VI.—DISCUSSION.

WHAT DOES BERGSON MEAN BY PURE PERCEPTION?

THE number of *MIND* for October, 1918, containing Mr. H. Wilder Carr's note on the above subject, has reached me in Australia after considerable delay. I have to thank Mr. Carr for trying to make some fundamental points clear, and for the considerate way in which he has handled the rather crude view put forward in my note in the number of this Journal for April, 1918. My note reads like an attack on M. Bergson; it was not written with any such purpose, but was put together about five years ago in the course of a correspondence with a friend, and was simply an attempt to clear up a doubtful point. I had not seen Mr. E. D. Fawcett's review of *Matter and Memory* (*MIND*, N.S., No. 82) which would have removed some of my difficulties.

Pure perception, though M. Bergson tells us that it has only a theoretical existence, plays an important part in his exposition of the relation between spirit and matter. It is the point from which his dualism starts (*Matter and Memory*, p. 295). It is in the act of pure perception that spirit can rest on matter and unite with it, yet nevertheless be radically distinct from it (*ibid.*, p. 294). It seemed worth while to isolate pure perception and try to discover what it means for M. Bergson and whether it always means the same thing.

Mr. Carr defines it as the limit of materiality, assuming, apparently, that for M. Bergson this is always the same thing. But it is sufficiently clear that in *Matter and Memory* there are two views of pure perception, an earlier view and a later view. The transition from one to the other is worked out on pp. 69-77. The earlier view is that it is an instantaneous vision, the later view is that it is the act in which spirit or memory meets the vibrations which it contracts into concrete perceptions. In both cases, when we speak of pure perception, the work of memory is supposed in theory to be eliminated. I attempted to press the later view to its furthest possible point by putting the question, "Is pure perception the perception of a single vibration?" The question was unfortunately expressed: it seems to imply an actual experience of the pure perception, and Mr. Carr has no difficulty in showing that there can be no such experience. I never meant to suggest that there was, and regarded it as assumed throughout that the pure perception was something prior to experience and was being considered as a factor in the genesis of experience. It meant nothing more for me

than the act, whatever it is, in which spirit meets and grasps the vibrations which M. Bergson believes it to contract. If at the instant of meeting they are uncontracted and in succession, and if succession is, as M. Bergson holds, something real, we have to face the question whether the theoretical pure perception ought not to be, for M. Bergson, the meeting of spirit with a single vibration. It seemed to me that that view was actually implied by one of the passages which I quoted. Let me say at once that I have misunderstood this passage; I will return to it later; for I do not think that Mr. Carr quite does justice to the misunderstanding which he has pointed out.

Mr. Carr's note does not deal with the further questions to which I alluded, *viz.*: whether memory in the act of perception is to be regarded as meeting vibrations which are already contracted or not, and whether the different aspects of images and pure perception which appears in different parts of *Matter and Memory*, admit of reconciliation or not. I return to these points, because the references to them in my former note do not seem to me now to give quite a fair indication of M. Bergson's attitude.

The first of these questions brings us at once to the relation between M. Bergson and the Realists. Mr. Carr finds the distinction between them in the fact that realist theories make perception diaphanous. The following passage from Prof. Alexander will show, to those who understand his quaint but helpful terminology, how close the approach between the two views sometimes is:—

"We may consider the vibrations or other internal motions of bodies, but there still remains the single pulse of distinctive enjoyment into which those vibrations are 'condensed,' and which appears to our contemplation as colour. Hence it is not without reason that M. Bergson in the course of a highly suggestive passage, speaking from his own point of view, declared that if we could slow down the rhythm in which the colours are presented to our apprehension, the colour though diluted would remain" (*Method of Metaphysics and the Categories*, MIND, N.S., No. 81, p. 18).

The passage referred to is on page 268 of *Matter and Memory*. Just above M. Bergson has said: "Certainly the difference is irreducible (as we have shown in a previous work) between quality on the one hand and pure quantity on the other. But this is just the question: do real movements present merely differences of quantity, or are they not quality itself, vibrating so to speak internally, and beating time for its own existence through an often incalculable number of moments?" In this beautiful passage, as well as in that quoted by Prof. Alexander, M. Bergson seems for a moment to be a Realist. But on the following page he says of the Realist theory: "It wrongly sets up as absolute that division of matter which, in our view, is hardly anything but an outward projection of human needs". Can we allow M. Bergson this "hardly anything"? Surely he ought to make the division one thing or the other. Is our experience only the process of "breaking up for the greater convenience of practical life the continuity of the real"

(*ibid.*, p. 215), and is the continuity undivided, as it sometimes seems to be, or do the contractions which we make correspond to real lines of division? Are there real differences in the rhythms of things, independent of our condensations? Have the contractions, which are supposed to be made by memory, already been partially made, before memory begins its work? On page 239 we are told that "pure intuition, external or internal, is that of an undivided continuity"; and on page 292 it is assumed that "the divisibility of matter is entirely relative to our action thereon". But at the conclusion of the book the writer appears to return to the realist position. Mr. Fawcett, in the review referred to above, complains that with regard to panpsychism M. Bergson's thought oscillates. May we not say that it oscillates with regard to this aspect of Realism? Is it unfair to say that in *Matter and Memory* we have two pictures of the opposing current which spirit or memory meets,—one representing a more rigorous view, which seems to be required by a strict interpretation of M. Bergson's attitude, the other suggesting a more elastic view, which brings him into close approximation with the Realists? In my former note he was interpreted only with reference to the more rigorous view.

Much of the difficulty of *Matter and Memory* arises from the author's use of the word 'image'. On the first page of the introduction we read: "Matter is in our view an aggregate of 'images'. And by 'image' we mean a certain existence which is more than that which the idealist calls a representation and less than that which the realist calls a thing—an existence half-way between the thing and the representation. This conception is simply that of common sense." Now, whatever this means, it is clear that the image dealt with is the image which we get in our conscious perceptive experience. Again on pages 12, 13 we have two systems of images. One is the system "which I term my perception of the universe and which may be entirely altered by a very slight change in a certain privileged image—my body". The other is the system belonging to science, in which we get "the same images, but referred each one to itself—influencing each other no doubt, but in such a way that the effect is always in proportion to the cause; this is what I call the universe". In both these systems the images are still those which we get in our conscious perceptive experience.

It is the same images again which Mr. Carr deals with on the first page of his note, and whose genesis he describes when he tells that they are "a selection within, and a contraction of duration". Duration here is clearly not the duration of spirit which we live through in our conscious states. It is the duration referred to by M. Bergson, when he tells us that "the humblest function of spirit is to bind together the successive moments of the duration of things" (*ibid.*, p. 295). These successive moments are simply the vibrations and movements into which the physicist has resolved matter.

M. Bergson does not at first tell us the genesis of the image. But on page 26, when we begin to "consider how conscious perception may be explained," we pass to a new kind of image, which is thus described:—

"Reduce matter to atoms in motion: these atoms, though denuded of physical qualities, are determined only in relation to an eventual vision and an eventual contact, the one without light and the other without materiality. Condense atoms into centres of force, dissolve them into vortices revolving in a continuous fluid; this fluid, these movements, these centres, can themselves be determined only in relation to an impotent touch, an ineffectual impulsion, a colourless light; they are still images. It is true that an image may be without *being perceived*; it may be present without being represented; and the distance between these two terms, presence and representation, seems just to measure the interval between matter itself and our conscious perception of matter."

From this point onwards we must be prepared to have two matters—one an aggregate of the new kind of images, the vibrations and vortices of the physicist, the other an aggregate of the images of common sense which are constituted by the selection and contraction of these movements. To M. Bergson the difference between the two is one of degree and not of kind, and he feels at liberty to pass from one to the other. To the average reader the difference appears fundamental. Mr. Carr also, on the second page of his note, tells us that a single vibration is an image: but surely he has no right to do so after his account of images on the first page; a single vibration is certainly not a contraction of duration.

The introduction of this new kind of image reminds us of a passage in which the author of the 7th Platonic Epistle speaks of the untrustworthy nature of language as a vehicle for philosophical thought. He tells us "There is no reason why the things which are now called round should not be called straight, and the straight things round. For those who make changes and call things by opposite names nothing is less permanent than a name."

What is actually meant by calling the movements images? They are so called because they can be determined only in relation to an eventual vision and an eventual contact. In other words, if we are to speak of them at all, we must provisionally assign to them relations similar to those which determine our conscious perceptive experience. But surely this applies to every existence whatsoever which we can perceive, infer, or imagine—to everything, in short, of which we can speak at all. The word 'image' thus becomes a meaningless label which may be attached to anything which we can name.

Or is something more meant when the vibrations are called images? Are we to think that already, before they have been selected and contracted, they are something of the same texture as the spirit which meets them? This is what Mr. Fawcett seems to feel when he claims M. Bergson as a panpsychist, and at the

conclusion of his book (*ibid.*, p. 328) the latter writes: "Only one hypothesis remains possible: namely, that concrete movement, capable, like consciousness, of prolonging its past into its present, capable by repeating itself, of engendering sensible qualities, already possesses something akin to consciousness, something akin to sensation". But he has told us definitely that spirit is radically different from the matter which it meets, and if we consider the ground of resemblance which he finds between them in this passage, it seems clear that his attitude has little in common with that of panpsychism.

With this new view of images and of matter it might be expected that we should at once get the transition to a new view of pure perception. But this is not M. Bergson's method. We are told (*ibid.*, p. 34) that we are not called on to trace the origin of perception itself, in so far as it is an image, since we posited it to begin with. Accordingly he retains the common-sense position with regard to images and perception, while he is developing his view of the function of the body in the formation of our experience. Affective sensation is described and distinguished from perception. The meaning of extension is indicated, and there is a preliminary consideration of the position of the materialist. We are told (page 59) that our theory of pure perception must be corrected; but this only means that it must be freed from all impurities which have arisen from affective sensation. We reach the conclusion of this section on page 69, where we are told: "Such is our simplified, schematic theory of external perception. It is the theory of *pure* perception. If we went no further, the part of consciousness in perception would thus be confined to threading on the continuous string of memory an uninterrupted series of instantaneous visions, which would be a part of things rather than of ourselves."

But we do go further, and we do trace the genesis of perception, in spite of the fact that it was posited. "The moment has come," we are told, "to reinstate memory in perception, to correct in this respect the element of exaggeration in our conclusions, and so to determine with more precision the point of contact between consciousness and things, between the body and the spirit" (p. 70). The transition takes place on pages 74-77. The passage should of course be read in full. The essential point in it seems to be, that we are now to abandon the view laid down theoretically, that in our external perception we are joining together by the continuous thread of memory instantaneous visions of the real. There can be no such thing as an instantaneous vision; all visions occupy a certain depth of duration. If we wish to know what the sensible qualities of matter really are, we must disengage them from our particular rhythm of consciousness. They are thus resolved into an enormous multiplicity of vibrations which appear to us all at once, though they are really successive. We must divide ideally this undivided depth of time. Then matter "would tend more and more towards that system of homogeneous vibrations of which

realism tells, although it would never coincide entirely with them". It is not clear why the realist, whom, as we have seen, M. Bergson criticises for making the divisions of matter absolute, should here be charged with making matter homogeneous. The conclusion, which we are told that we shall reach in the last part of the essay, is thus stated: "Subject and object would unite in an extended perception, the subjective side of perception being the contraction effected by memory, and the objective reality of matter fusing with the multitudinous and successive vibrations into which this perception can be internally broken up".

Pure perception is not here defined afresh for as in so many words: but there can be no doubt that it is the point at which subject and object unite—and that, whereas originally it was the meeting of subject and subject in the formation of an instantaneous image, it is now their meeting in the contraction of vibrations. The whole passage is referred to immediately after as "our distinction between pure perception and pure memory" and again on page 83 as "our analysis of pure perception". We are told that pure perception gives us hints as to the nature of matter (*ibid.*, p. 77), that pure perception gives us the whole or at least the essential part of matter (*ibid.*, p. 81), that in pure perception we are actually placed outside ourselves, we touch the reality of the object in an immediate intuition (*ibid.*, p. 84).

The average reader expects that, when this new view of pure perception has been developed, the old one will not reappear. But M. Bergson assumes that whatever he has originally posited with regard to matter, images, and perception is still valid and may be appealed to, in spite of the fact that his magician's wand has turned it into something startlingly different. In all these cases the difference for him seems to be one of degree and not of kind.

Now let us pass to the passage on pages 237, 238 of *Matter and Memory* which was quoted in full in my previous note, and in which Mr. Carr points out a misunderstanding on my part. The last sentence was as follows: "Now if every concrete perception, however short we suppose it to be, is already a *synthesis, made by memory, of an infinity of pure perceptions*, which succeed each other, must we not think that the heterogeneity of sensible qualities is due to their being contracted in our memory and the relative homogeneity of objective changes to the slackness of their natural tension?" The italics are mine, and I failed to see that in the italicised words M. Bergson is going back to his earlier view of concrete perception as an uninterrupted series of instantaneous visions threaded on a continuous string of memory. I assumed that the synthesis, made by memory (Mr. Carr's note omits these three words), of an infinity of pure perceptions does not refer to a mathematical infinity, but is the same thing as the contraction, also made by memory of a large, but not strictly infinite number of vibrations. Mr. Carr thinks that, in identifying these two, I am making M. Bergson propound something essentially silly and convicting him of laxity and

confusion. But if we suppose the two things totally different, we have to face the question—How can one and the same concrete perception be both a synthesis, made by memory, of an infinity of pure perceptions, and a contraction, also made by memory, of many billions of vibrations? Memory is already rather hard worked in M. Bergson's system, but surely here we have got beyond the limit of its powers.

Mr. Carr does not give us an explanation of the passage; but if we have now got the right meaning of the italicised words, does it not follow that M. Bergson himself is bringing the two views together and telling us that if they are not exactly the same, they are extremely like one another? The view that concrete perception was a synthesis of instantaneous visions was only a theoretical view; it could not correspond to the real facts, after it has been proved that there can be no such thing as an instantaneous vision. The real fact is the contraction of vibrations. But M. Bergson seems to feel that the other view, having been posited, may be appealed to, and that it implies a power in memory very similar to the contracting power required in his explanation of heterogeneity. The synthesis is therefore brought back in order to show its relation to the contraction. The train of thought seems to be that, as the heterogeneity becomes more clearly marked, the contraction becomes closer and closer and approaches more and more nearly to the synthesis, but the two never exactly coincide. Perhaps M. Bergson would feel that my question about the single vibration was not altogether a foolish one, and that, though his pure perception must not be regarded as ever coinciding with a single vibration, still, as we dilute the heterogeneity of sensible qualities, the two will be constantly making a closer and closer approach to one another.

Whether this is so or not, it is the new view of pure perception, as the meeting of spirit with the actual vibrations before they have been contracted into heterogeneity, which makes it so important a feature in M. Bergson's dualism. The main point of his book is to show that our experience is the meeting of two reals, spirit in the form of memory and matter resolved into motion. A large part—perhaps the most valuable part—of his essay is devoted to proving that memory, in the form of recollection, is a real existence. This is followed by a criticism of the Zenonian paradoxes which proves the reality of pure motion. Matter, therefore, when completely resolved into motion, must also be a real existence. Pure perception is the act in which these two reals meet; and it must not be considered merely as a limit, or purely from the cognitive point of view. It is a "system of nascent acts which plunges roots deep into the real" (*ibid.*, p. 75).

It is this view of our experience which renders it unnecessary for the Bergsonian system to deal with metaphysical difficulties about the unknown and unknowable. The weak points in the theory are the absence of evidence for the contracting power of memory on which so much of it hinges, and the remoteness of the

new matter from the matter of common sense. M. Bergson considers that he is leaving to matter those sensible qualities (which it is stripped both by the materialist and the spiritualist (*ibid.*, p. 80). But surely common sense will feel that the matter resolved into vibrations, which is all that he leaves to it, has been stripped as bare as it was by the philosophers of either of those schools.

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