Bergson's Psychology.[1]

By the Rev. Dr. GREGORY SMITH.

PROFESSOR BERGSON'S philosophy has many exponents in this country, none, perhaps, more lucid than Mr. Lindsay and Mr. Solomon. They have the art, not too common among philosophers, of making an intricate subject interesting generally. Long ago the prince of catechists "drew philosophy down from the clouds" to brighten and sweeten the lives of men. But in the chaotic time, when the inrush of barbaric hordes almost wrecked the civilization of Europe, the shy visitant fled for shelter to the student's cell, and there wove cobwebs. The days of ponderous folios in a cryptic phraseology seem far away now from us; but the old bifurcation thought and action is with us still. Philosophy, the ethereal element in the wear and tear of a material life, has too long been the peculiar property of a privileged few. But there are signs now, as we have been told lately by Professor Hobson, of a tendency to "democratize" knowledge, to make it more accessible to the many. The first step in this direction is to get rid of "the jargon of the schools," a very different thing from "the sweet jargoning" of birds in the woods, about which poets sing.

Without a certain amount of sympathy, criticism merely beats the air. If I seem less appreciative than others of one who is without doubt a keen and vigorous thinker, this is far from my intention. But the very qualities which lend a special charm to the Bergson lectures bring with them a special danger.

[1] "Essai sur les Données Immédiates de la Conscience," par Henri Bergson, Membre de l'Institut, Professeur au College de France. Paris: Felix Alcan.

"Matière et Mémoire: Essai sur la Relation du Corps à l'Ésprit," par Henri Bergson, Membre de l'Institut, Professeur au College de France. Paris: Felix Alcan.

"The Philosophy of Bergson," by A. D. Lindsay, Fellow and Tutor of Balliol College, Oxford. Dent and Sons.

"Bergson," by Joseph Solomon. Constable.

The brilliant sword-play, the swift flashes of thought, so quick as to look like intuition, the apt and vivid illustration—all this is rather dazzling. If the theorizings now and again lose touch with actuality and vanish into thin air, if a remarkable subtlety of discernment sometimes spends itself in gossamer work, if the philosophy is apt to be too deductive—these are the almost inevitable accidents of genius.

To build up a world-system; to measure the height, the depth, the totality of the universe, is a large enterprise—too large for even the lifelong absorption of a Spinoza. Sir Oliver Lodge, after quoting (*Hibbert Journal*, January, 1912) Mr. Balfour's "The End of Life is the Development of Spirit in Matter," seems to prefer "the Development of Self." Seldom, if ever, can one mind gain complete mastery over even one department of thought. To master them all, and to balance the bearings of each on each and on the whole, requires omniscience. If we try to get behind the world of phenomena into the absolute meaning of "things in themselves," we lose ourselves "in the holy jungle of transcendental metaphysics." One may believe that "nothing in the universe is isolated" without knowing how the parts are fitted together. But the conqueror sighs for new worlds to conquer. The captive bird beats her wings against the bars of her cage. The limitations of thought baffle the inquirer. The Positivist is right, that inquiry must start from what is palpable, though he is not right if he would make it stop there. The guessings of ontology stimulate, though they cannot satisfy. If it is rash to argue from teleology, it is quite as unscientific to say that there is not, cannot be, any such thing.

In psychology, the study of the component parts of human nature, we are on firmer ground. Here we have solid fact in the workings of heart and brain, something also solid even in the seemingly lawless vagaries of the will, so far as it manifests itself in conduct and character.[1] The inductive method, which

[1] Professor McDougall, in his interesting little volume "Psychology," defines psychology as "the study of behaviour." Williams and Norgate.

the *Novum Organum* resuscitated, like the Phœnix, from the ashes of Aristotelianism, is the only sure foundation on which to build. The medieval schoolmen were sound enough in their apparatus of deductive logic, but their analysis and induction were altogether inadequate. They were making bricks without straw. The question between necessity and responsibility, most vital of all questions, cannot be settled by *a priori* reasoning.

It is worth while to compare—sometimes to contrast—Bergson with Grote,[1] the Plato and the Aristotle of modern philosophy. The difference is often more verbal than real—in the way of expressing rather than in the thought itself. A difference in nomenclature is of small account, if the meaning is the same. "Brain cells" or "brain tissues," "connection" or "communication" between object and subject—word-variations such as these are nothing, so long as the fundamental truth is recognized that, though the growth of the several parts of the organism is vegetative and their operation mechanical, there is in the personality the responsibility of a self-centred choice, whether we call it "life-force" with M. Bergson or "spirit" with S. T. Coleridge. Both Grote and Bergson distinguish the two stages of sensation—the external, which is passive and unconscious; the internal, which is consciously active. Both hold that the merely material contact of, say, the hand with the table becomes perceptive only when a something else comes into play which is not material. That the external matter, acting on the body, should of itself produce sensation is, says Bergson, absolutely self-contradictory. Thus, even in the rudimentary stage of experience—the ἀρχη whence all else proceeds—something more than the mere impact of inert matter on matter is necessitated; something which is supplied by the co-ordination of heart, brain, will; something "mediated by a certain nervous organization, involving the co-operation of the entire self." So, again, Bergson argues that perception

[1] "Exploratio Philosophica," by John Grote, B.D., Professor of Moral Philosophy in the University of Cambridge. Edited by Joseph Bickersteth Mayor, D.D., etc. The University Press, 1900.

is "selective" because it is not "continuous." Like Grote, he seems to think of language as indispensable to thought. Is not language only the shorthand, the labelling of thought?

Both philosophers, taking "action" in its widest sense, abstract as well as concrete, regard thought as the germ of action, as "nascent" or "inchoate" action. "Spirit as well as matter," Bergson teaches, "is involved in action." "Life is orientated towards action." "Mental operations can only be understood in their relation to action." Sir Oliver Lodge has reminded us "Life is an arena of conflict and struggle; it calls out vigorous exertion." We are told that in amœba irritability and contractility are simultaneous, and, as anyone can see, in a dog the bark and bite follow the emotive impulse and the conception instantaneously.[1] Grote and Bergson, while recognizing that the human organism is in its faculties, considered separately, automatic, insist that man is not an automaton. Both maintain that, though consciousness passes through successive changes, the self which experiences these changes loses not its identity. In Bergson's words, "The consciousness is one"; "Self is a living unity" ("C'est le même moi"), though modified continually by successive experiences.

With Grote as with Bergson, time is more subjective than space—a philosophic dogma which daily experience endorses, as Shakespeare knew when he spoke in "As You Like It" of time "ambling" or "galloping" according to the mood of anyone at any particular moment.[2] To Grote time and space are merely "conditions" of our existence. With Bergson the keynote of his argument against materialism is that the action of the spiritual element in man must be considered in time, not in space; as successive, not simultaneous; as differentiated by quality, not by quantity.

Memory is, perhaps, of all the functions of the brain, the

[1] *Cf.* Hartley's "vibrations in delicate nervous strings all over the body, brain and all," and Grote's "network of filaments."

[2] *Cf.*
"Sweet happy days, that were as long
As twenty days are now."
T. Hood.

most mechanical. It is well described by Grote as the "penumbra" of sensation. Even here, as in sensation, Bergson sees something at work which is not mechanical. The other parts of the organism co-operate. As a sensation evokes a memory, so memory makes sensation more intense. The shock of plunging into cold water or the slipperiness of ice is not always a sensation merely: it may be sensation intensified by recollection. And the will has to consent; it selects. For, as Bergson reminds us continually, everything in man's organism points to action, something to be done or left undone. "How was it?" means practically "How shall it be?" The Professor goes on to distinguish two kinds of memory: one, for instance, of a lesson learnt, another of the time and place, when and where it was learnt; or the memory which guides the muscular movements in bicycling, and the memory of a particular incident on the road. But the distinction, so far as it denotes a difference, is in degree rather than in kind. In all cases alike "the past is incorporated into the present." It is the force of habit, a very potent force, which makes one of these two kinds of memory seem to differ from the other. When habit has done its part, it lies dormant till some circumstance calls it up again. M. Bergson seems to demur to calling the brain "a storehouse of memories." And yet he holds that "similarity acts objectively like a force"—in other words, that the law of association (like to like) acts like the law of gravitation; and in his "Mémoire et Matière" we read, "La représentation est toujours là, mais virtuelle"—latent in the reservoir of the cerebellum, overlaid by more recent experiences. Indeed, he has described memory very happily as a *parqueterie*, a mosaic of sensations.

M. Bergson seems distrustful of logic. Instinct, he says, is less apt to err than reason. But the scope of instinct is very limited. Instinct works in a circle, immeasurably narrower than the range of reason; heredity is stronger in lower organisms than in the highly developed. The failures of logic come, not from any flaw in the laws of thought, but from the misapplication of them; not from the implement, but from the way of handling

it. If the premisses are sound, the conclusion must follow as surely as a sum in addition. The "if" lies in the inevitable incompleteness of the inductive process, which has been, and ever will be, the barrier to intellectual progress. The nearest approach to certainty is the ineffaceable line which demarcates right from wrong ethically. All else is the "perpetual flux" of Heraclitus; the theory of to-day is a bygone thing to-morrow. But this instability is no fault of the laws of thought. They rest on the elemental principle of identity or non-identity, and although similarity, however close, is not identity, to classify things by their likeness or unlikeness must serve for practical purposes. To depreciate logic is to open the door to any kind of mysticism, however unreasonable. It is to saw off the branch on which you are sitting.

It would help to clear the fog away if the several functions which are the province of the psychologist—several, though acting together in "the entire self," thought, emotion, will—were defined more clearly. We want more anatomizing in psychology. Bodily ailments, it is often said, can never be treated completely till the healer shall be able to see, as through a window, what is going on inside his patient. So in psychology. One is grateful to a thinker so acute, so profound as M. Bergson, for aiding the physiologists to do this.

It is not to be expected that even a really great philosopher can command assent on all points. Some even of his adherents may hesitate to follow M. Bergson's more daring flights. But he asserts the vital truth, that man is not a mere machine, not a motor-car without a driver. By reasonings educed from considerations of time and space, of quality and quantity, etc., he reaches the goal, which others have reached by a less circuitous route, that it rests with the self to open or to close the floodgates to the passions of the heart and to the speculations of the brain.