

MAURICE MERLEAU-PONTY AND GILLES DELEUZE AS INTERPRETERS OF HENRI BERGSON

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Introduction

As is well known, Gilles Deleuze's appreciation for phenomenology was not unambiguous. On the one hand, he explicitly describes Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty as 'difference thinkers' *avant la lettre* (Deleuze, 1968, 64-65). Difference being the central theme of Deleuze's philosophical enterprise, this statement indicates a direct link between phenomenology and Deleuze's philosophy. Moreover, in his book, *The Logic of Sense*, Deleuze appropriates and further develops Husserlian concepts such as 'the sterility of the noema' (Deleuze, 1969, 94-99), 'disjunctive synthesis' (Deleuze, 1969, 199), and 'the anexactitude of a science' working with 'vagabond concepts' (Deleuze, 1980, 449). Nonetheless, Deleuze clearly distances himself from the phenomenological project. In *What is Philosophy?* he accuses both Edmund Husserl and Merleau-Ponty of corrupting the respective immanent ontologies that they were trying to construct by making the immanent being immanent *to* something (i.e. to Husserl's transcendental subject, or Merleau-Ponty's flesh) and thereby reinstalling a transcendent element. This transcendental 'mole' (Deleuze, 1991, 46) eventually reduces the

phenomenological project to a classical kind of transcendentalism that Deleuze sees exemplified in the philosophies of Kant and Plato. Both of these thinkers situate the transcendental conditions in a transcendent order, instead of keeping them on the same level as that which they condition.

As I have argued elsewhere, it is my opinion that Deleuze's critique of phenomenology does not take into account either the discussions between these authors - the concepts they created were always an answer to the shortcomings of others – or the evolution within the work of some phenomenologists, like for example within the work of Merleau-Ponty (Wambacq, 2009, 345-359).

In this essay I will concentrate on the relation between Deleuze's philosophy and Merleau-Ponty's. More specifically, I will examine the question of whether their philosophical projects are as widely divergent as Deleuze wants the reader to believe. Since explicit references to Merleau-Ponty in the work of Deleuze are rather rare, I will take the detour of examining their interpretations of Henri Bergson, a philosopher they both recognized as an important source of inspiration. Not only did they both know his work very well – Deleuze devoted a book to Bergson's philosophy (Deleuze, 1966) and Merleau-Ponty taught several courses on him (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, 1953 and 1960) – but they both also situate their philosophy in the line of Bergsonian theory. Deleuze's most fundamental concepts and ideas – such as 'virtuality', 'multiplicity', and the temporal nature of the virtual – come from Bergson. Merleau-Ponty's theory of perception has a clearly Bergsonian framework.¹

In this article I will examine the references to Bergson that deal with difference and immanence in both authors. By ‘difference’ I mean all the concepts that in one way or another relate to the idea of the impossibility of determining fixed, univocal and identical essences of being (for example, the ever changing nature of being, its ambiguity, its multiplicity, its non-coinciding with itself, its temporality, etc.). ‘Immanence’ refers to the impossibility of distinguishing two levels in being: the first being the origin and condition of the other, usually situated in a transcendent order, and the second being the result of the conditioning and usually situated in the empirical order. Deleuze considers difference and immanence to be central characteristics of a good philosophy. Both notions are intrinsically linked in the sense that the impossibility of distinguishing a superior and an inferior level of being implies that characteristics of finiteness (ambiguity, multiplicity, etc.) can no longer be relegated to an inferior being, but are now attributed to being itself.

Merleau-Ponty’s reworkings of Bergson’s theory of the memory of the body will thus not be discussed, and neither will be Deleuze’s references to Bergson’s theory of memory. In the first section, I will focus on Merleau-Ponty’s comments about Bergson as a philosopher of non-coincidence, in order to figure out how important this differential aspect is for Merleau-Ponty’s conception of philosophy as such. After that, I will examine the references to Bergson in Deleuze’s work. It will become clear that Deleuze stresses a rather different aspect of Bergsonism, namely his immanentism. Since this is also a central theme for the later Merleau-Ponty, I will conclude with an examination of a passage in *Cinema 1. The Movement-Image*, where Deleuze argues that the battles against

dualism – and hence the pleas for immanentism - that are fought by phenomenology and Bergson are in fact radically different from one another. This will help us to determine if the requirements that Deleuze imposes on any good philosophy can also be found in Merleau-Ponty's conception of philosophy.

Merleau-Ponty as an interpreter of Bergson

Merleau-Ponty's references to Bergson are mainly concentrated in four texts: *The Incarnate Subject: Malebranche, Biran, and Bergson on the Union of Body and Soul*, *In Praise of Philosophy*, *Bergson in the Making*, and *The Visible and the Invisible*. I will discuss these texts in chronological order so as to discern whether there is an evolution in his interpretation of Bergson.

The Incarnate Subject: Malebranche, Biran, and Bergson on the Union of Body and Soul

In the classes that Merleau-Ponty devoted to Bergson in 1947-1948, he focused mainly on Bergson's efforts to overcome the problems of dualism. He gives particular attention and appreciation to Bergson's idea that perception does not originate in us – in our minds – but rather in the things themselves. This idea implies that it is impossible to distinguish between a constituting perceiving act and a constituted perceived object; perception precedes this constituting relation. As Merleau-Ponty articulates in his own work: perception presupposes one being of which everything is a part, the flesh. It is the co-existence of perceiver and perceived thing which makes the access to the outside world

possible. In other words, perception is explained via the idea of an immanent being. To this end, Merleau-Ponty appropriates the term ‘co-existence’ from Bergson. Merleau-Ponty also zooms in on other Bergsonian ideas referring to immanentism, such as the statement that every *esse* is a *percipi*, and that everything, humans included, must be considered an image. As Deleuze, who also focuses on the same Bergsonian ideas, explains, this does not mean that everything has to be reduced to a representation, as idealism would argue. Rather, that everything only exists insofar as it is also experienced by others; everything owes its being to its relation to others. There is no *en soi*, only a *pour l’autre*. Or, in the terms of Deleuze’s *Cinema 1. The Movement-Image* (Deleuze, 1983, 58): every image is movement and in this image it is impossible to distinguish between that which is moved and the movement itself, between, what we previously called, the *en soi* and *l’autre* who makes the *en soi*. The thing equals its actions and reactions; the thing or the image is “merely a road by which pass, in every direction, the modifications propagated throughout the immensity of the universe” (Deleuze, 1983, 58). By saying that everything is an image, Bergson distances himself from the idea that things are bodies (realism), since the latter idea presupposes a confusion between movement and the subject that executes the movement. Nor are things actions, since actions mix movement with the result of the movement. Finally, things cannot be considered qualities, since the notion of ‘quality’ reduces movement to the change from one temporary state into another.

To summarize, Merleau-Ponty and Deleuze interpret Bergson’s statements that perception has to be situated in the things themselves and that everything is an image, as

an invitation to return to a level of being which precedes the distinction of constituting and constituted, and thus of transcendent, immaterial essences on the one hand, and empirical, material things, qualities, and actions on the other. In his statements, they both recognize a plea for immanentism.

Nevertheless, in *The Incarnate Subject*, Merleau-Ponty does not spare Bergson from criticism. First of all, he blames him for remaining too much of a dualist. Merleau-Ponty argues that Bergson's notion of 'image' is filled in both realistically – Bergson's description of the body as 'locus of passage for movements in themselves' – and idealistically – Bergson's conception of the body as a representation similar to the images of memory.² Merleau-Ponty points to several other illustrations of this indecision: the fundamental distinction Bergson makes between the plane of the dream and the plane of action, and memory versus perception. Bergson starts from two radically different domains whose relations are then examined. For example, theoretically, perception and memory are of a radically different nature, yet in practice, they are inseparable. We can also point to other examples, for instance, everyday actions show a non-representational memory *of the body*, which, on a theoretical level, requires the intervention of pure memory. Yet, according to Merleau-Ponty, Bergson fails in articulating the exact nature of these mutual (factual) relations: "Bergson fails to establish the articulation between the two levels he described: he tries in vain to achieve the synthesis through the combination of two objective elements: pure percept and pure recollection" (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, 91).³ Or, to say the same but in the terms Merleau-Ponty uses in *Phenomenology of Perception*: Bergson fails (for Merleau-Ponty) to make the body a subject, giving it

intentionality, and attributing capacities to it that are usually connected with the mind. The Bergsonian body does not have its own capacities of ‘insight’ which it would owe to its being-towards-and-in-the-world. Although Bergson refers to the particularity of the body being always situated amongst beings, his conception of the memory of the body betrays a less monist view.

Merleau-Ponty’s second criticism is that Bergson does not integrate time into his conception of the body. To be conscious of time, the body itself should be temporal, and not, as Bergson thinks, a present existing thing.⁴ Or in other words, the present should be conceived as a consciousness of the passage of present to past, and not as an impotent ‘now’.⁵ Since many Bergson scholars have remarked that this criticism is absolutely incorrect, and since the question of the role of the body within our relation to the outside world is not my primary concern, I will not delve any further into this particular criticism.

In Praise of Philosophy

The second text in which Merleau-Ponty extensively discusses Bergson’s work is *In Praise of Philosophy*, Merleau-Ponty’s inaugural speech at the Collège de France in 1953. In this text, as in the others that follow, Merleau-Ponty tries to present Bergson as a thinker of difference. The elements of finiteness that Bergson never defined positively, according to Merleau-Ponty’s analysis in *The Incarnate Subject*, are now at the core of his interpretation of Bergsonian philosophy.⁶

All the argumentation in *In Praise of Philosophy* is built up around one idea: Bergson is not a philosopher of coincidence, as he is all too often presented. When Bergson bars any kind of negativism from his conception of philosophy and equates philosophical enquiry with intuition, he is not talking about a kind of naive and complete contact with being, regardless of what his famous formulae of “fusion” with things, the “inscription” or “impression” of things in us, their “recording” in “a simple act”, “a viewing without a point of view”, “a direct access without interposed symbols”, etc, might suggest (Merleau-Ponty, 1953 and 1960, 12). Merleau-Ponty reads these formulae not as being synonymous with losing oneself in being or becoming one with being, but as referring to being exceeded or transcended by being.⁷ Although this could suggest a transcendent relation between the philosopher and being, it does not necessarily corrupt the aforementioned interpretation of Bergson as a philosopher of immanence. After all, as Merleau-Ponty stresses, the relation between the philosopher and being is “lateral”; it implies a “complicity” between both, and it does not require the philosopher to “leave the human situation” (Merleau-Ponty, 1953 and 1960, 16). The philosopher does not need to “go outside himself in order to reach the things themselves; he is solicited or haunted by them from within” (Merleau-Ponty, 1953 and 1960, 14-15). One could read this as follows: there is one being of which the philosopher is a part, and it is this participation that makes his access to being possible. It is because duration is at the same time my duration and the duration of others that I can access other durations.

It is clear that this duration, or this one being, can no longer be described as my particular duration or being. On the contrary, this one duration or being has a “singular

nature which makes it at once my manner of being and a universal dimension of other beings” (Merleau-Ponty, 1953 and 1960, 15). Thus, its singularity – its being no more outside of us than inside of us, its being no more superior than inferior to us – prevents it from being a transcendent category. It is because it is at once inside and outside of us that it can function as a kind of immediate mediator between the outside world and ourselves. Bergsonian intuition then is not made possible by coincidence – this would be a naive kind of immanentism that neglects the differences among the beings it gathers – but rather by the co-existence of different beings in one singular being.

There is a second way in which Bergsonian immanentism is not naïve and testifies to a thinking of difference. Up to now, the suggestion could have been made that this co-existence is a natural given, that it has always been there and that it happens spontaneously. This is not what Merleau-Ponty reads in Bergson. The access to being that is made possible by co-existence requires active participation on the part of the observer. Merleau-Ponty says that Bergsonian notions like “sounding”, “auscultation” and “palpation”, “make it sufficiently clear that intuition needs to be *understood* [...]” (Merleau-Ponty, 1953 and 1960, 18, italics by Judith Wambacq). Being needs to be “deciphered” or “read” (Merleau-Ponty, 1953 and 1960, 23), or even “created” and “expressed” (Merleau-Ponty, 1953 and 1960, 28). One does not gain access to the outside world by passively relying on this all-encompassing being that precedes us, but by actively molding it, giving it a shape that fits the particular situation one is facing. Put otherwise, the solution is never for the taking, but needs to be constructed, just like the problem to which it forms an answer. Philosophy is not about discovering pre-existing

solutions, but rather about formulating problems – which are as good as answered once they are well-posed (Merleau-Ponty, 1953 and 1960, 14). Problems or questions do not have to be situated within the philosopher, and the solutions outside of him. On the contrary, the answers are in a certain sense inside ourselves (because they are in the singular being of which we are a part), and the questions or the problematics outside of us. Being is inherently problematic.⁸

This description of Bergsonian being indicates that the act of expression demanded of the observer does not originate in the finiteness of the observer. It is not because of the infinite richness of being and the restricted capacities of the observer that the process of expression needs to be repeated again and again. The participation of the observer is neither a necessary evil nor an unavoidable “detour”(Merleau-Ponty, 1953 and 1960, 26). On the contrary, it is because being itself is not perfect, complete or finished, that it asks to be said (Merleau-Ponty, 1953 and 1960, 18-19), and thus to become what it is (Merleau-Ponty, 1953 and 1960, 19). It asks to be shaped and to be determined because it has no determination of its own. And, because there is no original determination that expression should copy, the expressed determination always has a retroactive and metamorphosing character (Merleau-Ponty, 1953 and 1960, 29). Thus, human expression does not obscure being but, rather, in a certain sense, makes being. In accordance with the aforementioned non-negativism of Bergson’s philosophy, expression cannot be understood negatively, as a means to fill up a lack, but has to be seen positively, as a way of making being visible.

This positive conception of expression (and more specifically language) is central to a difference thinker like Jacques Derrida. His discussion with Husserl in *Speech and Phenomena* and *Of Grammatology* revolves exactly around this theme. Whereas Husserl defends an instrumentalist view of language by reducing language to the phrasing of a preceding ideal insight, Derrida will abandon this underlying ideal of a transparent, secondary language. For Derrida, language has its own materiality which positively interferes with its content. Expression and content co-determine each other. This implies that the speaker is not in control of the meaning that he or she produces; language lives its own life. Every so-called direct or transparent relation to content, idea or insight is thwarted by something that escapes the content and that is, in this sense, strange to it, while at the same time co-determining it. As such, there is no language that is completely present to itself or that coincides with itself; no language is what it is. Language is always differing from itself, being somewhere else, changing. It is characterized by ambiguity and non-transparency.

Now, these differential notions are exactly what Merleau-Ponty highlights in Bergson's philosophy. He refers to the "absence of a primordial unity" (Merleau-Ponty, 1953 and 1960, 27) in Bergson, to the consequential "moving" and "swarming" proper to being and our relation to it,⁹ to the non-localizable character of truth (Merleau-Ponty, 1953 and 1960, 31), to the consequential "creativity" of men (Merleau-Ponty, 1953 and 1960, 27), and to the "discord of man with himself" (Merleau-Ponty, 1953 and 1960, 27). Just like the difference thinkers, Bergson abandons the idea of the secondary nature of expression or materialization in the sense that he exchanges a philosophy of impression for a

philosophy of expression,¹⁰ and also translates this into a thinking of historicity (Merleau-Ponty, 1953 and 1960, 27).

While in *The Incarnate Subject* Merleau-Ponty identifies passages that testify to Bergson being both a philosopher of coincidence and a philosopher of expression,¹¹ in *In Praise of Philosophy* he seems convinced that Bergson is a difference thinker.

Bergson in the Making and The Visible and the Invisible

In *Bergson in the Making* (1959) and *The Visible and the Invisible* (1964), Merleau-Ponty elaborates on this idea of Bergson as a difference thinker. Against the conception of Bergson as a philosopher of coincidence, Merleau-Ponty now introduces Bergson's term of "partial coincidence" and his own notion of simultaneity. We will see how, with this last notion, Merleau-Ponty tries to radicalize Bergson's thought, that is, make it more differential.

We have already seen how Bergson thinks that being cannot be approached from outside: I understand being or duration from within my own duration or being; it is in me that being or duration understands itself. This does not at all imply a total coincidence of my being or duration with being or duration as such, and consequently there is no absolute transparency. On the contrary, I do not know all my memories, or the whole thickness of my presence. Hence, there is only partial coincidence, and it is the partiality of this coincidence that makes access to being possible. In other words, the finiteness and the

moving, non-localizable and material character of this coincidence are not deficiencies, but conditions of possibility.¹²

In *The Visible and the Invisible* Merleau-Ponty defines this partial coincidence as follows: “It is a coincidence always past or always future, an experience that remembers an impossible past, anticipates an impossible future, that emerges from Being or that will incorporate itself into Being, that ‘is of it’ but is not it, and therefore is not a coincidence, a real fusion, [...], but an overlaying [...]” (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, 122-123). This notion of “overlaying” forms an opening towards Merleau-Ponty’s own (later) philosophy, which, in a certain sense, can be considered a radicalized Bergsonism. After all, Merleau-Ponty understands the “overlaying” of my being with being as such as “simultaneity” and even “delay”.¹³ These two notions refer explicitly to his own theory of the flesh. There is simultaneity in the flesh because, at the same time, being exists because of my perception of it and I am existing because of my perception of being. Simultaneity refers, in other words, to the chiasm existing between myself and the world, to the reversible relation between two irreducible differences. It does not imply coincidence, a refund unity, or an absolute transparency but a “dehiscence” (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, 123) dividing being, an interaction within the flesh. The “overlaying” can also be understood as delay in the sense that this chiasmic relation between me and the world implies that the conception of being cannot be localized in time. It necessarily occurs retroactively or *après-coup*, when the *va-et-viens* of perception has been interrupted.

According to Merleau-Ponty, Bergson did not pay enough attention to the simultaneity or chiasm proper to being, to the “the identity of the retiring into oneself with the leaving of oneself, of the lived through with the distance” (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, 124). More specifically, he did not understand that that which makes a complete coincidence impossible - the “deflection” (*écart*) - is at the same time the opening towards the thing (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, 124). He did not see “[t]hat every being presents itself at a distance, which does not prevent us from knowing it, which is on the contrary the guarantee for knowing it [...]” (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, 127). Or, in still other terms, he did not see that I am at once the world and not the world, and that this thickness of the flesh between me and the world conditions my access to it. In sum, Bergson did not value the generative power of difference, or partial coincidence, enough.

Merleau-Ponty further illustrates this judgement by referring to Bergson’s conception of language and forgetting. In Merleau-Ponty’s eyes, Bergson conceives language to be a deficient instrument without which humans cannot live since being itself is speechless. In order to offer the truest perspective on being, philosophers should aim at imposing themselves as little as possible and let the words find their own way.¹⁴ Merleau-Ponty, on the contrary, thinks that language is not an interruption of an original contact with being; perception, thinking and the lived are themselves structured as language – they are articulations – such that they are the “most valuable witness to Being”. They express what was not there before.¹⁵

With respect to Bergson’s explanation of the phenomenon of forgetting, Merleau-Ponty rejects Bergson’s identification of the spatialisation of time as the cause of forgetting and

refers instead to the differential nature of (spatial or temporal) things. Forgetting is not an occultation of being, a passage towards nothing, as Bergson thinks (according to Merleau-Ponty), but a way of de-articulating or de-differentiating being, such that it is a way of being towards the pre-individual and prethetic flesh (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, 193-197).

Deleuze as an interpreter of Bergson

In his book on Bergson, *Bergsonism*, Deleuze offers a solution to the problem of Bergsonian philosophy that Merleau-Ponty raised in *The Incarnate Subject*. As Deleuze distilled this solution out of Bergson's own texts, it not only indicates what the central topics of Bergsonian philosophy are, according to Deleuze, but also which Bergson is most interesting for Deleuze. After all, in his monographs, it is not Deleuze's aim to deliver a complete, coherent and objective representation of the author's philosophy but rather to "bugger" (Deleuze, 1990, 6) him, that is to say, to create an offspring with him that he would probably himself consider to be monstrous, and not his own.

As mentioned above, the problem Merleau-Ponty brought to the fore touched upon the unexplained nature of the relation between pure memory on the one hand and perception or action on the other; theoretically they are fundamentally different, but factually they are always interwoven. How exactly must this passage from theory to practice be understood? Or, to paraphrase Deleuze's words (Deleuze, 1966, chapter 4 and 5): on the one hand Bergson distinguishes fundamental differences between memories and

perception, between memory and matter, between present and past, etc. But on the other hand, Bergsonian concepts such as contraction and relaxation indicate gradual differences between the above mentioned notions. Is there is no contradiction here? Does Bergson's philosophy eventually have to be considered a monism or immanentism (implication of the gradual differences) - after all, everything is duration according to Bergson - or does it consist of a quantitative pluralism (implication of the fundamental differences) since there are several degrees of duration?

According to Deleuze the answer to this question varies according to the moment of the Bergsonian philosophical method – the intuition – one is situated in.

In the first stage, factual mixtures, such as concrete perceptions that are always interwoven with memories, are analysed. One has to try to distinguish the fundamentally different things – such as perceptions and memories – that are combined in these mixtures. This stage is, in other words, a moment of pure dualism.

In the second stage, these fundamental differences are divided into two kinds. One kind contains all the differences that presuppose a common measure, that are, in other words, gradual differences. For example, spatial differences which presuppose a homogeneous, quantitative grid with respect to which different positions can be taken. The other kind of differences contains all the concepts that are irreducible to one another. For example, in the paradoxes of Zeno, the duration of Achilles being irreducible to and thus not comparable to the duration of the turtle (we will come back to this later). The remarkable thing about this second kind of differences is that, although they are irreducible to one another, they all share the same characteristic of not being what they are. They are always

differing from themselves, alternating with respect to themselves. What the duration of a turtle consists of cannot be said; it has no identity, but can take different forms, although it can at all times be recognized, referred to in metaphors, etc. Because this differentiating characteristic has no actual determination, but, on the contrary, consists of the constant movement from one actual determination to another, Deleuze situates these differences on a virtual level. One could say then that, on this virtual level, all is one because all is difference, whereas, on the actual level, all is different because all is one. On the actual level, one can distinguish differences in kind which nevertheless presuppose a common framework with respect to which these kinds can be distinguished. On a virtual level, there is no such a common framework, which implies that the differences explode in all directions; their 'common' nature is to differ constantly.

The third stage is the one in which these two kinds of differences (duration and space) are considered to be two extremes on one and the same line of contraction. According to Deleuze, Bergsonian matter has to be understood in terms of relaxation. In matter duration is completely decontracted such that its exterior moments can be displayed one next to, or after, the other; one moment can arise as soon as the other has disappeared.

The momentaneous continuum is in other words infinitely divided into extensions. Space then, is the utmost limit of relaxation; it is the "schema" of matter, "the external envelope of all possible extensions" (Deleuze, 1966, 87). Thus, duration and matter (or space) are relative to one another: matter is the most relaxed degree of duration, whereas duration is the most contracted degree of matter. This is also the reason why there is always something extended in our duration and vice versa, something of duration present in matter.¹⁶ To conclude, the third stage is the moment of monism in the sense that

“Differences in degree are the lowest degree of Difference; differences in kind (*nature*) are the highest nature of Difference. [...] All the degrees coexist in a single Nature that is expressed, on the one hand, in differences in kind, and on the other, in differences in degree” (Deleuze, 1966). Deleuze adds that there is no contradiction between the monism of this stage and the dualism of the first, since the first concerns the actual level, whereas this one concerns the more fundamental virtual level.

Since the recognition of the continuation between gradual and fundamental differences is the final stage of Bergson’s philosophical method,¹⁷ we can conclude that Deleuze regards Bergson as a philosopher of immanence. This can be further illustrated by the fact that Deleuze, just like Merleau-Ponty, considers Bergson’s notion of co-existence to be central to his thought.¹⁸ Bergson’s use of the term ‘multiplicity’ to describe duration is another indication for his immanentism. After all, ‘multiplicity’ allows us to avoid thinking being in terms of the one and the multiple (Deleuze, 1966, 43, 46), since it refers to the unity that is proper to the multiple.¹⁹ Thirdly, as is also done by Merleau-Ponty, Deleuze describes Bergson’s philosophical project as a search for the conditions of the reality of experience instead of its conditions of possibility (Deleuze, 1966, 23). Bergson is not looking for conditions that are part of a higher, immaterial, transcendent order. On the contrary, the meshes of the transcendental net cannot be so large that reality escapes through it. Bergson thus turns away from a classical transcendent transcendentalism.²⁰ Thus, although the later Merleau-Ponty prefers to focus on the differential aspects in Bergson, he refers to the same Bergsonian concepts as Deleuze uses to illustrate Bergson’s immanentism.

Bergson's immanentism versus Merleau-Ponty's immanentism

Although Deleuze and Merleau-Ponty finally characterize Bergson's philosophical project differently, this does not necessarily imply an opposition. First of all, as it has been shown, there are many similarities with respect to which Bergsonian concepts both authors focus on and how they interpret them. Secondly, as Deleuze's own philosophy illustrates, a philosophy of difference is not incompatible with immanentism. However, there is one passage in *Cinema 1. The Movement-Image* in which Deleuze states that there is a fundamental difference between the battle against dualism as it is fought by Bergson on the one hand, and phenomenology on the other. Since Deleuze's search for an immanent philosophy relies heavily on concepts introduced by Bergson, this passage can help to indicate to what degree the aforementioned similarities between Deleuze's and Merleau-Ponty's immanentism hold.

Let's take a look at the passage in question: "It was necessary, at any cost, to overcome this duality of image and movement, of consciousness and thing. Two very different authors were to undertake this task at about the same time: Bergson and Husserl. Each had his own war cry: all consciousness is consciousness *of* something (Husserl), or more strongly, all consciousness *is* something (Bergson)" (Deleuze, 1983, 56). This passage is immediately followed by a description of why Bergson and Merleau-Ponty reject cinema. What does the rejection of cinema have to do with the fight against dualism and why does Deleuze switch phenomenologists?

With respect to the first question it has to be said that, in Deleuze's mind, cinema is a privileged medium in which dualism can be overcome. Whereas dualists used to situate the immaterial image in the mind and the extended movement in calculable space, cinema not only shows that movement can generate an image (for example the succession of static pictures creating movement), or vice versa, that an image can create movement (for example the seeing of a horrible scene making us run away), but more fundamentally, that an image is movement and that movement is an image. In view of this extraordinary characteristic of cinema, and of the fact that cinema made its entry at the time Husserl and Bergson were in the midst of their philosophical careers, it is quite surprising that Husserl did not mention cinema in his writings, and that Bergson thought about it only in a negative way. The only phenomenologist, as Deleuze writes, "who attempts, only incidentally, a confrontation between cinema and phenomenology" is Merleau-Ponty, "but he also sees the cinema as an ambiguous ally" (Deleuze, 1983, 57).

Since Deleuze's cinema theory is beyond the scope of this article, I will try to explain the differences between Merleau-Ponty's and Bergson's rejection of cinema in direct reference to their immanentism.

Bergson's and Merleau-Ponty's rejection of cinema

Deleuze discusses the reasons for Bergson's rejection of cinema in his classes on Bergson.²¹ Bergson blames cinema for reconstructing movement (or duration) in the

wrong manner, namely by playing static images very quickly. Cinema thus confuses movement with the succession of momentaneous sections (*des coupes instantanées*).

Underlying this false image of movement is the idea that the momentaneous sections are not fundamentally different from each other. Their only difference consists in occupying another position on the same timeline,²² but as such, these sections are interchangeable; they are independent variables. In other words, underlying this false image of movement is the idea of a homogeneous time, a time which is the same at all moments, an abstract time.

Bergson, on the contrary, believes that moments really do differ, that is, that they are qualitatively different from each other, instead of being only quantitatively different. Hence, they are not interchangeable. Movement is not the displacement of one arbitrary moment into another. The paradoxes of Zeno for example, do not have to be explained by referring to a spatial conception of movement and time (as Zeno does), but rather by invoking the fundamental difference between the Achilles's movement and that of the turtle. It is because Achilles and the turtle have their own natural articulation that their movements cannot be situated on the same timeline.

Moreover, movement not only doesn't consist of a succession of equal moments, but these moments are also never completed, one moment is continued in the other.

Movement does not stop; rather, movement is about *traversing* space, and not about the *traversed* space. It is not a combination of finished elements, but it always has to create itself. Time is thus essentially movement or creation of new moments, instead of the repetition of one moment in the other.

In *Creative Evolution*, Bergson mentions another ‘incorrect’ conception of movement, in addition to the one cinema embodies: the one offered by the ancient Greeks. They tried to reconstruct movement by means of intelligible elements that are infinite and immobile, i.e. Forms or Ideas. These Ideas have to be caught when they are the closest to their actualization in a matter-flux. But essentially, “movement merely expresses a ‘dialectic’ of forms, an ideal synthesis which gives it order and measure. Movement, conceived in this way, will thus be the regulated transition from one form to another, that is, an order of *poses* or privileged instants, [...]” (Deleuze, 1966, 4). Examples of these Greek privileged moments are the “final term” of a movement or its “culminating point” (telos, acme).

Deleuze situates Merleau-Ponty in the same tradition as the ancient Greeks. Merleau-Ponty also conceives movement as the passage of immobile, privileged moments, except that these moments are no longer essential, but existential. He does not invoke intelligible forms but perceivable *Gestalts* that organize our field of perception in function of our being-towards-the-world. These *Gestalts*, and by extension, our being-towards-the-world, function as the fixed anchor points of, for example, perception, and as such, they are comparable to the Greek Ideas.

The reason why Merleau-Ponty does not appreciate cinema relates exactly to this: cinema loses sight of these existential poses. It does not value the world and our being anchored in the world as the horizon of our perception. To the contrary, it tries to get rid of any

horizon. Instead of creating an image of the world, the world becomes an image, something fictional.

Conclusion

One could translate Deleuze's criticism of Merleau-Ponty's conception of cinema, and thus of movement and time, as follows: despite the fact that our being-towards-the-world is indeterminate, that it gets its determination in and through our daily practices, Merleau-Ponty finally falls back on some kind of identity in explaining our interaction with the world. Minimizing this identity as much as possible by, for example, referring to its non-givenness, its non-localizable character, its ever changing and moving nature, its non-coincidence with itself, its non-transparency, and its materiality, etc. does not make it a differential category. What is needed is a notion that is itself hardly a notion. Merleau-Ponty on the contrary starts from a substantive to which he adds differential qualities. In this way, difference is secondary or mediated. Bergson's notion of duration on the other hand, is first and foremost movement; it is immediate difference.

Aside from the question of whether Deleuze does right by Merleau-Ponty in characterizing him this way – Deleuze focuses mainly on *Phenomenology of Perception* and only indirectly on *The Visible and the Invisible*, although in this last book, Merleau-Ponty explicitly distanced himself from the *Phenomenology of Perception* – it is a fact that Deleuze devotes much more attention to developing a differential theory of the relation between the condition (the virtual) and the conditioned (the actual). His

differential ontology has a more solid ground.²³ Since this is also the problem that Merleau-Ponty recognized in Bergson and given that *The Visible and the Invisible* could be considered the book in which Merleau-Ponty tried to develop certain differential Bergsonian ideas but unfortunately was not able to finish, it is not improbable that Merleau-Ponty would have come up with a similar solution. One could say that, compared to Deleuzian standards, Merleau-Ponty's immanentism is immature or naive. But the fact that Merleau-Ponty recognizes in Bergson's notion of partial coincidence an effort to avoid naive immanentism, could mean that he was himself very aware of the traps of immanentism to be avoided. He only lacked time.

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¹ While this Bergsonian heritage was rather logical for Merleau-Ponty, this was not at all the case for Deleuze. When Merleau-Ponty studied philosophy in the twenties, Bergson was omnipresent in French academia. After World War II however – the period when Deleuze received his education – Bergson disappeared from the philosophical scene. Among the reasons for this eclipse was the introduction of Husserlian phenomenology in France, but also some aspects of Bergson's thought itself. Bergson's view of language being equivalent to symbols, and thus dividing the continuity of the duration, was in sharp contrast with the upcoming Heideggerian idea of language as 'the house of being'. Also the mysticism of Bergson's *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* was hard to reconcile with Husserl's ideal of a rigorous science. As it fits his eccentricity, Deleuze was thus rowing against the stream when he dug Bergson up again in 1966. The revitalization of Bergson today is due almost entirely to him.

(<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/bergson/>)

² "[...] sometimes the body is the locus of passage for movements in themselves, in the manner of an element from the physical world ; sometimes it is only a representation, homogeneous with images from memory. Bergson plays on the two meanings – idealist and realist – of the word 'image'" (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, 91). And: "Sometimes Bergson attributes everything to the mind, sometimes he attributes everything to the body" (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, 94).

³ Merleau-Ponty also criticizes this Bergsonian tendency towards purity in *The Visible and the Invisible* (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, 122-129). If memory would be really pure – that is, presuppose a coincidence with the past present – then the past present would become again present and thus lose its past dimension, its character as memory. If perception would be really pure – that is, presuppose a coincidence with what is seen – there would

be no more perception because there would be no more me. Thus, every access to being (whether in perception or in memory) carries the traces of the reconstruction, and is thus indirect.

⁴ ‘For him, the body is indeed a means of actualizing the past, but he conceives of the body as a present existent rather than a temporal reality’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, 96).

⁵ « Bergson does not show how we can escape the present in order to constitute the consciousness of time. In Bergson there is no passage from present to past : we are confronted either with a ghostly, distant past, or with a present without any temporal horizon. Bergson distinguishes himself in this regard from Husserl, for whom the present is a consciousness of passage. Sometimes Bergson attaches us to the present, and the past is no longer but a pure virtuality ; sometimes he detaches us from the present, and he does this in order to cut us off entirely from the world : neither of these approaches is satisfactory. » (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, 96)

⁶ “Bergson never sees the positive value of our finitude” (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, 101).

⁷ Merleau-Ponty uses the verb ‘*dépasser*’ (*Eloge de la philosophie*, p. 22).

⁸ “[...] being itself is problematic” (Merleau-Ponty, 1953 and 1960, 14). Cf., Merleau-Ponty’s statement that being is not of one sole type and that it breaks up (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, 124)

⁹ “[...] he should have grasped consciousness as history and proliferation ; [...] perception, which does not exclude a certain ‘mis-focus’ (*bougé*)” (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, 106).

¹⁰ “We can summarize the internal movement of Bergsonism by saying that it is the development from a philosophy of impression to a philosophy of expression” (Merleau-Ponty, 1953 and 1960, 28).

¹¹ “Depending on the text, intuition is a coincidence with the object (first conception) or, on the other hand, it is only a borderline case, with the mind being required to elaborate images and concepts in view of a reconstruction (second conception)” (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, 113). To support the first conception, Merleau-Ponty refers to the following passage from *La pensée et le mouvement* (Bergson, Œuvres, 1273): « Intuition signifie donc d’abord conscience, mais conscience immédiate, vision qui se distingue à peine de l’objet vu, connaissance qui est contact et même coïncidence. » To support the second conception, Merleau-Ponty refers to a passage in *Introduction à la métaphysique* (Bergson, Œuvres, 1430) in which the intuition is considered not to be a pure and simple identification, but a (re)construction of duration in terms of contrary theses (thesis and antithesis). In *The Incarnate Subject* he comments on this idea: “If intuition were simple coincidence, there would not be in every great philosophy this inner articulation of theses, and we would not uncover therein such a logic of intuition. It is because intuition is a movement of comprehension that the intuitions of a philosophy form a kind of organism or a kind of system” (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, 116).

¹² “Absolute knowledge is not detachment ; it is inherence. In 1889 (*Essais sur les données immédiates de la conscience*) it was a great novelty – and one which had a future – to present as the basis of philosophy not an *I think* and its immanent thoughts but a Being-self whose self-cohesion is also a tearing away from self” (Merleau-Ponty, 1960, 184).

¹³ After the passage about the partial coincidence as “overlying”, Merleau-Ponty continues as follows: “There is an experience of the visible thing as pre-existing my vision, but this experience is not a fusion, a coincidence: because my eyes which see, my hands which touch, can also be seen and touched, because, therefore, in this sense they see and touch the visible, the tangible, from within, because our flesh lines and even envelops all the visible and tangible things with which nevertheless it is surrounded, the world and I are within one another, and there is no anteriority of the *percipere* to the *percipi*, there is simultaneity or even retardation” (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, 123).

¹⁴ “It would be a language of which he (the philosopher) would not be the organizer, words he would not assemble, that would combine through him by virtue of a natural intertwining of their meaning, through the occult trading of the metaphor – where what counts is no longer the manifest meaning of each word and of each image, but the lateral relations, the kinships that are implicated in their transfers and their exchanges” (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, 125).

¹⁵ “[...] apparition of something where there was nothing or something else” (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, 126).

¹⁶ Deleuze stresses that this mixture of duration and matter cannot be seen as an “intertwining” (*entrelacement*), which is the term Merleau-Ponty uses to describe the chiasmic relation within the flesh. “Intertwining” would suggest the combination of already formed things, whereas the idea of matter as decontracted duration implies that matter is formed during this process of decontraction. It refers to a never-ending codetermination of both.

¹⁷ Strictly speaking, Deleuze recognizes a fourth stage in Bergson’s intuition: the stage of refound dualism. The reason why Deleuze names this stage as he does is obscure since it is the stage at which the virtual is actualizing or differentiating itself, and this differentiation has no external cause: “Duration is differentiated within itself through an internal explosive force” (Deleuze, 1966, 94). Moreover, the virtual persists in its different actualizations. The actual is thus a continuation of the virtual; they are part of one being.

¹⁸ “[...] Bergsonian duration is, in the final analysis, defined less by succession than by coexistence” (Deleuze, 1966, 60).

¹⁹ “Being, or Time, is a *multiplicity*. But it is precisely not ‘multiple’; it is One, in conformity with *its* type of multiplicity” (Deleuze, 1966, 85).

²⁰ In this context Deleuze already mentions the term he will use to describe his own philosophical project: superior empiricism (Deleuze, 1966, 30). A fourth element that links Merleau-Ponty’s account of Bergsonian philosophy to Deleuze’s is the fact that they both describe the relation between the condition and the conditioned as a (creative) relation of expression. However, in his book *Bergsonism*, Deleuze does this only in an implicit manner: his references to the need for creativity required on the actual level (Deleuze, 1966, 106) – actualization implies the determination of what is without fixed shape on a virtual level– echo his definition of expression in his book on Spinoza. Since, in this book, ‘expression’ functions as a concept to think the relation between the virtual and the actual without slipping back into transcendentalism, it can be considered to illustrate Deleuze’s immanent reading of Bergson. We saw earlier that it fulfills a similar role in Merleau-Ponty’s interpretation.

²¹ Gilles Deleuze cinéma – “l’intuition de Bergson”, CD 1+2

²² Bergson calls this a spatial interpretation of time, a confusion of movement with the traversing of space. (*parcourir l’espace*)

²³ Judith Wambacq, Differentie en immanentie van het denken in het werk van Maurice Merleau-Ponty en Gilles Deleuze. Resonanties en divergenties tussen twee denkstijlen, doctoral thesis, Leuven, 2007 chapter 2 and 3.

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