a meeting place of a number of universals; but this addition that explains the meeting of them is precisely what conceptual methods cannot capture. Intuition, on the other hand, is an intellectual sympathy, acquired by no little effort, whereby one is projected into the object and identified with its being. It puts one in possession of some absolute, not as a point upon which universals are seen to converge, but as a point from which they are seen to radiate.

Thus, it appears that analysis and intuition are directly opposed to one another. Yet, in the life of knowledge, there is an organic bond between the two by virtue of which the one process pays into the other. Hence, the function of intuition can be best understood as a process complementary to analysis. In other words, the richness and the significance of an intuition is dependent upon the amount of analysis preceding it. An intuition gained by merely abandoning the work of concept-forming and concept-weaving is an unintelligible blur into which nothing has gone and from which nothing can emerge. To take one of Bergson's examples: one may read the adventures of a hero with a readiness of sympathy hardly to be distinguished from an ill-balanced sentimentality, or one may keep alert one's powers of criticism and analysis, studying the character from different angles and, finally, fusing those judgments in a way that puts one in a ready disposition to enter sympathetically into the character of the hero. The first would be an intuition that had ignored or rejected the work of analysis; the second, one that would have meaning because it builds upon and supplements that undertaking.

Like Bergson, Plato holds that knowledge of the absolute or Real is possible, but possible only if one is willing to employ a particular method. The particular method that Plato

discusses and recommends is called by him "the dialectical method" or "the power of conversing." Although Plato speaks of this method in various dialogues, the precise nature of the Dialectic is nowhere explicitly formulated. And while the *Phaedo* and the *Republic* provide the best source of examination in an attempt to understand Plato's methodology, many critics have found incongruities between the two texts.

In the *Phaedo*, Plato formulates a methodological principle that would enable one, by careful use of reasoning, to attain clear insight into the nature of all things. This "method of hypothesis," as it is called, involves the following features: (1) It is an hypothesizing in which one adopts opinions deliberately—he does not slide into them unconsciously; (2) It is a procedure in which one explores implications—drawing out the consequences of hypotheses—and carefully distinguishes premises from conclusions; (3) It is a method that consists in paying the utmost attention to the avoidance of contradiction, in rejecting any set of opinions that is self-contradictory; and, finally; (4) The hypothetical method consists in holding one's opinion provisionally, never dogmatically.

The method of hypothesis, therefore, seems to suggest a procedure of graduated approximation, whereby alterations are perpetually made in one's whole web of opinions as contradictions are revealed among them. In this manner, the inquiring mind renders these opinions more and more adequate. But it does not appear that they are ever rendered final; the possibility that another contradiction will turn up is always present. This method seems to provide no way of converting the provisional into the certain.

The topic of methodology is again treated in the *Republic*, especially in connection with the Divided Line and the Cave. And while much of the discussion in these passages is consistent with the hypothetical method of the *Phaedo*, Plato makes an addition: he now proposes that by means of this tentative and hypothetical attack, one may reach absolute certainty. It is not a matter of perpetual improvement and approximation as in the *Phaedo*, but of attaining incorrigible truth. Plato declares that a proper method, while recognizing hypotheses for what they are, can so manipulate them as to reach indubitable truth or the "unhypothesized beginning."

Thus, in the *Republic*, Plato advocates a passage from hypothesis to an unhypothesized beginning by way of an "upward path." The dialectical method alone proceeds in this upward manner, destroying inadequate hypotheses in the movement toward the Real. Now, while the upward path includes the hypothetical method of the *Phaedo*, it does not seem to exhaust the dialectic as Plato conceived it in the *Republic* because it does not give the infallible certainty or sure grasp of an "unhypothesized beginning" that is emphasized in the *Republic*. The characteristic and new element in the *Republic* is the claim to have a method that gives absolute certainty. The question to be raised here is: What method

has Plato determined in the *Republic*, in addition to the hypothetical method of the *Phaedo*, by which he thinks the dialectician can escape from the tentativeness of the *Phaedo*'s procedure and reach indubitable certainty? In order to answer this question, I want to explore the methodologies of both Plato and Bergson, hoping that the suggestiveness of this comparison will secure an answer.

II

It should be clear from what has been said that the philosophical methods of Plato and Bergson admit of comparison. Above, I claimed that analysis and intuition are intimately bound up with each other, such that analysis serves as a mental preparation for an intellectual conversion. Again, I held that while the hypothetical method of the *Phaedo* is incorporated into the dialectic, Plato argues that this latter method can lead one to absolute knowledge of the Real, whereas the former cannot. Thus, for both men, the Real is capable of being grasped intellectually by means of a special method. In this section I want to argue that for Plato, knowledge of the Real is to be attained by intuition, a method similar to the intellectual sympathy that Bergson repeatedly emphasizes. Thus, I shall proceed by carefully tracing Plato's theory of dialectic, making the appropriate connections to Bergson's thought.

The upward path of the *Republic* includes, then, the hypothetical method of the *Phaedo*, yet there seems to be an added element. Whereas the hypothetical method only secures tentative certainty, the dialectic arrives at absolute certainty. It is true that in the Line, Plato is pointing to a contrast of intellectual temperaments, and that the scientific habit of reasoning from unquestioned assumptions does differ from the philosophical readiness and ability to extend indefinitely the analysis of the presuppositions either of science or common sense; but it is false that this is all he is doing. Bergson seems to be in complete agreement with this when he discusses the contrast between science and philosophy. Science, for Bergson, uses symbols and proceeds by reducing objects to elements already known. Philosophy, on the other hand, must go beyond all concepts in order to grasp what is real. So long as one is confined to the realm of concepts, all knowledge is relative. Only a transcending of this scientific framework will yield knowledge of the absolute.

Plato seems to be arguing in a similar fashion. Science, for Plato, utilizes the hypothetical method. In the same way in which analysis for Bergson will never lead one to the Real, so for Plato, science proceeds by drawing consequences from hypotheses in an attempt to reach a more adequate hypothesis. But such a method cannot go beyond any "hypothetical beginning": no absolute knowledge is capable of being revealed.

It has already been noted that Bergson advocates a "going beyond" all conceptual analysis, a complete dispensing

with the symbols ordinarily used in everyday thought. Plato's theory of the Line conveys a similar outlook and can be interpreted as a method for "going beyond" the methods of science to grasp the absolute or what is unquestionable.

Another comparison will bring my point clearly into focus. In the first section of this paper, I was particularly concerned to stress the relationship between analysis and intuition, and I argued that the appropriate amount and kind of analysis may put one in a disposition to make the mental effort of intuition. Similarly, in the *Republic* Plato seems to be claiming that the man who competently and conscientiously practices this hypothetical method may one day find himself in the possession of an unhypothesized beginning. This final stage of cognizing the "unhypothesized" is not a proof; no demonstration is made of the absolute at all. Socrates speaks in terms of "proceeding" to a beginning, but this is not to say that one proves what is grasped absolutely. The "beginning" at which dialectic arrives is the Form of the Good; and Plato's view seems to be that the Good, far from being proved, is the presupposition of all proof that is not hypothetical. In the way in which the Real for Bergson is known through intuition, so for Plato; it seems reasonable to interpret him as saying essentially the same thing: Knowledge of the Good involves an intuition, a going beyond all analysis, a dispensing with hypotheses. Of course, for Plato, the process of the upward path is necessary for knowledge of the Good, though it is not sufficient.

If my interpretation of Bergson set forth at the beginning of this paper is essentially correct, then it is clearly reasonable to make a comparison between the relationships of analysis and intuition on the one hand, and of progression along the upward path and knowledge of the Good on the other. But one may question whether Plato should be held to an "intuition" theory of the upward path. Perhaps I have made use of the Procrustean Bed in my comparison of Plato and Bergson. Yet, I think other passages throughout the Dialogues may secure my claims concerning the dialectic so far.

If the upward path, like analysis, does not prove or lead one automatically to knowledge of the Real, of what use is it? In lieu of proceeding up this challenging path, why not begin at the beginning itself? The reason lies in what I take Bergson to be saying concerning analysis and intuition. I mentioned that intuition without analysis would be like someone naively sympathizing with the character of a novel where the intellectual sympathy involved could hardly be distinguished from ill-balanced sentimentality. In a similar manner, the prisoner released from the Cave goes through a series of objects graduated in brightness before he can look at the sun. This series of preliminary objects does not demonstrate the sun, but only enables him to see it. The prisoner gradually strengthens his eyes. Just so, the dialectician on the upward path is gradually strengthening his mental vision until he can fully comprehend the existence of each stage. Without

progressing along this series of objects graduated in brightness, one would be blinded and overcome by gazing at the sun, not unlike the person who naively enters into the character of the novel.

In "Philosophical Intuition," Bergson speaks of intuition as a negative process in which one rejects a certain idea as being simply impossible:

What a strange force this intuitive power of negation is! . . . Is it not obvious that the first step the philosopher takes when his thought is still faltering and there is nothing definite in his doctrine, is to reject certain things definitely? Later he will make changes in much of what he affirms, but he will vary only slightly in what he believes (1946:105).

Again, it seems that this negative aspect of intuition parallels one's progression up the Line. At each successive stage of the Line, one is greatly inclined to accept the appearances and take them to be Real. But it is the whispering of the word "Impossible!" into the philosopher's ear that compels him to reject as Real what each stage offers, "even though the facts and reasons appeared to invite you to think it possible and real and certain" (1946:110). Thus, as one moves up the Line, the hypotheses that present themselves are continually being altered and refined, rejected for what is more adequate.

Let us turn now to other Dialogues for support of my interpretation, which at this point may seem to rest on tenuous evidence. In the *Symposium*, Plato gives an account of the lover's progress to the Beautiful. Although the Beautiful is known through itself, a long apprenticeship among the many beautifuls is necessary before this direct knowledge can occur. A similar view is implied in the *Seventh Letter*. Plato says that:

It cannot be expressed like other learning, but after community of life with much discussion of the matter itself, it suddenly appears in the soul like light kindling from leaping fire, and thenceforth sustains itself (341c).

This is perhaps the clearest passage that lends credibility to my claims. Here, Plato, like Bergson, is saying that knowledge of what is Real is not to be gained in the way one approaches the sciences. Rather, one must go beyond all science and its methods to gain an intuition whereby the Real "suddenly appears in the soul." This "suddenness" suggests an immediacy, a dispensing with one's ordinary manner of symbolism, and an "entering into" or sympathizing intellectually with the Absolute.

Both in the *Republic* and the *Seventh Letter*, Plato seems to attribute the same quality of ineffability to one's

apprehension of the Good that can be found in Bergson's claims concerning the intuition of duration. For Bergson, one's experience of pure duration is essentially incommunicable!

. . . that which constitutes his [the character's] essence cannot be perceived from without, being internal by definition, nor be expressed in symbols, being incommensurate with everything else (1946:108).

In Plato this same inexpressibility of one's intuition of the Real is mentioned in the *Republic*. When Glaucon asks Socrates to tell him what the Good is, Socrates replies:

I am afraid it is beyond my powers; with the best will in the world I should only disgrace myself and be laughed at (506E).

Again in the *Seventh Letter* Plato, in talking about knowledge of the Good, writes:

But when it is "the fifth" about which we are compelled to answer questions or to make explanations, then anyone who wishes to refute us has the advantage and can make the propounder of a doctrine, whether in writing or speaking or in answering questions, seem to most of his listeners completely ignorant. . . . Those who listen sometimes do not realize that it is not the mind of the speaker or writer which is being refuted, but these four instruments mentioned. . . (343E).

The reservations that Plato expresses in both passages concerning the communicating of the Good stems from the fact that since the knowledge to be gained of the Good is inexpressible, any attempt to convey such knowledge is hopelessly obscure, if not silly.

In talking of "intuition," Bergson describes this experience as an "entering into" the object in order to understand what is unique in it. I think Plato has a similar point in mind in his repeated assertion that there must be a kinship between the mind of the enquirer and the ultimate objects of philosophical study. For example, in the *Seventh Letter*, Plato says:

In short, neither quickness of learning nor a good memory can make a man see when his nature is not akin to the object (344A).

Both men appear to be saying that intuition involves an immediacy that no amount of analysis or scientific research or method of demonstration can attain.

There is a final comparison I want to sketch con-

cerning Plato's conception of the downward path and Bergson's notion of moving from intuition to analysis. In "Philosophical Intuition," Bergson claims that as one seeks to penetrate more fully into a philosopher's thought instead of "moving around its exterior," his doctrines are transformed for us. In other words, by grasping what is essential to the thought of another *via* intuition, the whole of his thought is brought together "into a single point." The various aspects fit neatly together as the multifarious facets of the philosophy appear with new clarity and freshness. This is an example of a movement from intuition to analysis. A similar concept is to be found in the downward path that moves from one's grasping of the Good to the various lesser levels. Having knowledge of the Good, one possesses for the first time categorical, demonstrative knowledge. The downward path distinguishes the true from false hypotheses of the upward in a process that includes assimilating what is true and approaching it from an indubitable, unhypothesized standpoint.

To conclude, there are, no doubt, many more comparisons to be made here, but they will be left untreated in this paper. Of course, the reader should not be persuaded that everything that Plato and Bergson say on this issue coincide perfectly. My purpose is to elucidate those points of coincidence that I think useful in coming to a correct interpretation of Plato's dialectic.

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