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THE NATURE OF CONSCIOUSNESS

QUESTIONING AND EXPERIENCING CONSCIOUSNESS

What can we really say about our consciousness? At first glance, it would seem that we could say a lot. Consciousness is, after all, almost by definition, that which we feel most immediately; it is, to paraphrase one recent scholar of consciousness, "what it's like from the inside."[1] However, the moment when we turn our gaze inward, we are bound to notice that there is something elusive and highly mysterious about consciousness. For instance, in the very attempt to "turn our gaze" toward consciousness, where exactly do we begin to look? And what are we looking at? And who is doing this looking? How do we become conscious of consciousness itself? Exactly what is this strange "stuff" that seems to be, somehow, both something that is known and the knowing itself? Consciousness is that which is most "us," and yet, somehow, in ways that continue to elude comprehension, it also manages to contain within it all that is not us (for example: Just how does that outer world that is so solid, so bulky, so huge, get, in effect, "inside my head"?).

After centuries of scientific discoveries and technological achievements, we *can* say with some confidence that we know quite a lot about matter and how it works. The physical world seems remarkably pliant and obedient, as if it willingly acquiesces to being weighed, measured, tested, probed, and prodded. The same cannot be said about our consciousness. Unlike the external world that seems so strikingly self-evident, consciousness slips from our grasp the moment that we try to capture it with our often less-than-subtle nets of measurement and quantification.

It often appears as if consciousness resists every attempt to pin it down with words. It should not be a surprise, therefore, that exploring the nature of consciousness generates many more questions than it does either reliable or easily

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understandable answers. For instance: Is consciousness the constantly changing flux of perceptions, feelings, memories, sensations, thoughts within us (i.e., that which is known), or is it the underlying changeless inner subject, the “I,” the knower of this inner flux? (Or is it somehow both? Or is it something more than any of this?) Is consciousness a seamless unbroken inner continuity of awareness (i.e., is it “one”), or is it an endless, yet always new, play of sheer difference? (Or is it somehow both? Or something else?) Is consciousness an impersonal, objective “stuff,” an “it,” or is it a personal, subjective “I”? (Or is “it” somehow both? Or neither?) Is consciousness the most intimate, unique, ever-changing expression of my individuality, or is it a vast, transpersonal, cosmic Awareness that is simultaneously the creative weaver, and created fabric, of this entire universe? (Or is it somehow both? Or beyond even this?)

As you might have guessed, I have been obsessed with these questions for quite some time. My awakening to the importance of consciousness took place when I was around twelve or thirteen and had my first mystical experience. Until this time, I did the things that kids typically do in a college town in north-central Florida: climbing huge oak trees and watching, fascinated, as rabbits and squirrels emerged out of the underbrush; making forts in the swampy woods nearby with my brother and sisters and our friends; running through these woods with my Labrador retriever; playing elaborately staged games of croquet, and so on.

During all of this quasi-automatic immersion in “doing stuff,” I was, as might be expected, somewhat less than self-aware. However, while coming back from school on a hot Florida afternoon, I “woke up.”[2] For most of that day, for no apparent reason, I had been obsessing about what would happen to my consciousness after I died. I tried and tried to imagine what it would be like not to be aware anymore, what it would be like to have my consciousness just disappear, what it would be like simply to go blank, even while, somehow, the world would remain, would continue without me. I just could not imagine it. It did not seem to make sense, especially when I was feeling so charged, so alive, and the world felt so vivid and real. Every time I pictured myself, cold, dead, and underground in a grave, I could feel my imagination bounce back, as if rebuffed—not so much in fear or revulsion at the thought of death per se, but rather, recoiling at the thought that my “I-ness,” my self-awareness, could blink out, disappear, as if it had never existed, as if it had never known this moment in time, walked through this patch of scruffy weeds and smelled the scent of hot asphalt and pine tar and gazed up at the cumulus clouds floating in the bright, blue sky.

And then “it” happened. I find it rather odd, almost surreal, now, almost forty years later, to communicate in words what happened to me, in me, as me, at that juncture in time. There is such a difference between who I am now and who I was then—how I interpret that event, what philosophical overlays I now

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naturally superimpose over the experience, the density of life experience that I can draw upon to make sense of it. Now the moment exists within me primarily as a rather distant, almost virtual, but strangely magnetic and densely packed, memory—known, understood, explored, but rather removed, far away. For that boy, however, what happened was utterly unexpected and astonishingly vivid—"it" just opened up, suddenly, and then "I" was gone, and yet also, strangely, I was very, very present. My boundaries (which I had not really questioned or thought about before) no longer existed. This "I" was no longer contained, limited to the confines of my physical body. Instead, "I" was literally *ec*-static—*out of* my usual "place," spread out, freely and joyously, existing in-and-as an almost unbearable flux of surging power and delight and transparent open awareness. The normal tick-tock of time dissolved. I do not really, now, have a clue as to how long, in ordinary time, "I" was in that state of consciousness while standing there in the quiet neighborhood road. Perhaps a minute? A couple of minutes? But when I returned, while I was inwardly reeling from the experience, I knew something crucial had just taken place. I knew that I was no longer the same, that somehow, in a way that I could not even begin to describe, I had woken up.

For a variety of reasons, I decided to keep this experience to myself. I could not have articulated in any clear-cut, overt way, why I kept quiet about this experience. In retrospect, I think that it had something to do with wanting to keep this almost miraculous, but still somewhat fragile and raw event untarnished, free from disturbing questions, protected from the rough and insensitive handling of people, even if they might have had the best of intentions. I knew that I had been given an astonishing gift. What the gift was, I could not begin to articulate. All I knew was that the experience had something to do with awareness, joy, expansion, awakening—and that the best way to keep it safe was to keep it secret.

The memory of this inner opening, over the next few years, acted as a kind of touchstone, a catalyst that prompted me to pay close attention to the nature of my consciousness. I was especially intrigued by any experiences that were at all similar to my gradually receding memory of that ecstatic moment on the hot pavement up the street from my home.

For instance, while still in high school, I increasingly began to notice an intriguing sort of inner bifurcation taking place within my own consciousness. One part was able to step back, somewhere deep inside myself, and just observe. This aspect of me simply took note of what was happening both inside and outside of myself, while the other just did (and thought and felt) all of the things that teenagers do (and think and feel). However, my awareness of this inner duality dramatically altered one day when, in full-bore observer mode, I suddenly became aware of just how multilayered and amazingly slippery my everyday consciousness actually was.

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It was a clear, comparatively mild day. I was mowing a neighbor's lawn and I began to observe my sensations, feelings, and thoughts. What intrigued me was that so many different experiences were happening within me simultaneously and sequentially. I noticed that I was aware of the bright blue sky, the throbbing sound and vibration of the mower, the shifting of my weight as I moved forward, the smell of the grass and camellias. I was also aware of numerous ever-changing thoughts and feelings. I noticed that somehow these thoughts and feelings took place on another level than the sensations, that they manifested in a way that had a different internal quality, yet were not isolated and separate from the sensations. My feeling of contentment was intermingled, not only with a vague sense of disquiet on the edges of my awareness (emerging, perhaps, from an earlier argument with a friend), but also with the countless sensations that rushed into me, along with another layering of thoughts (again, each with its unique quality and tone): on one level I was, rather abstractly and preconsciously humming a song to myself, while on another level, I was thinking about when I should send the bill to the elderly couple whose lawn I was mowing, while on yet another level I was remembering, in a vague yet tangible way, a previous interaction with this elderly couple in which they had been warm and friendly with me. Amazingly, to me at least, I was also aware of the fact that I was aware of all of this, and aware of my amazement, not only at the densely interwoven contents of my consciousness, but also of the fact that I was aware that I was aware of the fact that I was aware . . . and where did all of these levels of awareness end or begin?

This process was so prolonged, and vivid, and charged, that I added another layer into the mix: an intense desire to remember this experience, to capture in my memory, not only the specifics of this experience, but also how sweetly thrilling and mysterious and intriguing it was (other layers themselves!), even though I was doing something that was so utterly ordinary and prosaic as mowing someone's lawn.

Enduring Durée

This experience of the multilayered nature of consciousness was, to my knowledge, my first conscious encounter with *durée*. Durée is, arguably, the most important philosophical concept of Henri Bergson, the French philosopher of the later nineteenth and early twentieth century whose ideas are the primary catalyst of this present volume. Durée is Bergson's term for the dynamic, ever-changing nature of consciousness, a consciousness expressed and manifested in-and-through-and-as *time*. From Bergson's perspective, durée is an indivisible fusion of manyness and oneness; it is the ongoing, dynamic, temporal flux of awareness; it is a flowing that is ever new and always unpredictable; it is the con-

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tinual, seamless, interconnected, immeasurable movement of our awareness, manifesting, simultaneously, as both the knower and what is known.

In English texts, *durée* is often translated as "duration," which is a rather problematic translation in that "duration" is often associated with notions of "endurance" and has connotations of grimly and stoically "enduring" something painful or difficult (which is why I prefer to leave the French word *durée* untranslated). Durée is not something that we have to endure, it is not necessarily painful or difficult. Instead, it is the natural manifestation of our inner being; it surges forth, in reality, with complete ease—it is the most natural occurrence in the world. (Bergson also claims that durée actually is very difficult to experience in its purity—but I will say more on this later.)

Durée is accessed through a subtle intuitive introspective awareness, not simply as the contents of our consciousness, but rather as the dynamic essence of who we really are, both the inner knower and what that inner knower knows.[3] As such, durée is not something that exists separate from us; instead, "it" is the temporal flux of our consciousness—it is our own awareness as it persists (while always changing), that is always present (and always moving), that endures, in time, *as* time. (Please bear with my awkward use of quotation marks: they are simply my way of highlighting the limitations of language, because, as noted previously, "it" is not an "it" at all.)

The attempt to understand durée and to express it in philosophically precise and vivid language is at the heart of Bergson's corpus. As he noted in a letter to Harald Höffding, any attempt to portray his work that does not "continually return to . . . the very central point of the doctrine—the intuition of duration [the English translation of durée] . . . [which] is the point whence I set out and to which I constantly return" is, on some level, a distortion.[4]

Struggling with Immediacy

Bergson, from very early on in his philosophical career, focused his attention on the problem of understanding durée. His first attempt was his doctoral thesis, written at the age of thirty in 1889, *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience* (*An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*, published in English as *Time and Free Will*).[5] In this text, as well as in most of his other published work, Bergson attempts to base his philosophical conclusions on what is available to all of us in our own immediate experience. For Bergson, it is crucial that philosophical investigations start from what is, arguably, the most intimate, undeniable, vividly felt knowledge that we possess: what is taking place within our own consciousness.

Bergson (in what may strike some as a moment of rhetorical exuberance), even goes so far as to claim that if we focus our attention inward, while letting

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go of certain deeply entrenched habits (more on these later), it is actually possible to "have absolute knowledge of ourselves" (*TFW* 235). Now, as Maurice Merleau-Ponty, another French philosopher (who was deeply influenced by Bergson) astutely points out, this is a rather "strange absolute knowledge," given the fact that our awareness of ourselves is rarely, if ever, complete or undistorted.[6] However, as Merleau-Ponty then goes on to suggest, the fact that we typically only have a "partial coincidence" with ourselves is not actually a philosophical obstacle, but instead, is an opportunity, because even if we do not possess some sort of "god-like," utterly complete knowledge of ourselves, there is something that is irreplaceable and immediate (and in that sense, "absolute) about our own self-awareness, in that we know ourselves with a knowledge which "could not be conceived of as being any closer or more intimate." [7]

Merleau-Ponty's comments are an evocative attempt to express a self-evident truth: there is something utterly unique and singular and irreplaceable about our self-knowledge. No one else knows what is going on within us besides ourselves; even if that self-knowledge is flawed and limited, it is still a type of knowledge that is incomparable. We may know a lot about objects and events in the external world (e.g., we may have a degree in veterinary medicine and know all about the anatomy and physiology of dogs and cats and cows), but we can only know *about* these objects or events by studying them from the outside—we cannot have the personal, immediate, inner knowledge of them that we have of our own consciousness (*CE* 1).

In *Time and Free Will*, Bergson typically stresses (perhaps even overemphasizes) the difference between these two types of knowledge, and goes to great lengths to point out that it is crucial that we do not treat these two intrinsically different types of knowledge in the same way. In particular, it is a grave error to assume that our own inner states of awareness should be subjected to the same types of observational techniques that we would use to gather accurate information about external objects (e.g., measurement, controlled laboratory experiments, and so on). According to Bergson, instead of studying inner phenomena as we would study external phenomena, using a methodology which is rooted in the tacit assumption that our inner and outer worlds are the same, it is far better to recognize that our inner states of consciousness are uniquely configured and, as such, are best understood "in their developing, and in so far as they make up, by their interpenetration, the continuous evolution of a free person" (*TFW* 229).

It is important to note that Bergson does not have a naïve or simplistic understanding of the immediacy of our conscious experience. While he consistently maintains that our consciousness is a type of philosophical touchstone, he also argues that this touchstone is not easily accessed.[8] Instead, the immediacy of consciousness ironically only emerges for the philosopher after an arduous inner search (and even then only haltingly and with varying degrees of intensity). As

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Bergson points out in the letter to Harald Höffding, the intuitive knowledge of durée "demands a great mental effort, the rupture of many restraining limits, something resembling a fresh method of thinking (for the immediate is far from being that which is easiest to notice)" (*M* 1148). The direct knowledge of our own consciousness, for Bergson, is hidden beneath many layers of psychic habits or predispositions that veil its true nature. Nonetheless, according to Bergson, even with all the difficulties and limitations that we might face in our quest to come to know ourselves, even with all of the wrong turns that we might encounter in our introspective endeavors, when we finally make our way into that inner sanctum (or when it presents itself to us as a gift) our intuitive awareness of ourselves is undeniable, nonmediated, and directly evident. As Bergson stresses, once a person has reached this level of awareness, "and is acquainted with it in its simple form (which must not be confounded with its conceptual representation)," he or she cannot and will not remain the same; instead, that inner certainty of awareness is so powerful and self-evident that the person who has this knowledge will feel "constrained" to change his or her "point of view about reality" so that it aligns with this inner perception (*M* 1148).

Nonetheless, even if we have, for a limited time and in a limited way, been privileged to grasp (or be grasped by) this inner immediacy; and even if we admit that this intuitive knowledge perhaps challenges many of our previous philosophical presuppositions, another difficulty quickly presents itself: it is almost impossible to describe this "immediate data of consciousness." Bergson, throughout his career, struggles with the difficulty of articulating that which, it seems, language simply cannot handle. While Bergson often insists that language structures and shapes much of our everyday experience, he also recognizes (and attempts to help us to recognize as well) that language, especially in its more abstract, conceptual formulations (although metaphorical language has problems of its own), just does not work very well when it comes to certain types of experiences. This linguistic flat-footedness is apparent, not only in attempts to accurately and thoroughly describe altered states of consciousness, such as dreams, trance states, or mystical experiences, but even in our attempts to convey in any meaningful way the deeper levels of our day-to-day awareness.

Our difficulty in articulating the nature of consciousness is due, to a certain extent, to the fact that words (especially written words) do not flow. Words remain fixed on the page. Words have a very specific range of meanings (e.g., "apple" = red, fruit, tasty, not "apple" = motorcycle, fish, flying). Words are sequential; they are lined up next to each other and they are built up from parts (at least in those languages that are alphabetical in nature). Durée, however, is very different—it flows, it never remains the same, it is seamlessly interconnected, it has distinctions but no parts. Is it any wonder then that words do not work so well when it comes to describing the nature of durée?

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Carving Up the World

There is also another reason why it is difficult for us to gain clear, easy access to the "immediate data of consciousness." Bergson, drawing upon his interest in evolutionary thought, claims that, as a species, we have an inherent and powerful compulsion to focus our attention outward. Human beings, in Bergson's eyes, are immensely practical. In order to survive as a species our attention has primarily, and understandably, been focused on the mastery of the day-to-day details of the external world. For millennia, our time and energy has been primarily given to the urgent necessities of creating shelter, hunting and growing food, and protecting ourselves against enemies; we have been much less concerned with cultivating an awareness of what is going on within us, to say nothing of the development of philosophically sophisticated, introspective observations about the nature of consciousness.

In this respect, things have not changed much during the thousands of years that we have populated the planet. Our focus is still irresistibly riveted on the outer world. It is as if we are mesmerized by the sensory stimulation that drives our culture: we are almost constantly bombarded with throbbing music, with suggestive ads, with honking car horns and bombastic TV shows. In this torrent of sensory overload and psychic pressure, it is not surprising that we rarely find the time, or the desire, to turn our attention within, and really examine what is happening inside of us.

In addition, as Bergson suggests (especially in several of his later works), we *need* to give a lot of attention to the world around us, because it does not come ready-made. Bergson argues that, from the time of our birth, we have had to work hard in order to successfully create a meaningful and manageable world out of the sensory data that cascades in and through us. In order to not be overwhelmed, in order to function, it is crucial that our senses and our brain carve out certain clearly defined zones of stability in the flux of universal becoming. We are forced to create order by screening out vast amounts of the sensory and mental information that pours into us. Through the ongoing process of biological maturation and cultural assimilation, and with the assistance of our social institutions and communal traditions, we are taught how to name and count and assign meanings to this torrent of data. If we are successful, it then becomes possible to live in a world of relatively unchanging (and therefore, useful) objects—for example, cars, computers, blouses, radios, azalea bushes, and squirrels. Helped by our language, which assigns relatively permanent, distinct words to certain clusters of sensory phenomena, and helped by our brain, which filters out any information that is not in some way useful to us, we in essence "create" objects from the flux of sensation, objects that possess clearly defined boundaries, objects that are distinct from other objects, objects that can be lined up next to each other in space and counted, objects that are seen to possess certain (again, relatively stable)

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abstract qualities (e.g., hot/cold, soft/hard, wet/dry), objects that can be helpfully compared and contrasted with the qualities of other objects.

Bergson suggests that our desire to shape the seeming "chaos" of experience into objects that are discrete, distinct, stable, and that move in quantifiable, ordered, and predictable ways is accentuated in human beings due to our primary reliance upon our sense of sight. He notes that our sense of sight is almost invariably spatial in orientation—it shows us external objects with definite boundaries, positioned near or far from our equally clearly (and spatially) defined, physical body. This visual world is the world that seems most real and important to us, a reality and importance that is underscored by the tangible solidity of our sense of touch.

However, our sense of hearing can reveal a quite different world to us, if we can let go of certain visual habits that we have internalized. If we focus our attention primarily on our sense of hearing, then it is possible that we might begin to "see" (is the frequent linguistic correlation between sight and understanding accidental?) something different, a world of interconnected and ever-changing movement, a world in which movement itself is the central reality. Bergson, as he frequently does, draws upon the example of listening to a melody to make his point:

> Let us listen to a melody, allowing ourselves to be lulled by it: do we not have the clear perception of a movement which is not attached to a mobile [i.e., a moving object], of change without anything changing? This change is enough, it is the thing itself. And even if it takes time, it is still indivisible; if the melody stopped sooner it would no longer be the same sonorous whole, it would be another, equally indivisible. (*CM* 174)

Many of us might tend to think of a melody as simply a "juxtaposition of distinct notes," but this tendency is only because our sense of hearing has taken on the habits of our sense of sight—we, in essence, "listen to the melody through the vision which an orchestra leader would have of it as he watched its score. We picture notes placed next to one another upon an imaginary piece of paper" (*CM* 174). But if we let go of these spatial and visual images, what do we perceive? If we make the effort, if we listen carefully, it is possible to hear a series of overlapping sounds in which each pulsation is qualitatively unique, and yet is also intrinsically connected to the other pulsations of sound, sounds that have no definite and fixed spatial location, sounds that are both outside and inside us, simultaneously, sounds that have no clear-cut boundaries—sounds that are a continuous, interconnected, yet ever changing, whole.

Normally, however, this is not the way we hear music, or more importantly, it is not the way that we "view" the world. Instead, we prefer to "see" the world

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as filled with relatively stable objects that possess distinct boundaries. And while such a perception may well help us to function effectively, it is deadly to a clear understanding of our inner world. As Bergson points out, as long as our attention is gripped by the outside world, "we have no interest in listening to the uninterrupted humming of life's depths" (*CM* 176). For the vast majority of us, therefore, it is exceedingly difficult to get back to the real experience of our lived consciousness, a consciousness that flows; in order to do so it is "as if the whole normal direction of consciousness [has] to be reversed" (*CM* 111).

An "Object"-tive Understanding of Ourselves

Bergson emphasizes that due to the magnetic pull of the external world, it is almost inevitable that we will have difficulty turning our attention within. He suggests that due to the artificial and linguistically based superimposition of the external world onto our inner experience, we typically (and tacitly) assume that our consciousness (i.e., durée) is structured like the external world, whereas, in reality, it is radically different.[9] Our awareness may seem to be a reflection of the external world, but it is not. It may appear to be composed of a series of separate, self-contained states of awareness that are, in essence, lined up next to each other like solid beads of different colors, seemingly exchanging places with each other in the passing of time (e.g., sadness changing into happiness, a memory of my aunt changing into a memory of my uncle), but it is not.

To use one of Bergson's favorite metaphorical images, we tend to think of our inner experience as if it were captured on a roll of movie film—essentially turning the undivided and unanticipated flux of our consciousness into a linear series of static snapshots, one frozen moment followed by another, each one inevitably leading to the next. In this "cinematographic" perspective on life, each thought, each memory, each feeling, is tacitly understood to exist separately within us, each having its own discrete identity, each taking up just so much "space" within our psyche, each static snapshot lined up and unrolling, implacably, on the underlying homogenous substance of the film of time.[10] As Bergson points out, our tendency to envision the dynamic flow of our consciousness as static and fragmented, to see it as notes upon a musical score, or as beads threaded together on a string, or as snapshots on a roll of film, may well suit the requirements of logic and language, but this "spatialized" mode of understanding deeply distorts the nature of our consciousness. Durée, understood and experienced clearly, is literally like nothing else found in the world, even if we might wish that this were not the case so that we could more easily grasp it.

As was noted earlier, perhaps the closest external analog to durée is a melody. Listening to a melody takes time, and yet it has to be experienced *in* time as an organic unity in order for it to be what it is. If it were split into separate, disconnected parts, it would not be the same melody—it cannot be reduced

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to individual notes or different vibrations. Listening to a melody, each note blends into others—the previous notes linger in our memory to produce a seamless flow of sound—and yet a melody has to change; in fact, it is made of changes, it is continual novelty and diversity. As such, as Milič Čapek points out, a melody, like durée, is "neither a bare unity nor a sheer multiplicity."[11] Therefore, we would be justified in asking ourselves, with Čapek: "Is the intuitive fact of a melody a single whole or a sum of distinct parts? Is it a unity or a plurality? It is both of them at the same time, or rather neither of them, at least as long as both terms have their usual arithmetical connotations" (more later on the significance of counting).[12]

The problem is that we normally do not hear the manyness/oneness of our consciousness singing its unique song within us. Instead, seeing ourselves through the distorting lens of our internalization of the external world, we lose touch with the "indivisible and indestructible continuity" of the "melody of our experience"; we divide this melody of consciousness into distinct notes that can be set out, side by side, in a two-dimensional, paper-thin existence (*CM* 83). Whereas our inner world is in actuality a "melody where the past enters into the present and forms with it an undivided whole which remains undivided and even indivisible in spite of what is added at every instant," what we normally tend to experience is an inner life that is tightly controlled, where ideally every feeling has a label and every idea is carefully weighed and considered (*CM* 83).

Language and Durée

As was mentioned earlier, Bergson suggests that, unknown to most of us, language acts as a type of prism in that it fragments our experience, splitting the dynamic flux of our consciousness into unchanging, self-contained parts (i.e., "states" of consciousness, such as "fear" or "pleasure"). Since words are separate, unchanging units ("fear," as a word, always stays the same and is always a different word than "pleasure"), we tend to assume that as time passes within us one "nugget" of consciousness (e.g., "pleasure") is replaced by another "nugget" of consciousness (e.g., "fear"). Furthermore, we are convinced (again, at least partially because of the stability of words) that not only do we experience the same emotion each time we feel, let's say, "anger," but also that other people, because they use the same word "anger," are feeling the same internal state that we are experiencing. However, as Bergson repeatedly stresses, each state of consciousness is utterly unique and is "tinged with the coloring of all the others. Thus each of us has his own way of loving and hating; and this love or this hatred reflects his whole personality. Language, however, denotes these states by the same words in every case: so that it has been able to fix only the objective and impersonal aspect of love, hate, and the thousand emotions which stir the soul" (*TFW* 164).

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Bergson points out that the need to label inner experience, to give it a clear-cut name (e.g., "loneliness" or "anger" or "soft" or "hungry") comes with a heavy cost. He notes that "language requires us to establish between our ideas the same sharp and precise distinctions, the same discontinuity, as between material objects" (*TFW* xix). This similarity in the way that we treat words and things may well be useful in our day-to-day existence, but it can also lead to philosophical difficulties. We see the world through language, through the lens of words that seem so stable and unchanging, that remain fixed in place and lined up next to each other (at least in written form). Language tacitly, yet relentlessly, chops up the interwoven dynamism of our inner world, creating manageable, useful "chunks" of experience, making it difficult for us to see clearly and accurately the true nature of our inner world. As Bergson notes, "the word with well-defined outlines, the rough and ready word, which stores up the stable, common, and consequently impersonal element in the impressions of mankind, overwhelms or at least covers over the delicate and fugitive impressions of our individual consciousness" (*TFW* 132). Even if we somehow could manage to continually create new words to represent each new facet of the ever-changing nature of our sensations and feelings, these words would fail in their task, if nothing else because of the simple fact that they, as words, inherently stay the same, while our consciousness is ceaselessly changing.

While we might well prefer an inner world that is clear-cut and logically consistent, where every belief can be rationally justified and every emotion comes neatly packaged, where there is no murky ambiguity—only black and white, not shades of gray—this attempt to form a stable inner world, seen from a Bergsonian perspective, is nothing more than a desperate attempt to ignore what is really happening within us; it is, at best, a denial of the unpredictable thrust of newness blossoming at each moment in our consciousness in favor of a managed, carefully crafted, and tightly controlled inner world. However, if we can, at least for a while and to the extent that it is possible, let go of our evolutionary predisposition to fragment and spatialize our consciousness, if we release for the moment our desire to corral our feelings and thoughts into culturally convenient compartments, if we can take the risk necessary to open ourselves to the currents of our inner life, it is possible that we might indeed manage to have an intuitive, immediate awareness of durée, even if it only lasts for a short time and is never fully pure.

The Paradox of Durée

Bergson repeatedly insists that durée, our personal consciousness, is not split up into parts. As Čapek notes, it is not "built out of atomic, independent, mutually separable components."[13] It is not a shuffling of "permanent and pre-existing units," such as ideas, thoughts, feelings, memories, and so on, that are each, so to

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speak, "fragments" of our consciousness.[14] Rather, durée is characterized by a mutual interrelationship of its various states, each of which is utterly unique, and yet each of which is permeated and suffused by all of the other inner states of consciousness.

Because the manyness/oneness of our consciousness is unlike any external object in the world, it is not irrational to use paradox as a way to accurately describe our inner world. In fact, it is irrational *not* to do so. Durée is that which manifests as sheer and utter internal multiplicity and diversity, and yet it is also that which, if examined carefully, has no breaks, no gaps, within itself.[15] Instead, our consciousness is a seamless continuity, an uninterrupted flow in which, in the words of Ian W. Alexander, "each moment is absorbed into the following one, transforming it and being transformed by it, with the consequent transformation of the whole."[16] Consciousness as such is "pure change and heterogeneity," but it is also "the heterogeneity of organic growth."[17] Durée is, as Bergson emphasizes, that which is "ever the same and ever changing" (*TFW* 101). It is always the same in that it is utter continuity, it is always changing because it is a flux of sheer novelty. It is both, and yet actually neither. No descriptive term, or even any clever combination of terms, will ever adequately represent durée.

In order to give more concrete specificity to Bergson's evocative, if somewhat abstract, conceptual understanding of the inevitable fusion of continuity and heterogeneity within our consciousness, let's imagine that I am looking at a chair—an external object that is seemingly immobile. Even if I keep my head completely still and only look at it from the same angle of vision, and even if the light basically stays the same, my perception of this chair is not one continuous *unchanging* experience. Rather, it is a continuous *changing* experience—its continuity actually consists of a multiplicity of changes from the first moment to the next, simply because the later moment of vision is suffused by my memory of the first moment. Therefore, my inner experience, even of something as seemingly static as a chair, is a seamless flow of constant change, swelling within memory as time accumulates, "rolling upon itself, as a snowball on the snow" (*CE* 2).

Bergson repeatedly emphasizes that memory, while providing a multilayered context of ongoing continuity within myself, also subtly alters the sensations of even seemingly stable external objects. Let's say that I am walking for the first time in the Latin Quarter in Paris. Making my way down the street, I am bombarded by countless sensory impressions: the sound of my shoes on cobblestone streets, the smell of escargot cooking in restaurants, the taste of a freshly baked croissant, the sight of Notre Dame peeking above the rooftops. All of these sensations are fused together, mingling with my excitement at finally being able to visit this area of Paris, my disorientation and minor apprehension at being in a strange place, my desire to find a certain bookstore, my memory of getting out of bed that morning, and so on. Let's say that, after a number of days of continuing to prowl around the Latin Quarter, I go on another walk along the same

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streets. During this walk, I might well see many of the same buildings, smell many of the same foods, eat a croissant baked at the same little shop, and hear my shoes hitting against the same cobblestones. I might, therefore, for convenience's sake, think to myself that my sensations (the sights, the smells, the tastes, the sounds) were also the same. But, if I look closely at my experience, I would notice that the sensations I experience after being in the Latin Quarter for a week are actually strikingly different than they were before. Now I carry within me the memories from all of the previous walks that I took during that week; now, instead of being disoriented, I feel at ease and at home, almost carrying an internalized map of the city within me; now I greet each new moment of experience with a whole new interwoven matrix of memories (which includes everything that I experienced, thought, and felt during that whole week). This tacit overlay of memory, in and of itself, subtly but significantly, alters my experience of these "same" sights, sounds, smells, and tastes.

The ceaseless inner change of conscious experience combined inexplicably but undeniably with inner continuity is also strikingly apparent when we look carefully at our emotions, our desires, and our efforts of will, none of which correspond, like our visual perception of the chair or a walk through the Latin Quarter, to a seemingly unchanging external object or set of objects. To illustrate this claim, let's say that at this moment I am aware of feeling sad (even calling it a "feeling" is simply a linguistic marker that focuses attention on a dominant "note" in the overall "melody" of my consciousness). This sad feeling, if I examine it closely, is not the same as previous feelings of sadness, even if I might use the same word "sad." This feeling is itself suffused with countless memories of previous experiences that all coalesce, in various gradations, to form the utterly unique quality of this current feeling-state. Then, whether or not I am conscious of it, in the very next moment this feeling will have subtly changed (but without any radical breaks) into something else. Perhaps I have shifted the position of my body, or I have absorbed some new sights or sounds, or I have had some new insight. All of these new experiences combine with the memory of the original feeling of sadness that still lingers as a type of "overtone" in my consciousness. All of these new factors come together to produce a different note in the ongoing melody of my consciousness. As time passes, these changes in my consciousness continue to multiply. In fact, for Bergson, the passage of time *is itself* the changing of our consciousness. Ultimately, these changes, reverberating throughout my being, become so evident that I have to acknowledge that I am no longer feeling the way I once was; I am no longer "sad"; now I am, let's say, "content." Therefore, as Bergson points out:

> No two moments are identical in a conscious being. Take for example the simplest feeling, suppose it to be constant, absorb the whole personality in it: the consciousness which will accompany this feeling will

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> not be able to remain identical with itself for two consecutive moments, since the following moment always contains, over and above the preceding one, the memory the latter has left it. A consciousness which had two identical moments would be a consciousness without memory. It would therefore die and be re-born continually. (*CM* 193)

Bergson goes to great pains to emphasize that in much the same way that we make a mistake when we think that a perception, or a thought, or an emotion, stays the same within us, we also make a mistake when we think that the transition from one state of consciousness to the next is abrupt or discontinuous; in fact, as Bergson notes, "the passing from one state to another resembles, more than we imagine, a single state being prolonged; the transition is continuous" (*CE* 2). We, in essence, ignore the change that is taking place within us until it becomes too great to ignore any longer. We then act as if a completely new state of consciousness has replaced the previous one. In this way, by separate acts of our attention, we change what is a gentle, unbroken slope into a series of discontinuous steps. According to Bergson, however, even the sudden, unforeseen, seemingly disconnected moments in our psychic life (e.g., an unexpected surge of anger) are "the beats of the drum which breaks forth here and there in the symphony" (*CE* 3). We focus on them because they interest us more than the rest of what is occurring within us, but each of these shifts of our consciousness is, in actuality, "borne by the fluid mass of our whole psychical existence. Each is only the best illuminated point of a moving zone which comprises all that we feel or think or will—all, in short, that we are at any given moment. It is this entire zone which in reality makes up our state" (*CE* 3). In truth, as noted earlier, each of the "elements" of our consciousness are not separate from each other—there is nothing static, nothing that is cut off from the rest. Rather, the entire "mass" of our consciousness continues, moment by moment, in an "endless flow" (*CE* 3).

This flow of durée is, in many respects, the flow of memory. And for Bergson, there is nothing more substantial, more durable, than this swelling advance of memory that continually evolves, carrying with it the past that "grows without ceasing" (*CE* 4). He suggests that our personal past is automatically and continually preserved (perhaps in its entirety) in our memory (not, as we will see in section 2, put away in some neural net in the brain), and that it therefore "follows us at every instant; all that we have felt, thought and willed from our earliest infancy is there, leaning over the present which is about to join it" (*CE* 5). What is significant about the persistence of memory and its infusion into the flux of our present awareness is that "consciousness cannot go through the same state twice. The circumstances may be the same, but they will act no longer on the same person, since they find him at a new moment in his history. Our personality, which is being built up each instant with its accumulated experience, [in this way] changes without ceasing" (*CE* 5–6).

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