

An Analysis of the Problem of Free Will in Henri Bergson's Philosophy

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Abstract: Free will or freedom is one of the important aspects of Bergson's thought. He skilfully links it with duration. Through, the analysis of duration (true time) and its difference with mathematical time, he opens up a serious and at the same time, new understanding of free will which is completely different from those of the determinist's and voluntarist's. The way Bergson related duration to free will and basically the nature of his relevant understanding is the most critical problem that this study using descriptive and analytical method, tries to discuss.

Key words: Free will, Bergson, duration, determinism, false time, Iran

INTRODUCTION

During the history of philosophy, freedom or free will was important for philosophers which they had different approaches to discuss. Bergson had different views on this cardinal problem, resulting from his ontological and epistemological principles. Bergson's conceptualization of free will and the essence of his method is the most important problem of this study. To correctly outline this problem in Bergson's thought, explaining the problem of time in his view would be necessary.

TIME AND THE PROOF OF FREE WILL IN BERGSON'S THOUGHT

Bergson thinks that the concept of time as in the philosophical tradition and natural sciences is resulted from the perception of space in human's mind. Although, this perception is used in sciences such as physics and astronomy, it is a false understanding of time which is the outcome of the reconciliation with extensity and space as quantities. Take a full day and night as an instance. In fact, sun is imagined rising from the east passing the sky and going down at the end of the day and rising again. Thinking more carefully, it is just the picture of sun in parallel with different points in space. In another words, it is the perception of definite extensity. When, it is said a full day and night, sun is implied in simultaneity with different points in a celestial circle. Therefore, some dimensions would be considered in simultaneity with some-things. It is the reason why the simultaneity of a full day and night is taken as quantity (Ali, 2004). What is seen in a clock is not actually time but a pointer changing its place, so it is space. Mathematical time taken as space is used for ordering movements and necessary activities,

however it is a false time. Real time has not homogeneity with space. It is a process of change which everyone understands by thinking about their inner life. No one parts of this process is separate from each other. They are rigorously entangled that cannot be discerned individually. Contrary to the spatialized time, there is an indivisible unity between present and past in real time. When we recall successive notes of a melody we perceive them as if they have vital interdependence on each other as in organs of an alive creature. Relying too much on a note not only makes the length of the note disproportionate but also changes the whole quality of the melody and leads to disorder. This amounts to the same for duration. In duration, succession can be understood only without separation and be perceived like a reciprocal penetration and interdependence.

"Pure duration is the form which the succession of our conscious states assumes when our ego lets itself live when it refrains from separating its present state from its former states. For this purpose, it need not be entirely absorbed in the passing sensation or idea for then on the contrary, it would no longer endure. Nor need it forget its former states: it is enough that in recalling these states, it does not set them alongside its actual state as one point alongside another but forms both the past and the present states into an organic whole" (Bergson, 1989). In another passage with the same theme, he says: "What is duration within us? A qualitative multiplicity with no likeness to number an organic evolution which is yet not an increasing quantity a pure heterogeneity within which there are no distinct qualities. In a word, the moments of inner duration are not external to one another. What duration is there existing outside us? The present only or if we prefer the expression, simultaneity".

According to Bergson, this “nondistinctive succession” is a fundamental character of consciousness and conscience, since it is enduring. Our consciousness is not a chain of individual modes but is a process which a present moment is being mixed up with whatsoever that have been until then and whatsoever was there until then enters a new moment and mixed in each other (Sanford, 2004).

His answer is contradictory to what we consider as moments and measuring them. To clarify this, he poses an example and says “when I say that a minute has just elapsed and I mean by this that a pendulum beating the seconds has completed sixty oscillations. I understand these oscillations in two ways. On the one hand I picture these sixty oscillations to myself all at once, a single mental perception or I can consider these sixty oscillations in succession. In the former I exclude by hypothesis the idea of a succession. I do not think of sixty strokes which succeed one another but of sixty points on a fixed line which shall not be acceptable. However, in the second way which I wish to picture these sixty oscillations in succession is the recollection of the preceding one excluded or preserved? If I exclude the recollection of the preceding stroke, in fact I return to very moment which exclude the succession so I confined myself to solve the problem and it shall not be agreed upon. So, perception of oscillations or preserving the preceding recollection is our understanding which can be resulted in either ways: either I shall set the two images side by side and we then fall back on our first hypothesis or I shall perceive one in the other, each permeating the other and organizing themselves like the notes of a tune” which Bergson because of the entanglement of oscillations considers this the real understanding of duration and therefore there is no possibility to count or measure them (Bergson, 1989).

In fact, events happen in a minute as we measure them are not moments of time but a number of simultaneities. “To announce that something will take place at the end of a time (t) is to declare that consciousness will note between now and then a number t of simultaneities of a certain kind. And we must not be led astray by the words “between now and then” for the interval of duration exists only for us and on account of the interpenetration of our conscious states. Outside ourselves we should find only space and consequently nothing but simultaneities” (Bergson, 1989).

In Bergson’s opinion, we are unaware of duration which for us is imponderable and is in constant flux. We are steered toward a mathematical or heterogeneous and spatialized time. Consequently, we comprehend our mental life (mental mood) quantitatively which has distinct

moments and is the effect of preceding ones. So, we find a causal relation between them which makes mental determinism inevitable. However, we can act as a free self only in duration or real continuation and become our authentic self. Duration is not dominated by causal necessity wherever there is causal necessity there is no duration. In other words, our conscious life displays two aspects. One is similar to external space which is superficial. And the other which is more personal, more deep-seated and is enduring.

Thoughts, feelings, perception, desires and the like are flowing in this aspect which makes it impossible to separate cause from effect, the relation that is necessary for scientific prediction (Eric, 1999). Considering mental life the same with its superficial aspect is a mistake that associationists made which provided a distorted picture, bearing no freedom. Associationism generalizes the principle of causality that is for the homogeneous space and realm of matter-into mental modes and believes that under definite condition, mind essentially expresses the same effects and acts. It is clear that will as an effect, comes out of its specific causes and whenever it is being repeated, the same expression will be given, however there is no essential cause-effect relation in duration, otherwise, this leads to the denial of free will (Sanford, 2004).

To explain deeper aspects, including feelings, perceptions and desires which are completely personal and happen in every one’s life-story and has nothing to with causal explanation Bergson gives a useful example: “I smell a rose and immediately confused recollections of childhood come back to my memory. In truth these recollections have not been called up by the perfume of the rose: I breathe them in with the very scent; it means all that to me. To others, it will smell differently. It is always the same scent you will say but associated with different ideas I am quite willing that you should express yourself in this way but do not forget that you have first removed the personal element from the different impressions which the rose makes on each one of us you have retained only the objective aspect that part of the scent of the rose which is public property and thereby belongs to space. Only this was it possible to give a name to the rose and its perfume. You then found it necessary, in order to distinguish our personal impressions from one another to add specific characteristics to the general idea of rose-scent. And you now say that our different impressions, our personal impressions, result from the fact that we associate different recollections with rose-scent. But, the association of which you speak hardly exists except for you and as a method of explanation”. Association of recollection of childhood with the

rose-scent is completely personal. It is the recollection of Bergson's childhood through smelling rose-scent. In other words, Bergson already understands this experience as a part of his life-story. He understands his life intuitively and since it is his there is no other life that could be separated from, so there is no generalization of causal relation, however, it is rather indefinable. Any attempt to define and determine the process which holds our "free will" (Bergson, 1989) requires the ignorance of the uniqueness of any individual and results in a distorted picture. So, "free will is the relation of the concrete self to the act which it performs. This relation is indefinable". He also says:

"We are free when our acts spring from our whole personality when they express it when they have that indefinable resemblance to it which one sometimes finds between the artist and his research" and he also adds, "To act freely is to recover possession of oneself and to get back into pure duration".

These quotes are provided, only to give insight into different definitions of free will or freedom. However, Bergson does not allow any precise definition about free will only because we are free. For we can analyze a thing but not a process. If we persist in analyzing it, we transform the process into a thing and duration into extensity. Thus, any definition of freedom will ensure the victory of determinism.

BERGSON'S ANALYSIS OF DEFENDERS AND OPPONENTS OF FREE WILL

Bergson's claim of free will goes beyond causal determinism and voluntarism. Not only did he try to react against common conceptualizations of determinism but also he tried to answer voluntarists. Voluntarism denies any kind of cause for human's acts there is no relation between my act and me as an individual. They do not arise from my personality, desires wishes or anything to do with me because if they do then they are the effect of the latter. Voluntarism claims that human's actions have no cause but if they do not stem from me then they are simply accidental movements. However, a free act is symbolized by our personality, since mind is its source. Bergson tries to analyze and criticize the views of these two groups. In his opinion, defenders of free will say: when we do something freely, another act was "equally possible". Voluntarists resort to witness to consciousness which is beyond the act per se and shows us the power of judgment in opposite direction. On the contrary, determinists believe, assuming determinate premises, there is only one possible act.

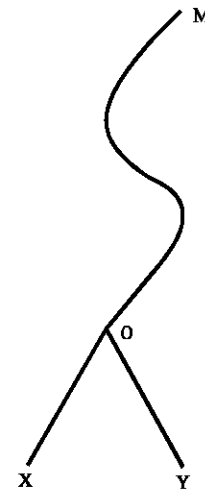


Fig. 1: Possibility of two contrary action or wills

To criticize these views, Bergson poses the problem of "possibility of two contrary actions or wills" which both parties agreed on. He shows this by a geometrical in Fig. 1. I hesitate between two possible actions X and Y and I go in turn from one to the other. This means that I pass through a series of states and that these states can be divided into two groups according as I incline more towards X or in the contrary direction which can be divided into two cases.

A: According to voluntarists, if one decides in favor of OX, the line OY will nevertheless remain if it chooses OY, the path OX will remain open, waiting in case the self retraces its steps in order to make use of it. It is in this sense that we say when speaking of a free act that the contrary action was equally possible.

B: According to determinists, our actions are constantly tending towards one direction and its result would be necessary. There is no reason to separate this activity from the act in which it will issue and which forms part and parcel of it. If the decision has been in favor of X, it is not a neutral activity which should be placed at the point O but an activity tending in advance in the direction OX, in spite of apparent hesitations. If, on the contrary, observation proves that the decision has been in favor of Y, the same thing happens in opposite direction.

Defenders and opponents of free will agree on holding that the action is preceded by a kind of mechanical oscillation between the two points X and Y. If I decide in favor of X, the former will tell me you hesitated and deliberated, therefore Y was possible. The others will answer: you chose X, therefore you had some reason for doing so.

Both parties (defenders and opposites) take up their position after the action X has been performed and represent the process of my voluntary activity by a path MO which branches off at the point O, the lines OX and OY symbolizing the two directions which abstraction distinguishes within the continuous activity of which X is the goal.

Positioning after X is in fact, a splitting of our psychic activity in space and it is purely symbolical. It does not show the act while it is happening but pictures it after the process. It simply provides a picture of incident in memory and not its dynamism that had happened in the process. This question then whether the self, having traversed the path MO and decided in favor of X could or could not choose Y? would be meaningless because there is no line MO, no point O, no path OX, no direction OY. To ask such a question is to admit the possibility of adequately representing time by space and a succession by a simultaneity (Bergson, 1989).

Bergson claims that the two parties use this figure in some ways and perceived different successive stages as simultaneity. They project time onto space while this figure shows a thing not a process. It corresponds in its inertness to a kind of stereotyped memory of the whole process of deliberation and the final decision. It cannot give us the least idea of the concrete movement, the dynamic progress by which the deliberation issued in the act. And yet, once the figure is constructed, we go back in imagination into the past and will have it that our psychic activity has followed exactly the path traced out by the figure. We, thus, fall into the mistake which has been pointed out above: we give a mechanical explanation of a fact and then substitute the explanation for the fact itself. Hence we encounter insuperable difficulties from the very beginning: if the two courses were equally possible how have we made our choice? If only one of them was possible why did we believe ourselves free? And we do not see that both questions come back to this: Is time space? In fact, the fundamental problem of both parties is the mixture of time with space. Ego is flawless while expressing direct experience of freedom, however cannot explain it (Bergson, 1989).

Freedom should be understood in nuance or determinate quality of self, not in relation to what it is not or what it could be. All the difficulty arises from the fact that both parties picture the deliberation under the form of an oscillation in space while it really consists in a dynamic progress in which the self and its motives, like real living beings are in a constant state of becoming. The self, infallible when it affirms its immediate experiences, feels itself free and says so but as soon as it tries to explain its

freedom to itself, it no longer perceives itself except by a kind of refraction through space. Consequently, voluntarists who tried to define it and their opponents, both chose the wrong path.

Bergson's critique of determinist's prediction of an act:

As mentioned earlier in this study, determinists believe if premises and its conditions of an act ripen then act is predictable without any exception and becomes a certain truth. So, free will is an illusion and everything can be determined beforehand.

Analyzing this problem, Bergson thinks that if premises of an act are already determined then there are two ways of assimilating these premises: dynamic and static ways. In former, person experiences it his/her self, so there will be no chance of prediction of act any longer. In the latter, instead of creating consciousness, it is imagined. In this case, there must be a sign of their intensity accompanying this imagined form, since these states of mind are not active and the person doing so has no opportunity to experience the power of these state along with feeling them in action. This signification necessarily takes a magnitude (Bergson, 1989). Therefore, when the act is done, it is so and it is meaningless to ask whether it is possible to predict an act when all premises are known. There are some illusions in this problem. The first consists in regarding intensity as a quantity and not quality. The second consists in substituting for the dynamic progress, the material symbol of this progress. In these two illusions themselves a third one is involved: confusing time with space, meaning, claiming to foresee an action always comes back to confusing time with space. You make the time to come into a road already marked out across the plain which we can contemplate from the top of the mountain even if we have not traversed it and are never to do so (Bergson, 1989). In Bergson's view what makes the confusion a natural and almost an unavoidable one is that science seems to point to many cases where we do anticipate the future, just like predictions of astronomical phenomena. However, we are unaware of the fact that prediction in material world, although contemporaneous with the future of a conscious being has no analogy to it (Bergson, 1989). As for an astronomer what he does is nothing but establishing a series of relations of position between this body and other given bodies, a series of simultaneities and coincidences, a series of numerical relations as for duration properly so called, it remains outside the calculation and could only be perceived by a consciousness capable of living through the intervals and, in fact, living the intervals themselves (Bergson,

1989). The time of which we speak in astronomy is a number and the nature of the units of this number cannot be specified in our calculations.

All foreseeing is in reality seeing and this seeing takes place when we can reduce as much as we please an interval of future time while preserving the relation of its parts to one another as happens in the case of astronomical predictions. But, what does reducing an interval of time mean, except emptying or impoverishing the conscious states which fill it?

Thus, when we ask whether a future action could have been foreseen, we unwittingly identify that time with which we have to do in the exact sciences and which reducible to a number with real duration whose so called quantity is really a quality (Bergson, 1989).

In Bergson's opinion, determinist's argument about foretelling the future is because that every act is determined by its psychic antecedents or, in other words that the facts of consciousness, like the phenomena of nature are subject to laws, otherwise causality allows an absurd exception. In fact, the same inner causes will reproduce the same effects as in outer causes for outer effects. Though, Bergson thinks that duration is what we say, deep-seated psychic states are radically heterogeneous to each other and it is impossible that any two of them should be quite alike since they are two different moments of a life-story. Duration is something real for the consciousness which preserves the trace of it and we cannot here speak of identical conditions because the same moment does not occur twice (Bergson, 1989). In fact for Bergson, even if causal relations are valid for inner life they have no resemblance to causality in nature. For the physicist, the same cause always produces the same effect: for a psychologist who does not let himself be misled by merely apparent analogies, a deep-seated inner cause produces its effect once and for all and will never reproduce it.

Bergson's analysis of causality as the basis of determinist's argument: As mentioned above, it is impossible to foretell a future act like for an astronomical phenomena. It is also impossible to foretell a future act like another act with the same condition by resorting to this argument that similar causes in outside world have similar effects because they cannot be generalized to mental world. Bergson believes that here we encounter a rigor doctrine which needs to be dealt with deeply. Therefore, Bergson tries to analyze "principle of causality", so as to overcome their attitude (Bergson, 1989).

Determinist's attitude about principle of causality means, to assert the regular succession of two

phenomena which is indeed to recognize that, the first being given, we already catch sight of the second. Thus, we picture the causal relation as a kind of prefiguring of the future phenomenon in its present conditions. Now this prefiguring can be understood in two very different ways and it is just here that the ambiguity of principle of causality begins (Bergson, 1989).

In the first place, mathematics furnishes us with one type of this kind of prefiguring. The very movement by which we draw the circumference of a circle on a sheet of paper generates all the mathematical properties of this figure: in this sense an unlimited number of theorems can be said to preexist within the definition. Now, it is easy to mathematically predict future (Bergson, 1989).

There is a prefiguring of another kind, still more familiar to our mind, because immediate consciousness gives us the type of it. We go, in fact, through successive states of consciousness and although the later was not contained in the earlier, we had before us at the time a more or less confused idea of it. Hence, we see that in a certain sense we may still say here that the future was prefigured in the present (Bergson, 1989).

What follows from Bergson's analysis is that the principle of causality involves two contradictory conceptions of duration, two mutually exclusive ways of prefiguring the future in the present. Sometimes all phenomena, physical or psychical are pictured as enduring in the same way and therefore in the way that we do: in this case the future will exist in the present only as an idea and the passing from the present to the future will take the form of an effort which does not always lead to the realization of the idea conceived. Sometimes on the other hand, duration is regarded as the characteristic form of conscious states in this case, things are no longer supposed to endure as we do and a mathematical pre-existence of their future in their present is admitted. Now, each of these two hypotheses when taken by itself, safeguards human freedom for the first would lead to the result that even the phenomena of nature were contingent and the second by attributing the necessary determination of physical phenomena to the fact that things do not endure as we do, invites us to regard the self which is subject to duration as a free force (Bergson, 1989).

Bergson believes that every clear conception of causality leads to the idea of human freedom as a natural consequence: "Unfortunately, the habit has grown up of taking the principle of causality in both senses at the same time because the one is more flattering to our imagination and the other is more favorable to mathematical reasoning. Sometimes we think particularly of the regular succession of physical phenomena and of

the kind of inner effort by which one becomes another; sometimes we fix our mind on the absolute regularity of these phenomena and from the idea of regularity we pass by imperceptible steps to that of mathematical necessity which excludes duration understood in the first way. And we do not see any harm in letting these two conceptions blend into one another" (Bergson, 1989).

Finally he asserts that "the relation of inner causality is purely dynamic and has no analogy with the relation of two external phenomena which condition one another. For, as the latter are capable of recurring in a homogeneous space their relation can be expressed in terms of a law whereas deep-seated psychic states occur once in consciousness and will never occur again". (Bergson, 1989).

By analyzing the causality principle which is the basic argument for denying human free will by determinists, Bergson believes that causality, the way determinists perceive it is in fact a confusion of two different perception of this principle and finally both of them are separately within human's free will which is call inner causality and is different from outer causality. So, determinists argument collapse and this will lead to Bergson's understanding of free will.

CONCLUSION

Bergson's philosophy is a defense of human position. His discussion of free will or freedom as a part of his duration theory is of utmost importance. Criticizing the common hypothesis of freedom and that of determinism he also believes that Kant appropriated freedom to noumenal realm and excluded them from phenomenal world. In Bergson's view, Kant could not understand the depth of time reality, since time, contrary to space is not a form of intuition. The idea of free will out of time, the way Kant assumed is not a concept of free will but its elimination. If we wish to determine the truth of free will, we have no way but search in daily life. In Bergson's view, we are free only because our life runs through concrete time (duration). Although, Bergson asserts the

impossibility to give any definition about free will but in some passages of time and free will he gives some connotation of definitions of free will which makes it easy to define it: "my act is free when its relation to my personality is like that of a research of art to its artist". Bergson likens free act to a ripe fruit on tree and continuation of human's inner life is its demystification. However is not yielding such a free act in our-selves, its creation and our relation to our-selves is dimension of determinism? This is a problem in Bergson's theory, since freedom gradually fading away and determinism replaces it. Are we here again witnessing the elimination of freedom for the benefit of ourselves? Bergson's opinion that, any kind of definition of freedom would eliminate its meaning was proved more than he wanted to do so (Henri, 1950). Bergson's great research was the denial of associationism. He clarified the meaning of freedom: it is essentially dependent upon time and especially to future and we cannot feel it but within our-selves.

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