

Randall E. Auxier

Image and Act: Bergson's Ontology and Aesthetics

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CREATION BETWEEN PAST AND PRESENT

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Abstract

Richard Rorty left philosophy with a debilitating array of restrictions upon what it could really accomplish (at least, without committing the old mistakes that had rendered it irrelevant to the world). But Rorty placed a new emphasis on aesthetics, especially literature and the process of creating new language. I argue that retrieving the ontology of Henri Bergson can provide a robust basis for a general aesthetics that can carry successfully the kind of philosophical burden Rorty placed upon it. In this essay I retrieve Bergson's ontology in the context of a philosophy of art and I assemble it in a way he never did himself, to show, in part, how this way of thinking can expand our present ideas about aesthetics into other empirical domains.

Keywords: *body, consciousness, creativity, image, memory, space, time*

I.

It is hard to deny, I think, that Richard Rorty's aesthetics, if it can even be called that, is anemic at best and useless at worst. We cannot "literarize" ourselves to a better future, even if it is also true that good books are an irreplaceable part of what fuels progress and hope, however these are defined. Can we go back to aesthetics before Rorty and retrieve those valuable strands of thought that were being offered for the sake of recovering a more robust aesthetics? Clearly Richard Shusterman has done great service, drawing especially upon Dewey and Merleau-Ponty. Crispin Sartwell has done something similar, practicing a post-Rortyan literary aesthetics in a fashion that applies and improves upon Rorty's own general drift in aesthetics.¹ Even with these two fine examples of a more robust

¹ See especially Crispin Sartwell's newest book, *How to Escape: Magic, Madness, Beauty, and Cynicism* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2014). This is an outstanding collection of aesthetic explorations in a Rortyan vein.

"post-Rortyan" aesthetics, I think something more is needed. Neither Shusterman nor Sartwell has, at this point, offered a *formal* ontology of a sort that follows from their excellent descriptions of art and artistic creation. That ontology is needed and it will have to be a *process* ontology – or, if one prefers, a temporalist ontology.² In the old days, this would have been called "metaphysics," but if that word cannot be safely retrieved, then "ontology" will suffice.

The ontology that is needed must be empirical (indeed, radically empirical), descriptive, temporalist/processual, and it cannot be at the mercy of concepts, representations, or any kind of necessity (logical, epistemological, metaphysical). Thus, transcendental arguments are inappropriate. This must be a cross-disciplinary ontology, guided as much by artistic and creative practice as by criticism and previous theory. Its value must be estimated by its power to transform individual and collective experience, to generate social hope, and to encourage reform and renewal while preserving those values without which our human solidarity, such as it is, cannot be maintained. The discovery and articulation of a pre-cognitive ontology must be undertaken as a part of liberating and transforming our civilizations.

The ontology needed for a post-Rortyan aesthetics is, in my view, something that runs along the lines of Bergson's aesthetics (although it can and should be supplemented with critical philosophies of culture, such as Cassirer explained). Bergson's view can be summarized in three parts. First I will show how his use of the "image" offers a provisional ontology for aesthetic thought. Second, I will discuss the relationship between instinct and intuition in his evolutionary description of the empirical ground of images, and I will also explain how the images of our inner lives relate, empirically, to those images that make up our domains of action. And third I will examine the brief remarks Bergson makes on aesthetic thought in his only explicit and extended discussion of that topic, in his essays on laughter and the comic, to show their relation to the accounts of image, instinct, and reflective intuition (archetype). Then I will situate Bergson's account within the view of "art" which shores up its trans-disciplinarity (especially its transcendence of Philosophy and philosophical aesthetics, placing it outside of Rorty's criticism without depriving it of a robust theoretical character). The result will be an aesthetic theory that avoids the traps Rorty helped us to understand.

II. The Flux and the Body: The Ground of the Image

Bergson's ontology is an ontology of images rather than, say, events (as one would find in Whitehead, Langer, and Dewey). The difference is crucial here. Bergson does maintain, as do these other process thinkers, that time flows in nested, overlapping hierarchies of duration.³ The flux has many levels of order

2 Sartwell has confirmed my surmise in conversation. I would be surprised if Shusterman disagrees.

3 See Pete A.Y. Gunter, "Temporal Hierarchy in Whitehead and Bergson," in *Interchange*, 36:1-2 (2005), 139-157. Bergson began his career with this ontology already in place (see Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, authorized trans. F. L. Pogson (London: Allen and Unwin, Ltd., 1910), 9), and it is not an

immanent within it, but human beings can *make use* of only a small portion of these forms of order. Most of what flows is not suited to our limitations. Thus, an ontology of events obligates itself to characterizing and taking account of aspects of the universe that are beyond our ken – of no conceivable *use* to us. From Bergson's point of view, such an ontology is recklessly excessive. We think about the world *in order to act* in it, and proper method generalizes from our experience aiming at the minimum account of what exists within our ken. Thus, there is a practical limit on Bergson's radical empiricism. Those modes of immanent order within the flux that can have no important overlap with the modes that inform our action are not of philosophical concern to us. Hence, as we shall see, he characterizes the "image," based on what serves utility from the standpoint of the limits of finite, human action. Bergson calls this a "common sense" limitation. (MM 10-11)⁴

The flux, insofar as it grounds the "image," in Bergson's special sense, consists of many kinds of pulses and vibrations of energy, and these energies move in wildly different temporal modes. Just to take the most familiar, we all know that light-energy travels faster than sonic energy, which is what makes it so wonderful to sit in the right field bleachers and see a professional baseball player hit the ball and then, a quarter of a second later, to *hear* one of the sweeter sounds ever emitted in the cosmos, the crack of milled Ash against cowhide and cork, colliding at over 300 kilometers per hour. The aesthetics of the delay is as much a part of the enjoyment and value of the experience as is the outcome, the "having of a hit, as a whole image." But apart from the energistic propagations of light and sound waves, there are dozens of other modes of energy pulsing through the flux at every sort of level of generalized and particularized existence, from the boring, repetitive background radiation (which comes as close to pure "matter," in Bergson's sense or simple repetition, the material tendency), up to the pulsars (a macro-level, precise repetition of a rotating neutron star, but far from a temporally monolithic "thing," since it emits radio waves, x-rays, and gamma rays, as well as visible light), and everything in between. All of this cosmic repetition overlaps with our domain of action in some ways – for example, we can see the stars, and for Bergson, seeing something means including it within one's field of action, virtually. We *do not* see what we cannot act on, in principle, and everything we *do* see is arranged in a visual field before us with the meaning of "distance" being the number of movements the body will have to perform to act upon an "image" in that field. (MM 20, 31-32, 57, 144) But not all images are primarily visible images. Indeed, the *visible* character of some images has nothing directly to do with *why* they are called images. (see MM 43) I will frame Bergson's account of the image in detail in the next section, but for now, let the word serve as a functional indicator of some portion of the flux that can be acted upon, at least in principle.

accident that among his earliest arguments for the reality of qualitative intensities as the proper units for understanding our experience of real duration were aesthetic experiences (see TFW 11 ff.).

4 Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, authorized trans. Nancy Margaret Paul and W. Scott Palmer (New York: Zone Books, 1988 [1910]), used throughout the whole article.

To be a physical being is to localize and to create a disequilibrium in the flux by slowing some variable collection of those energies into a pattern for a durational epoch or some kind, before releasing them back into their respective modalities, either for decay or further propagation.

To be a living or organic being requires not only a slowing and collecting of energies moving at variable rates or propagation in the flux, but life requires also a reduction and recombination of those energies into an astonishing pattern of overlapping and more or less harmonic sympathy of vibration, surrounded by what Bergson calls a "zone of indetermination" (MM 39), which is populated by *all* that the living body can act upon through one or a whole series of diastolic and systolic movements. (See MM 30) So far as we know, only within and accompanied by zones of indetermination is "perception" an actual occurrence in the natural world.⁵ The perceptions of living organisms can be described as symbols of experiences not had, through the inaction of the body (MM 144). The fact that perception is associated in a fundamental way with *inaction* is an important point for our later discussion.⁶

More could be said about the relation of the flux and the living organism. If the point be granted that Bergson's account intends to be thoroughly naturalistic and indeed, it is *radically* empirical (see MM 12, 75, etc.), in the sense articulated by William James.⁷ The point about radical empiricism is important for our purposes, since I think that radical empiricism, as an orientation on philosophical inquiry, is the best (perhaps the only) way really to avoid Rorty's better criticisms of philosophy's pretensions as a mirror of nature. The idea of "experience" may be difficult to reconstruct without giving in to the dogmas of empiricism, but radical empiricism does not begin with those dogmas.⁸ Radical empiricism deflates in philosophy what must be deflated for the sake of fact, holding fast to particular fact as experienced, but it does not deflate the

5 There are detailed accounts of what Bergson means by perception from various perspectives in all of his major works. The account that most closely corresponds to what I am saying here is in *Matter and Memory*, 44 ff. But it is important to remember that the various major works ask fundamentally different questions. The account in *Time and Free Will* comes closer to being a *phenomenology* of perception and its relation to consciousness, while *Matter and Memory* is an epistemology, arching toward ontology – addressing what perception *is* insofar as it contributes to knowledge and how we can account for the existence of perception without making epistemological mistakes. *Creative Evolution* seeks the origins of the forms of perception we find in ourselves and among all living organisms, while also asking after the ground of life. These are related but importantly different questions. I see no serious tensions among the various accounts of perception Bergson provides. Properly contextualized, each view contributes to an overall philosophical view that is subtle, complex, and as consistent as one could reasonably hope.

6 It is also not an accident that the narrowness or width of *personality* is associated by Bergson with the relation of activity to inactivity, with the range and tonality of *possible* action. Active people have narrower highly toned personalities, corresponding to a wide field of available immediate action; inactive people have broader, richer, more nuanced grasp of a smaller field of action. (MM 13-14) Both are aesthetically valuable of course, but in different ways. This point is also related to his assertion that "the object of art is to put to sleep the active or rather resistant powers of our personality and thus to bring us into a state of perfect responsiveness... In the processes of art we shall find, in a weakened form, a refined and in some measure spiritualized version of the process commonly used to induce the state of hypnosis." (TFW 14)

7 See William James, *The Writings of William James*, ed. John J. McDermott, "A Pluralistic Universe," (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 808.

8 I refer to Quine's famous essay, "Two Dogmas of Empiricism," in *Philosophical Review*, 60 (1951), 20-47, and anthologized many times thereafter.

whole *activity* of philosophy. Bergson's radically empirical, naturalistic account of the image, as the transient pattern in the variable flux, is as close as we can get, in my view, to grounding a responsible, fallible ontology that promises to leave intact our *experience* of value – and, in this case, aesthetic value, both as creating and receiving the created temporal patterns of others.

III. The Experience of the Image

We move now to what Bergson calls the "system of images" and their characters. Here we find an important distinction between a body and *my* body (see MM 47), the latter being a *privileged* image in the system of images. But in the passage cited here, Bergson continues, saying that *my* body (for me) and *your* body (for you) "is a pointed end, which our past is continually driving forward into our future. Whereas my body, taken at a single moment, is but a conductor interposed between the objects which influence it and those on which it acts, it is, nevertheless, when replaced in the flux of time, always situated at the very point where my past expires in a deed." (MM 78) Note that the past "expires" in the act, the deed, which might be called a "decision" in the literal sense – a "cut" in the flux.

We thus come to the structure of the act as *an* image *among* images. Bergson says that an image is *less* than an idea, as the idealists speak of these basic units of being, and also *less* than a thing or object, as realists are wont to posit as the basic units of the cosmos. As less determinate, the image is richer in both content and structure than the idea or the thing. He argues, conclusively in my view, that neither ideas nor things/objects can be parts of our experience as it is *had*. Rather, we employ memory to finish what is unfinished in our perception (where idealists and dogmatic empiricists roam) or our zone of indetermination (the playground of realists).

This situation gives realists problems with "the present," which they habitually hypostatize in order to ignore the incomplete character of the images they care about and offer as exemplars of "the real." In truth, these "things" are objects no more "complete" than anything else that comes from the flux. On the other side, we have dogmatic empiricists insisting that our perceptions can be simplified into qualities or primary and secondary characters that somehow (magically?) exhaust what we can know or experience about them. Thus, a percept is a sort of finished primary *idea*, a completed building block, an irreducible surd (conveniently fitted in advance for a theory of knowledge). They ignore the fact that the experience *as had* contains no such completed parts and that they, likewise, use memory to complete the image *into* a percept or simple idea instead of the "thing" or "object" favored by realists. Idealists fare no better, then, substituting the "idea" for the "thing" or "percept," and needing an account of how factually *incomplete* action, whether perception or thinking, can fill out an image into a determinate concept, or an inexhaustible idea of reason, or something similar.

In our experience *as had*, we work with images that *can be* completed in any of these ways – as ideas, concepts, objects, things, primary percepts, etc. – but we are under no absolute imperative to “complete” any of them. Action not only does not require that we treat images as completed units, it ignores all such virtualized completions in treating the image as the functional *unit* of all our actions. Hence, to act is to act *upon* images as *parts* of a system of images. To fail to accept this starting place is to court ideology and other pathologies of consciousness, philosophical, psychological, epistemological, phenomenological – it is the misuse (*and* the uncreative use) of memory. It supposes that the past has a power and influence over the meaning of the present that it does not have. As Bergson says, “habits formed in action,” that is, living memory brought to bear on present experience, “find their way up to the sphere of speculation, where they create fictitious problems,” so a corrected metaphysics that treats images and the image system as the basic grid of action, “must begin by dispersing this artificial obscurity.” (MM 16)

How, then, can we describe this system of images without illicitly relying upon completions that are misuses of memory? Bergson offers a way. Imagine that the present is really just the space of actions you *could* perform. “Distance,” then, is measured by the number of muscular contractions required to make use of that virtual “space.” Thus, to exist in a “present” is to be surrounded by a virtual space of action, a zone of indetermination, images you might or might not act upon, the relative “distances” of which are really only comprehensible with reference to the effort you *would* have to expend, and the duration it *would* require, to make use of that “space” (the present). Anything you cannot act on by means of contracting your muscles isn’t *really* part of your “present.”

Now, imagine that the whole of the “present” is a *plane*, in the geometrical sense. But the bothersome plane is *moving*; it recedes from your effort in proportion to the effort expended. The more effort you exert, the faster it recedes. The less effort you exert, the closer it comes and widens and broadens into a collection of images that you can *enjoy*.⁹ The only point of contact between an agent and his/her “present” consists in those contractions being enacted at the moment, whether that action be praying, drinking, cussing, or straining one’s brain to think about the meanings that always lie in the unthought background of our thinking.¹⁰ Thinking is also an effort, a kind of action, that forsakes *most* of the system of images for the sake of a paltry few and their relations. The *more* acuity there is in the thought, the *less* of the image we can grasp with it. This is the process of abstraction. The logician sees only a tree, in the conceptually determined sense. The artist sees a great deal more of the same image, saturated with ambiguity and possibility.

Still, the actor, whether logician or artist, always has *some* point of contact with the receding plane of the present, while *most* of that plane remains mere

9 This is a term much more common in Whiteheadian than in Bergsonian parlance. The term, for Whitehead, has to do with the depth of satisfaction achieved by the concrecence (but not the transition) of an actual entity in its valuation of its actual world. See Randall Auxier and Gary L. Herstein, *The Quantum of Explanation: Whitehead's Radical Empiricism*, chs. 7-9, forthcoming.

10 See Foucault’s famous distinction in chapter 9, “Man and His Doubles” in *The Order of Things* (London: Routledge, 1989), 330-374.

potential for action. Part of what makes artists psychologically delicate and epistemologically unreliable has to do with too much freedom within the system of images. And there is regret shooting through each and every enactment, since the cost of acting is cutting off *other* actions which *might have been* preferable, or at least more beautiful. Here there is an immediate encounter with the image system as a receding plane of the present as *possibility*.

Bergson's well-known example of our experience of watching the ice skater leap and twirl, and if she is graceful (and indeed this is the *meaning* of "grace"), our temporal experience is extended into the future, where we see the jump successfully completed, and then when she lands in our actual system of images, we feel as if we have willed the entire sequence. It is possible to act upon a receding plane of the present in ways that stretch it beyond the actual images and ever so slightly into the future. When the ice-skater falls, we are stunned for a moment, pervaded by a sense of unreality. How can the act anticipated *fail* to be the act experienced?

Let us continue the inquiry, respectfully, then. How much of what is in your "present" (that is, the space of possible action you currently perceive as a zone of indetermination) are you genuinely acting on, right now? Not much, right? The part you are acting on, by physical movements and effort, constitutes your point of contact with the receding plane of the present. You are not *conscious* of that part, but you do *feel* it, as resistance, and you *will* be able to be conscious of it as soon as it is far enough in the past for your central nervous system to process the feelings of resistance (and stimulation) into a synesthetic *feeling of the whole*. The receding plane of the present, as a system of images, has some solidity, then, consisting of whatever can be held in a single duration by the actor or agent (and it is good to remember that the moving plane defines what it means, at a minimum, for anything to be a solid, in the geometrical sense; it is how, in processual thinking, two dimensions become three).

If we take an act of consciousness as determining, for some purpose (usually for the sake of thinking), the solidity of the receding plane of the present, then its solidity is a couple of seconds (since a single act of thought can't usually be extended beyond a couple of seconds). But if we take continuous muscle contractions, each building upon the last in a way Bergson would call "graceful," as in our example, it is possible to imagine entire gymnastic routines or skating programs or symphony performances as being *one* unified action, meeting a relatively "thick" plane of the present. It is as if the entire continuity were spread out upon a single plane, and, physically speaking, it *is*. But we cannot *think* it that way. Thinking refuses to remain engaged with the receding plane of the present for more than a very short span. But physical effort, whether individual or collective, easily surpasses that limit. Indeed, the limits of *thinking* a physical act are themselves *a part of the act*. Thinking can employ forms – concepts, ideas, intuitions, and the like, to compensate and counteract the effects of the various discontinuities inherent in the act of creating spaces of thought, but the real continuities of action *are themselves the limits*, as far as we know, of such substitution. Even where we can no longer think, we often can still act, but where action is *completely* arrested, thinking will lack a fabric to support itself.

Where no *action* is possible at all, neither is any *thinking* possible. Inhibiting the body may lead, temporarily, to increased thinking, but that is the inertia of past action, as habit, overrunning the present situation. With no physical movement at all (including, for example, respiration), the organism ceases to function, vitally, in just a few minutes; thinking becomes clouded and desperate and gradually comes to be arrested altogether. Organisms must move in order to live; organisms with centralized nervous systems must move *against* resistance to become conscious of things or objects within their zones of indetermination.

What is crucial for our purposes is not what finally determines the thickness or thinness of the space of the present. What is crucial is that we must be able to imagine the *meaning* of an "actor" or "agent" as a *center of action*, chasing a virtual and variable space of possibility, a receding plane, some of which may be acted on before the plane is wholly out of reach and some of which may be reserved for acting upon through a *series* of actions corresponding to a series of present planes, transformed, indeed, but not so radically as to place beyond the reach of action those objects or ideas that lure our feeling to their promised solidity.¹¹ Sometimes the plane of the present is sufficiently transformed as to frustrate my action, in deed or in thought – I reach for the glass but do not succeed in apprehending it; it falls and breaks. The projected completion of my act of drinking is arrested. Other times, I succeed and the act falls into the past, unnoted and unremembered *because* I succeeded. Our access to memory depends, if not quite upon failure, upon imperfect success in the relation of act *experienced* to the act *projected* ahead in time. Bergson believes that consciousness is created in the difference arising from the dissonance of act and projection and the way in which we never quite perfectly anticipate the solid resistance we get from acting – at least not in instances of action we can *remember*. This is as much the case for thinking-as-action as for physical exertion. We all do both all the time (in fact, we do nothing else, as far as I know).

If you imagine the receding plane of the present as *sinking*, descending away into an infinite depth of futurity, and if you imagine the point of action, the zone of indetermination, as a vector, a tendency-arrow that chases that plane and leaves a sort of comet's tail of past deeds behind it, you have Bergson's image of the relationship between memory (the comet's tail) and perception (the space of the present, as qualified above). If you could *ascend* back up the arrow's path, regressing in lived time or "duration," all the way into the deepest past, you would have *pure memory*. The further back you move, the more static the images become until none of them moves at all. No one who is awake can "remember" the images that are so deep in the past as to be almost utterly fixed, relative to the present, but that does not mean these images are not active. They are archetypes and we encounter them in dreams, for example, which, according to Bergson, is a deep kind of experiencing of the past, but not limited to the past as it is associated with my own individual actions. We dip into the past of the race, the species, all the living, when we dream. There are other modes of access, apart from dreaming, to the past as memory images,

11 Solidarity and lure are discussed in Auxier and Herstein, *The Quantum of Explanation*, esp. ch. 7.

but the point is that artists really *are* “remembering” the images they create, while also perceiving the materials available for re-manifesting those images in novel configurations the present.

On the other hand, if you could spread a *single* action over the entire receding plane of the present, you would have *pure perception*. This would be a total, wholly integrated arrangement of *possible* action, perceived in perfect clarity, with no requirement of a finite action that makes the rest disappear into the background. In such a condition, the presence of memory (past images) would exert only a minimal influence upon action, although they would be available. Perception in the present of the possibilities for acting in the present makes possibility palpable and makes actuality into suggestion rather than determinate exertion upon the center of action. You, as a finite human actor, wouldn’t want either pure memory or pure perception, even if you really could experience them. They are tendencies only. Neither one of these can be enacted in a purified way, but there are perceptually richer “presents” in proportion as there are “presents” impoverished by over-weening memory, or by overwhelming perception. Rich memory comes at the cost of an impoverishment of perception and vice-versa.

In reality, all we ever get is a small point of contact between the past and the present, and an especially thick action simply has a broader perception and/or a longer duration, achieved by bringing more of the past to bear on the receding plane of the present. An especially thin present has to do with less perception and more with memory. In thinner, repetitive actions, such as sleeping, repetitive exercise, working on a factory line, and the like, more of the past pervades the present (only that part relevant to performing the repetitive task), so that even our consciousness of the receding plane of the present dissipates to something almost ephemeral.

If you can see, in your mind’s eye, that descending plane of the present with its chasing vector, and the comet’s tail spreading out behind the vector as it is becoming diffused into an increasingly indifferent past, I now want you to imagine that vector *as a cone*.¹² Everything *within* the cone once *touched* the present, and everything beyond it remained virtual, merely possible for the actor who chased the plane. Within the cone is “memory,” the *actual past*, for that actor, which is to say that *within* the cone is the whole of past action, while beyond that cone is the might-have-been. The might-have-been is neither strictly mine nor yours, but rather is part of what the past is *made of* for any actor whose receding plane it belonged to. Neither is the actual past *strictly* mine or yours alone, since an infinite series of actions stretching backward also brought us into actuality.

Following our understanding of solidity and solid geometry: If you could take a conic section of the “past” which is precisely *parallel* with the receding plane of the present, that moment now past which just was the configuration of the plane a few seconds before now, you would recover an actual slice of the past, a moment with some qualitative, epochal thickness, all the actions and all their internal relations.

12 For Bergson’s drawing of this, see MM 162 [210].

Fiction, according to Bergson, is what results when a conic section is taken from memory that is *not* parallel to the receding plane of the present. Fiction involves treating *as if* they were simultaneous a set of possibilities and actualities that never existed as a system of images together on *any agent's* plane of the present. The conic sections that are most closely parallel to the plane of the present, for the setting of the story, will be the most *historical* pieces of fiction. Umberto Eco's most recent novel, *The Prague Cemetery*, is a fine example of how close one can come – every event described in the novel *happened*, except for those performed by the one fictional character in the novel, Simone Simonini. I doubt that Eco was consciously attempting to press the envelope of *fact* as Bergson describes it. Nevertheless, the point is that creating a narrative requires that we connect successive planes of the present, and if we treat even a single pair of images as belonging to the *same* plane of action that were never in *any actor's actual* plane, we are fictionalizing the past. That is Bergson's understanding of fiction (see MM 168-169 [219-221]).

Fiction affects everyone who tells a story, however empirical, but it also affects artists and philosophers. The images offered by artists in performance and as artworks are fictions in the relevant sense – they are virtualized insofar as they never precisely existed as actions anyone performed, but rather they depict closely what never actually co-existed. (Even live-action photography fictionalizes by framing and by reducing the scope of the action performed to only a tiny instant of its genuine duration.) Philosophers similarly theorize about what has never quite really happened, but might or might have. Otherwise they would be historians.

This fictive structure pervades our present actions because the past survives in the present, which is to say that memory pervades and organizes perception, and memory is no respecter of conic sections that parallel the plane of the present. Memory substitutes its images for the genuine plane of the present by supplying memories that will suffice to aid present action. So long as the memory images approximate to those constituting the system of images in the present, action upon the past *as if* it were the present is not usually too discordant with what would be enacted in the genuine perceptual present. As we age we make this substitution more and more. By the time an agent grows to maturity, he or she perceives precious little of the receding plane of possible action. Rather, we look about us and we are mainly employing our fictive memories as substitutes for our perceptions. We don't usually care precisely when in course of the past the images we are aware of came to have the order they now have. We lump a trillion temporal distinctions into a single flooded plane of present possible action and ignore all possibilities that have no distinction for us in our own pasts.

Philosophers are among the worst perceivers, but among the best rememberers. As Bergson says: "This survival of the past *per se* forces itself upon philosophers, then, under one form or another; the difficulty that we have in conceiving it comes simply from the fact that we extend to the series of memories, in time, that obligation of containing and being contained which applies only to the collection of bodies instantaneously perceived in space. The fundamental illusion consists in transferring to duration itself, in its continuous

flow, the form of the instantaneous [conic] sections which we make in it." (MM 149 [193])

The body itself contains both memory and duration and so becomes a kind of temporally extended conic section in the relation between the past and the present. As the center of action and the point of contact between the receding plane of the present and actual memory, the body is a *special* image in the "system of images" (perception and memory *together*), as I have indicated above, "but this special image, which persists in the midst of others, and which I call my body, constitutes at every moment, as we have said, a [conic] section of becoming. It is then the place of passage of the movements received and thrown back, a hyphen, a connecting link between the things which act upon me and the things upon which I act..." (MM 151-152 [196]; see also MM 161-162 [210-211])

IV. Creativity and the Inner Life

If I have succeeded in what I set out to do in these first two sections, we have now an ontology of the image and a basis for understanding what action *is*, as an aspect of dealing with the system of images. All of this has been explained without need for reference to the inner life of organisms (images with bodies that remain constant through any given series of transformations of the receding plane of the present) or reference to other active images in the system of images. It is important that the ontology and the account of change and variable patterned transformation of the flux be carried out without appealing to the inner lives or motive forces or wills or intentions of the other images that act. Not only does such a description avoid the traps of representationalism, but it also places us on a path to *discuss* the inner lives of organisms in a radically empirical, thoroughly naturalistic way. It follows from the discussion to this point, and indeed it is Bergson's view, that consciousness has to do with the way that the past is retained by storing energies in the body without releasing them in action.

The result of this is that the zone of indetermination in the system of images that surrounds the special image I call "my body" becomes increasingly refined and distinct in proportion to the extent that memory can flood the system of images and determine it as an environment *for* the special image, i.e., that the image system takes on the dynamic forms that answer to precisely the types of actions the special image *could* carry out. Perception is, then, a variable relation between the past, present and future defined by a capacity to project the past onto the present for the sake of future actions (most of which will never be carried out, in your case, since your complex centralized nervous system can delay action indefinitely), with a relatively invariant center (meaning that we can always find that center, no matter how much it is transformed by its actions). Your zone of indetermination in the system of images becomes, for the purposes of action, a space of things (or objects), graded in their relevance by the effort that would be required to act on them, or be acted on by them

(including thinking about them, which is the substitute for acting on them). But the same sort of situation goes equally for all organisms, or indeed, for anything with a body, i.e., a special image that can remain relatively constant through a series of transformations. To some degree, this holds for *all* images, which is to say that all images have both memory and perception, but for most images the constancy of the center is guaranteed by repetition alone (i.e., the matter-tendency) and the type of action provides no motility. The interesting images in the image system are the ones that hold their constancy through a greater emphasis upon memory than upon matter.

As Bergson says:

Could reality come into direct contact with sense and consciousness, could we enter into immediate communion with things and with ourselves, probably art would be useless, or rather we should all be artists, for then our soul would continually vibrate in perfect accord with nature. Our eyes, aided by memory, would carve out in space and fix in time the most inimitable pictures. Hewn in the living marble of the human form, fragments of statues, beautiful as the relics of antique statuary, would strike the passing glance. (L 150)¹³

Here Bergson is bringing to bear on the question of “what is art?” the way the image system might be presented to human beings as a world of objects *if* there were no importunate veil mediating, stubbornly, between consciousness and our senses, on one side, and our world on the other. We would then see statues (and paintings, and the ballet, etc.), in the fragments of images in the image system. Yet, overcoming the veil of mediation is more than we can accomplish. As he continues:

All this is around and within us, and yet no whit of it do we distinctly perceive. Between nature and ourselves, nay, between ourselves and our own consciousness a veil is interposed: a veil that is dense and opaque for the common herd, – thin, almost transparent for the artist and the poet. What fairy wove that veil? Was it done in malice or friendliness? (L 151)

It is important that Bergson pauses, corrects himself in saying there is a veil between us and nature – there is, but that is an effect of a more difficult problem, which is the veil between our bodies as centers of action, as part of the system of images, and our *consciousness* thereof. We have described above the ontology that stresses the essential continuity of the body as an image and the system of images – which for some purposes we may call “nature,” if by that we mean all the patterns in the system of images we could possibly act upon. Whether there is anything we should call “nature” *beyond* that limit seems like a metaphysical question in the occult sense, and it is not a concern for radical empiricists, except insofar as we must remain open to it as possibility.

Yet, in refining his assertion, Bergson poses the question of the *inner life*, especially of complex organisms. These are organisms with nervous systems that allow them to delay acting upon things or objects in their zones of indetermination, nervous systems that project the past onto the system of images in more and less determinate ways, the less determinate being called “intellect,”

13 Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, authorized trans. Cloudeley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (New York: Macmillan, 1911), used throughout the article.

which creates spaces of possible action, and the more determinate ways called “instinct,” the inexorable drive to act almost immediately on images as universal exemplars of necessary relations, as if these images were *objects*, i.e., wholly determinate repetitions of their archetypes without variation of any kind.¹⁴

The zone of indetermination for intellect, by contrast, becomes a space of play and possibility, with objects transforming into their plurality of possibilities before the arrested eye of that body that resists acting. Yet, having offered the radically empirical ontology, we still have not confronted the reason for the existence of a veil between our inner lives, our consciousness and senses, if you will, and our lives as acting bodies in a zone of indetermination, or as a special image (“my body”), a center of action, in the system of images.

The question of the inner life, and hence, the way artists and poets experience the veil as thin, is what transforms Bergson’s aesthetics (as I have now brought it together) into a philosophy of art. I left out a crucial sentence in the passages I quoted above. After Bergson points out how images would be for us like statues as beautiful as the fragments that survive from the ancients, he says:

Deep within our souls we should hear the strains of our inner life’s unbroken melody, – a music that is oftentimes gay, but more frequently plaintive and always original. (L 150-151)

This is to say, we *would* hear this music if not for the veil between our consciousness and ourselves. But in fact we don’t hear it – or rather, *most* of us don’t. He offers this as the reason why our veils are so thick:

We had to live, and life demands that we grasp things in their relations to our own needs. Life is action. Life implies the acceptance only of the utilitarian side of things in order to respond to them by appropriate reactions: all other impressions must be dimmed or else reach us as vague and blurred. I look and I think I see; I listen and I think I hear, I examine myself and I think I am reading the very depths of my heart. But what I hear and see is purely and simply a selection made by my senses to serve as a light to my conduct; what I know of myself is what comes to the surface, what participates in my actions. My senses and my consciousness, therefore, give me no more than a practical simplification of reality. (L 151)

In the case of action in moving my body, I select images *for use*; in the case of thinking as an action of self-examination, I attend to the work of memory only as it aids that action. The rest is dim and opaque. This is to say that instinct never loses its grip on us except insofar as we can afford *not to act*, and not acting is counter to the requirements of life. The arrest of action is, in itself, a kind of

¹⁴ This is the sense in which Hegel, for example, treats “sense certainty” saying that “those who assert the truth and certainty of sense-objects... should go back to the most elementary school of wisdom,... [the initiate who] not only comes to doubt the being of sensuous things, but to despair of it; in part he brings about the nothingness of such things himself, in his dealings with them, and in part he sees them reduce themselves to nothingness. Even the animals are not shut out from this wisdom but, on the contrary, show themselves to be most profoundly initiated into it; for they do not just stand idly in front of sensuous things as if they possessed intrinsic being, but, despairing of their reality, and completely assured of their nothingness, they fall to without ceremony and eat them up.” See Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 65 (paragraph 109). What Hegel describes here is very close to what Bergson means by the word “image” and, being treated in its pure universality, we act on it without mediation as a universal – and this is “instinct,” in Bergson’s sense.

death, a stoppage of the flow that sustains life. Thus, the cost of encountering a space of possibility is inaction, a momentary cessation of life, exerting our vital energies in resisting the entire flow. The result of such resistance is that the zone of indetermination fills out in richer perception in proportion to our ability to delay acting on it and hold back the mindless flood of memory onto the plane of the present at the same time. What occurs in these moments is reflection, which is a virtual image of what would be happening if we were acting, whether upon the space created by not thinking, or the empty virtual objects that appear when we refrain from acting. This is what intuition intuits – what is not actively thought (reflective intuition) or what is not actually done (sensuous intuition). Intuition is made of possibilities, real possibilities, but on condition of their not being thought as objects of thinking (e.g., as determinate concepts), or being enacted in the economy of useful sensuous action. You only intuit what you have never determinately thought or acted on. Yet, such intuition can become a part of subsequent action when we have released our bodies into the sensuous flux and our thinking into the more rarified processes of cognition. These intuitions, as contributors to subsequent thinking and acting, become insights and novel movements (and what is an insight except a novel movement of thinking?).

It is possible, then, to refine our genuine possibilities for acting (and thinking) along certain lines by undertaking increasingly refined actions upon them – the development of technique, which is as valuable to artists as to politicians, hunters, footballers, or any other kind of human undertaking that focuses a *reflectively* refined perception upon a course of action or of thinking.

It cannot come as a surprise to anyone with even a passing familiarity with Bergson's philosophy that his account of intuition is at the heart of his aesthetics, just as it functions as the center of his epistemology, metaphysics, and ethics. When it came time to discuss the lives of *human beings*, as they are shared across disparate places and distant generations, Bergson chose to address the various associated issues through the philosophy of culture. Without going deeply into what culture might mean for Bergson (he is never wholly clear, in my view), we can summarize quickly by pointing out the images in the zone of indetermination for human action which appear in our perception as "objects," are taken by us as *symbols*, and their symbolic standing is a great part of what veils their "natural meaning," i.e., what they *would* mean if we could poke through the veil of utility upon which all our thinking and acting is bent.¹⁵

Bergson's aesthetics stands in contrast to many other views precisely because he does not regard the artist as a person with some sort of expertise in the arrangement of symbols, but as a person who can see (i.e., think and act) *through* the layers of crusty images, the enculturated symbolism, the tendency toward pure memory. The artist touches, by way of intuition (both reflective and sensuous) what is *in* the zone of indetermination as creative possibility for

15 Here it is good to remember the two principles Bergson articulates in the Introduction to *Matter and Memory*, viz., the psychological principle that all mental functions are turned toward action, and the metaphysical principle that past actions have a nasty habit of becoming objects of speculation with which we create fictitious problems. (See MM, 16 [xvi-xvii].)

perception, describing an arc in the *direction* of pure perception, while holding back memory and holding off utility to create the space of novel thinking and action, and allowing intuition to do its work. There is a freedom of action in the zone of indetermination for the artist that lies within the power of all of us, but is exemplified in the action of the artist.

The question, then, is what is the artist doing that brings the past into the present in such a way as to lay open the zone of indetermination as a pattern of perception that recovers what is inherent or immediate in the image system. We now arrive at the most important point about intuition, in Bergson's sense. Bergson held that intuition *is* instinct that has come to be *detached* from its direct and immediate association with life. In example after example, Bergson showed that the manipulation of life as *material process* was the immediate employment of "instinct." Instinctive action exploits the reliability of repetitive pattern in both the physical and the more complex organic world. Nothing complex can endure for long without exploiting patterned repetition, with the organic repetitions built from and depending upon the physical repetitions. Novel and complex patterns of order are concretized by taking advantage of the systolic relaxations of physical and organic systems of images, which provide a lapse of indetermination during which subtler and less stable repetitions may occur. Overlapping hierarchies of duration are everywhere observed in what we call nature, and there seem almost no limit to how subtle, unstable, and rapid a vibration might be that can be inserted into a longer, slower, more extended pattern of vibration. Every image in the image system is such a collection. Bergson attributes to the *élan vital* the work of inserting such life into the lapses, but we will not pursue that hypothesis here. (See CE, 126-128¹⁶) The point is that this really happens, whatever the agency or reason.

Still, the presence of possibility, as a might-have-been, in the fading reflective intuition must be structurally analogous (or something stronger) to the fading image from the image system. They could not be different in kind, and likely, the latter contains the former as a subtle set of unifiable variations that could be inserted into the lapses of the macro-structure of the image system. Thus, *my* possibilities for action, even when they are inhibited, are very like *the* possibilities for the acting of my body in the zone of indetermination that is the proximate and non-proximate structure (i.e., distance) in the receding plane of the present that confines the image system.

We may now say that an intuition, both in the way we *feel* it as it passes away, and in the way we can *imagine* it in recollection, whether visually, aurally, or in some other way, is a humanized version of "memory," in Bergson's sense. Because the image is public, the sensuous intuition that *is* the fading of that image, passes away in different animal bodies that have shared a present with that image. Thus, the fading and the intuition is grounds overlap in different animal bodies. Something analogous holds for reflective intuitions, the inner images of thinking that did not quite reach the clarity of an object of thought.

¹⁶ *Creative Evolution*, authorized trans. Arthur Mitchell (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1983 [1911]).

These overlap less from one human being to another, but their overlap is crucial for shared aesthetic judgment to occur.

This structural overlap of intuitions deriving from sensation, being the negative outline that surrounds our perception, is therefore irreducibly social. This is not due to our biology alone, but due to the way that images endure, survive, and fade. There is very little difference, in the grand scheme of things, between the actions I can perform or inhibit and those available to others. Thus, every action I inhibit is also counterbalanced in the past by the fact that many other humans actually have *done* and *are doing* what I have *not* done and never will do. I participate in their actions vicariously. My intuition of a might-have-been, an action I did not perform, is still part of memory insofar as some other image enacted that possibility, and while I merely intuit that act, some other enduring creature genuinely remembers it. This is the genuine empirical meaning of *methexis*, participation, and this account explains why that idea has gained so much purchase in our intellectual history. We do indeed participate in *forms* of action, i.e., generalized ways of acting that fall under memory itself. But it would be closer to accurate to say that the collective images of *unenacted* possible actions that form the negative outline of our actual history are really experienced as “archetypes,” in Jung’s sense, or “imaginative universals” in Vico’s sense. For Bergson, as we mentioned earlier, when we dream, we sink into this structural domain of archetypes or collective dream images. In dreaming it matters not at all to which special image (i.e., body) an intuition belongs. This fact of our experience also explains our aesthetic delight and thrill in seeing another human being or an animal enact something we cannot do ourselves.

As fascinating as all this is, the question, now that we have a basic sense of what a reflective intuition is. It is the result, Bergson says, of the long association of instinctive action with inhibition in living creatures that emphasize the tendency to use intellect – to spatialize and perceive the space – *instead* of acting. They are sublimated in images. Thinking, then, is a kind of second sight that draws upon the organization of the body and upon the structure of actions *not* enacted, and thus forming virtual thoughts that seem like analogues of the sensuous images in our zone of indetermination, only paler, occupying only a virtual space. Thinking, for Bergson, is always about the past, but, as with reflective intuitions and unreflective intuited feelings, it can become a contributor to forming a *substitute* for the actual future and enables us to anticipate a likely configuration of images in the image system. This *generalized* world is the one we inhabit almost all the time, Bergson holds. “We move amidst generalities and symbols, as within a tilt-yard in which our force is pitted against other forces; and fascinated by action, tempted by it, we live in a zone midway between things and ourselves.” (L 154)

But what is the value of reflective intuition for creating or experiencing a work of art? Clearly the process of creating works of art draws upon certain extremes of intensity in acting on the image system, utilizing feeling, intuition (both reflective and unreflective) and thinking. There is in artistic activity an intervention in the image system that reminds us of some possibility for moving

our bodies that we have not expected to enact ourselves or even to see enacted in the image system. Who is the artist? Bergson says:

From time to time, however, in a fit of absentmindedness, nature raises up souls that are more detached from life. Not with that intentional, logical systematical detachment – the result of reflection and philosophy – but rather with a natural detachment, one innate in the structure of sense or consciousness, which at once reveals itself by a virginal manner, so to speak, of seeing, hearing, or *thinking*. Were this detachment complete, did the soul no longer cleave to action by any of its perceptions, it would be the soul of an artist such as the world has never yet seen. It would excel alike in every art at the same time; or rather, it would infuse them into one. It would perceive all things in their native purity: the forms, colours, sounds of the physical world as well as the subtlest movements of the inner life. (L 154, my emphasis)

No such perfect detachment exists, of course. The veil of attachment to life is lifted only partly and accidentally among some of us in some ways, but it is not unimportant that Bergson has included *thinking*, along with seeing and hearing, among the powers of action implicated in human creativity. There is a thinking that is more than *artful*, it is a kind of *art*, a mode of art, and it is not the sort that philosophy and logic and systematic epistemology produce in us. But Bergson intimates that the arts would be a unity of perception if ever there could be a complete detachment from the way that life commands action in our instinctive being. But in the movements of the image system, the human artist moves within a limited domain and “little by little he insinuates [his seeing, hearing, thinking] into our own perception, baffled though we may be at the outset.” (L 155) The result is that “for a few moments he diverts us from the prejudices of form and color that have come between ourselves and reality. And thus he realizes the loftiest ambition of art, which here consists in revealing to us nature.” (L 155)

Art reaches its deepest into us when it ceases relying upon words and borrowing the structures of language and the conceptual spaces defined thereby; art goes deeper when it is grasping “something that has nothing in common with language.” Rather:

...certain rhythms of life and breath that are closer to man than his inmost feelings, being the living law – varying with each individual – of his enthusiasm and despair, his hopes and regrets. By setting free and emphasizing this music, they [the artists] force it upon our attention: they compel us, willy-nilly, to fall in with it, like passers-by who join in a dance. And thus they impel us to set in motion, in the depths of our being, some secret chord which was only waiting to thrill. (L 156-157)

Art then is not an imitation of life, although it draws on the way that the images generated for our inner lives through the inhibition of our actions that overlap with the actions that *others* enact, or that we ourselves enact *later*. There is something to the insight about imitation as the ground of art that is irreducible in our experience, but to have that insight, that reflective intuition of a thought we never quite *had*, coagulate into a dead Platonic form or completed idea is the very opposite of what the imitation means and portends, in art or in life. And there is definitely *expression* in the creation of art, but it is not the causal will of the inner life of the artist, nor any arrangement of intentions

for the work; expression is the collection of acts by which the work is brought into the image system as a kind of movement, a dynamism that impels our participation, for a moment.

These are natural rather than conventional or philosophical accounts of imitation and expression, and in no way do they fall into the trap of representationalism. The key difference is that Bergson looks for art in our experience below the level of language. Bergson respects language very much, and art that draws upon its structures, among those who “contrive to make us see something of what they have seen: by rhythmical arrangements of words, which thus become organized and animated with a life of their own, they tell us – or rather suggest – things that speech was not calculated to express.” (L 156)

In this way of naturalizing perception, action, creativity, imitation, expression and all the tropes of Western aesthetic theory, Bergson describes a path forward (and around all the fruitless old disputes) into a future that is intellectually responsible, radically empirical, and available to the contemplations of all who create and who enjoy the outcomes of artistic endeavor.

personalist61@gmail.com