

Lecture 12: Bergson and Passive Synthesis

Introduction

Last week, we looked at the notion of active synthesis, as Kant uses it in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Here, Kant defines synthesis as ‘the act of putting different representations together, and of grasping what is manifold in them in one act of knowledge.’ (CPR A77/B109) We saw that this idea of synthesis was fundamentally tied to the notions of subjects and objects, and, through the categories, to the notion of judgement. In fact, this is clear from Kant’s definition, as a judging *is* this conjunction of what is manifold in a single act (A *is* B). Deleuze’s claim is that Kant borrows this conscious, psychological, notion of synthesis, therefore, which applies to knowledge of objects, and uses it as a model for the constitution of objects themselves.

Now, it is Husserl who comes up with the notion of a passive synthesis. Husserl notes that when we look around the world, even before we arrive at the level of judgement, the object has a certain level of constitution. So, when I look at this table, even before I separate out the aspects of its table-ness and its wooden-ness (the two aspects of the table needed to form a judgement of the kind Husserl is looking for), it is still in a sense ‘there’, and available to me. We can extend this notion, and note that when I ‘pick out’ the table as the focus of my attention, I pick it out from a passive background of objects accessible to me, but not yet structured in terms of judgement. It is only when I shift my attention that something else, the door for instance, becomes thematised so that I can make a judgement about it. The world, therefore, is receptive to judgement, but is not yet actively understood in terms of judgement. Husserl calls this the ‘pre-predicative givenness’ of things (Smith, *Husserl and the Cartesian Meditations*, 127). Such a state therefore calls for a synthesis, but not the kind of active taking up into consciousness which characterises Kant’s account. Husserl therefore calls it a ‘passive synthesis’. Now, for Husserl, this kind of synthesis is still tied in the last analysis to the ego (he calls it the ‘lowest level of activity’ [Smith, 128]), and so will not serve Deleuze’s purposes. Deleuze’s question follows on from this notion of passive synthesis, however, and the question which will occupy us today is, is it possible to give an account of the organisation of experience which does not rely on the activity of consciousness? That is, is it possible to avoid the structure Kant presents us with which subsumes difference under the identities of the subject and the object? Now, this question is important for Deleuze for two reasons.

First, he needs an account of this sort to show that he can provide an alternative to the Kantian notion of synthesis. That is, if Kant’s definition of synthesis is correct, then organisation will always imply a central identity. A proper concept of difference will therefore be impossible to develop.

Second, if he is able to show not only the coherence of the notion of passive synthesis, but also its actual presence in the constitution of experience, then he will be able to show that the Kantian account is unsustainable. Kant’s account relies on the model of synthesis as spontaneous unification of a manifold by a subject, and so if another form of synthesis is available, the *necessity* of the categories unifying experience collapses, and with it Kant’s account of the world with the structure of judgement. It’s worth noting at this point that Deleuze isn’t claiming that all synthesis is passive. We

will still be able to make judgements. These will not be a complete specification of the object, however.

Rather than dealing with Husserl, I want to work through Bergson's account of memory today, as this provides the foundation for Deleuze's alternative to Kant's three syntheses of time.

Matter and Memory is a very rich text, and sets out not simply a model of psychology, but also the basis of an ontology which supports this psychology. It involves numerous deviations from the standard account of how memory functions that we might find, for instance, in Kant or Hume's models of psychology. In order to provide a framework to get to the heart of what Deleuze finds useful about Bergson's model, I want to follow Deleuze's characterisation of Bergson in *Bergsonism*, which was published a couple of years before *Difference and Repetition*. Deleuze's title *Bergsonism*, is not arbitrary here, as he is flagging the fact that he is interested in a Bergsonian approach, rather than Bergson's philosophy itself. Deleuze characterises Bergson's as based on the assumption of four main propositions:

(1) we place ourselves at once in a leap, in the ontological element of the past (the paradox of the leap); (2) there is a difference in kind between the present and the past (the paradox of Being); (3) the past does not follow the present that it has been (the paradox of coexistence); (4) what coexists with each present is the whole of the past, integrally, on various levels of contraction and relaxation (the paradox of psychic repetition) (*Bergsonism*, 61)

These four propositions are distinguished from the four propositions of the standard view which Bergson is opposing. These are the following:

(1) That we can reconstitute the past with the present; (2) we pass gradually from one to the other; (3) that they are distinguished by a before and an after; (4) that the work of the mind is carried out by the addition of elements (rather than by changes of level, genuine jumps, the reworking of systems, etc.) (*Bergsonism*, 61-2)

I want to first look at the view that Bergson is opposed to, before turning to the alternative.

The Standard View of Memory

We can see that all of the assumptions of the standard view of memory emerge from an attempt to preserve something like the Kantian view of psychology that we looked at last week. This view was essentially a *hylomorphic* account which saw the mind as operating on a field of given entities in order to give them unity. Now, this view, in turn, rests on the idea that the mind is made up of atomic elements which are brought into relation by the active powers of the mind. So, for instance, Hume makes the claim that 'simple perceptions or impressions and ideas are such as admit of no distinction nor separation.' So, how do we remember? Last week, we looked at Kant's account of the synthesis of reproduction by the imagination. The claim was that in order to be able to perform an act, such as counting, we need to be able to reproduce the previous moments of our experience, in order to relate them to the present moment of consciousness. By taking both moments together, we are able to unify them into the act of counting. Similarly, it is by reproducing our memories of cinnabar (a soft wood from the cinnabar tree, which grows in Southeast Asia), we are able to associate the cinnabar with the colour red. This is a paradigm case of Deleuze's fourth

point, that the work of the mind is carried out by the addition of elements. To return to Kant, it is 'the act of putting different representations together.' Now, implicit in this act of reproduction is the notion that memories are not different in kind from sensory impressions. This point is made explicit in the empiricist tradition, and Hume says the following in the *Treatise*:

We find by experience, that when any impression has been present with the mind, it again makes its appearance there as an idea; and this it may do after two different ways: either when in its new appearance it retains a considerable degree of its first vivacity, and is somewhat intermediate betwixt an impression and an idea: or when it entirely loses that vivacity, and is a perfect idea. The faculty, by which we repeat our impressions in the first manner, is called the MEMORY, and the other the IMAGINATION. It is evident at first sight, that the ideas of the memory are much more lively and strong than those of the imagination, and that the former faculty paints its objects in more distinct colours, than any which are employed by the latter. When we remember any past event, the idea of it flows in upon the mind in a forcible manner; whereas in the imagination the perception is faint and languid, and cannot without difficulty be preserved by the mind steady and uniform for any considerable time. Here then is a sensible difference betwixt one species of ideas and another. (*Treatise* 1.1.3)

Sensations differ merely by degree of vivacity from memories (this is point 2 of Deleuze's analysis: that we pass gradually from the past to the present). Now, as Bergson notes, while this account sounds reasonable when we begin from the perspective of the present (the idea that memories are weak versions of perceptions), if we invert the order of analysis, it becomes problematic. If we take the notion of an intense pain, then as it recedes in memory, it will become less intense. Now, Bergson notes that there will come a point where we do not know 'whether what I feel is a slight sensation, which I experience, or a slight sensation, which I imagine.' (MM 136) Now, as Bergson says, while we might agree that there is an insight contained in the fact that memory only becomes of practical benefit to us once it is introduced into an actual state of affairs (related to actual impressions), this does not mean that it has to be of the same kind of those impressions. Just as the hypnotist's suggestion may make us feel hot, this is not a result of the 'hotness' of the words themselves. Once we recognise this possibility, however, we see that there is another implicit assumption in the associationist position. That is that memory and perception are differentiated by one being past, and the other, present, as if the two were differentiated on a line of time. If, however, we see the past as different in kind from the present, then it is difficult to see how the past could simply be a present which has passed.

In fact, there is a fundamental difficulty with an account that sees memory as operating in associationist terms. As we saw last week, in order for association to be possible, Kant claims that we need a prior synthesis whereby impressions are brought into 'affinity' with one another. In fact, as Bergson notes, 'we should seek in vain for two ideas which have not some point of resemblance or which do not touch each other somewhere.' (MM 163) The point which Bergson is making is that once we have separated memories into a series of passive givens, in the manner such as Kant's, the principle whereby they are related to one another appears to be arbitrary: 'why should an image which is, by hypothesis, self sufficient, seek to accrue itself to others either similar or given in contiguity with it?' (MM 165) We can relate this point to Deleuze's criticisms of the notion of law that we looked at last term. There we saw that in order for a law to function, we had to see it as ranging over a field of discretely determined entities. But this made it impossible for us to provide an account of how those entities themselves were determined. Similarly here, once we have reached the level of discretely determined sensations, it is impossible to determine the principles by which they are related to one another, primarily because their self-sufficiency means that they are not internally related to other memories. For this reason, we require an external force, such as the

active synthesis of consciousness, to impose a set of relations on them. If this act of relation is external to the elements, and comes after them, then we cannot explain how it is able to operate according to an affinity we find within them. Bergson provides as for now cryptic alternative: 'In fact, we perceive the resemblance before we perceive the individuals which resemble one another; and in an aggregate of contiguous parts, we perceive the whole before the parts.' (MM 165) Bergson's point therefore is that there is a self-relation of the moments prior to their constitution as individuals that can be given to an active synthesis. This in effect is the claim (obscure for now) that active synthesis is transcendentally dependent on a prior passive (non-conscious) synthesis.

What is the root cause of the problems with the classical account of memory, therefore? Deleuze's claim is that we have failed to characterise the relation of memory in terms of its 'true differences in kind or articulations of the real'. In this case, we can imagine a series of categories: object, impression, sensation, memory. Now, at some point, we have to make a distinction between these terms. For associationism, we argue for a difference in kind between objects and the latter three categories. This is what leads to the classical problems of scepticism which, for instance, Kant's project attempted to overcome. Deleuze's point is that making the distinction at this point doesn't match up with natural articulations of reality, and leads to 'badly analysed composites' – we take sensation and memory to only differ in degree when in fact, they differ in kind. Bergson makes a different division amongst these concepts, situating object, impression, and sensation on one side, and memory on the other. Thus, for Bergson, objects themselves are merely images. Once the proper analysis at this level has been carried out, the problems of associationism dissolve. In terms of Deleuze's relation to the analytic tradition, Deleuze is quite close to Wittgenstein at this point, in that they both claim that the important moment in philosophy is that which precedes the analysis of arguments (in Deleuze's term, the question, in Wittgenstein, the analysis of the language game which allows the philosophical problem to be posed). The key difference is, I think that whereas Wittgenstein sees true philosophy as the effort to dissolve false problems, Deleuze sees this moment as rather the beginning of a philosophy of difference. The fact that Wittgenstein ultimately closes down metaphysical enquiry leads to Deleuze calling him 'an assassin of philosophy'. So how does a proper analysis of memory allow us to produce an account of memory?

Bergson's Positive Account

Bergson's account opposes the empiricist account in many key respects. It sees memory as different in kind from perception, the past as co-existing with the present, and forming a structure of co-existence, and the movement of memory as an ontological, rather than psychological, procedure. I want to focus today on just giving an overview of Bergson's theory of memory. We can begin by noting three terms: recollection-memory, habit-memory, and perception. Now, in Kant's philosophy, these three terms are run together. Habits are produced by the re-presentation of actual past experiences by the imagination, just as, presumably, the imagination reproduces particular events from the past that we recollect. These moments are represented as the equivalent of perceptions. As we know, however, there is a clear difference between the notion of habit which involves orienting ourselves towards a world of things, and the experience, for instance, of day-dreaming, which involves a detachment from concerns.

If we want to understand how these two notions are related, we need to begin by recognising that consciousness is, for Bergson, fundamentally oriented towards action. That means that the present moment of time is to be understood in terms of the connection between perception and action (in sensory motor terms). Our principle concern is with our orientation towards future possibilities, rather than towards the past. In this respect, however, the memory is

obviously of use, as it allows us to act on the basis of prior experience. This was the basis of Kant's claim that to form habits required an affinity of perceptions, in order that relations of similarity and contiguity could be formed between the past and present. Now, as we have seen, Bergson believes that memory is different in kind from perception, and so it cannot be the case that memories are simply representations like perception itself. Rather, memory 'begets sensation' (MM 141) when it is brought to bear on a present situation. So the present is the site of the integration of two movements which are different in kind. So this leads to a number of questions. If the past is unlike the present, how is it structured? And, if the past is unlike the present, how is it able to be integrated into the present?

Beginning with the first question, we can note that there appears to be a process of selection involved in action. That is, what is similar to the present is brought to bear on present experience. As Bergson notes, children often have far greater facility of recall than adults, which is inversely proportional to their ability to actualise the experiences appropriate to the present context. Bergson makes the following point in this regard:

Indeed, we observe this same exaggeration of spontaneous memory in men whose intellectual development hardly goes beyond that of childhood. A missionary, after preaching a long sermon to some African savages, heard one of them repeat it textually, with the same gestures, from beginning to end. (MM 154)

If detail of one's recollections is inversely proportional to action in this way, then 'a human being who should dream his life instead of living it and would no doubt keep before his eyes at each moment the infinite multitude of the details of his past history.' (MM 155) So memory that functions by recollection contains a greater and greater part of the past, until we reach a point at which it is completely detached from action and hence, in the state of pure memory, contains a complete record of the past. Now, as we know, memory is different in kind from the present, which relates itself by succession to the future. We can now give a clearer account of its structure.

Well, if we recognise that the empiricist model sees memory as disconnected and successive (Bergson's characterisation of 'self-sufficient atoms'), then the rejection of this model is going to mean that we no longer see memory composed of separate parts. Now, if that is the case, then we will not be able to separate one particular set of memories from others. This implies that memory stores the whole of the past, rather than just moments of particular interest to the subject. Now, given that the past cannot be divided up into elements, then it must be the case that the whole of the past is also present in our practical relations to the world. Selection on the basis of similarity will not explain how only a small part of the past is related to the present, as selection implies detachable elements, and as we saw, similarity is presupposed rather than explained by the empiricist model. Instead of a process of selection, we have a process of expansion and contraction between different levels of our memory. At the level of pure memory, which is most remote from action, we have memories at their most expanded, whereby the particularity of different experiences is apparent. As we contract memory towards a point, we move from particularity to generality, until we arrive at the point of the present itself, where, while the whole is still present, it is manifested in the form of habit where all particularity of experience has been lost. This gives us Bergson's diagram of the cone of time:

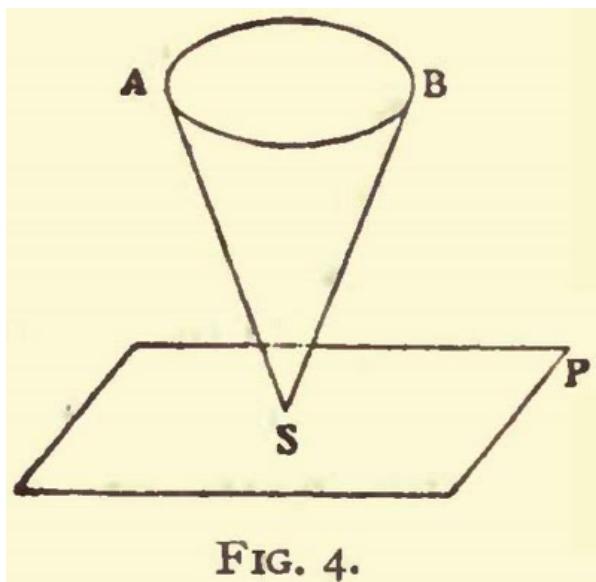


FIG. 4.

Taken from: <http://piratesandrevolutionaries.blogspot.com/2009/07/crystals-of-contraction-memories.html>

In fact, this 'cone' is divided up into a whole series of coexisting planes of memory, which represent different degrees of the contraction of the past depending on the requirements of the circumstances which allows us some freedom in our response to stimuli. Thus:

A foreign word, from a foreign language, uttered in my hearing, may make me think of that language in general or of a voice which once pronounced it in a certain way...[these two associations] answer to two different mental *dispositions*, to two distinct degrees of tension in memory; in the latter case they are nearer to the pure image, in the former, they are more disposed toward immediate response, that is to say, to action. (MM 169)

Bergson's account of how this process of contraction operates is a little obscure, but he describes it as follows:

[M]emory, laden with the whole of the past, responds to the appeal of the present state by two simultaneous movements, one of translation, by which it moves in its entirety to meet experience, thus contracting more or less, though without dividing, with a view to action; and the other of rotation upon itself, by which it turns towards the situation of the moment, presenting to it the side which may prove to be the most useful. (MM 168-9)

Conclusion

We can now draw some schematic conclusions about what Bergson's account of memory is going to give us.

- (1) If the past forms a unity, whereas the present is defined by a sequence of actual experiences, then the past cannot be constituted from the present, just as one can only approximate, rather than actually constitute, a circle with a series of straight lines. They are simply different modes of organisation. If the present cannot produce the past, then the two must coexist. In other words, the past is constituted at the same moment as the present.

- (2) The past *is* and the present *is not*. As Bergson notes, 'nothing *is* less than the present moment, if you understand by that the indivisible limit which divides the past from the future. When we think this present is going to be, it exists not yet, and when we think it as existing, it is already past.' (MM 150) Rather, the past genuinely is, insofar as it contains the totality of what has been made, rather than just the moment of the making of it, to use Bergson's terms.
- (3) The reason why we normally take the past not to exist is because consciousness is concerned with action, and therefore orientated towards perception and actual states of affairs. The past as such not only does not interest it, but also is inaccessible to it, as the structure of the past is different in kind to that of perception. Now, this point will become important for Deleuze, because if the past is to a degree constitutive of the present (and even, as Bergson notes, constitutive of our characters), but both different in kind from it and inaccessible to consciousness, then it provides a prime candidate for the kind of passive synthesis which Deleuze wants to use to escape the Kantian paradigm.
- (4) Finally, and once again somewhat obscurely, the recollection to the past involves a 'leap' in Deleuze's terms. 'We detach ourselves from the present, in order to replace ourselves, first, in the past in general, then, in a certain region of the past.' (MM 134) Without recollection involving a movement away from activity and hence the present, it couldn't dissociate recollections from present concerns. Also, if consciousness didn't relate to something which contained a moment of virtuality within it, it couldn't see the past *as past* – it would be indistinguishable from perception.

That's all I want to look at today. Next week, I want to show how Deleuze uses this Bergsonian model of memory in order to provide a transcendental account of experience which doesn't rely on active synthesis. This will rely on the essential feature of Bergson's account – that pure memory is unconscious, and thus cannot be coordinated in terms of an active synthesis.