

Time, duration, and discontinuity: Bergson, Derrida and Bachelard

Bart Nooteboom, April 2016

248. Connections with Bergson: The linguistic U-turn published 22-2-2016

Here I start a series to explore connections of this blog with the thought of Henri Bergson.

These days I found out that what I have written in this blog resembles the thought of Henri Bergson, in some important, but certainly not in all respects.

I tried to read Bergson before, but found his writing difficult to understand, until I turned to the secondary literature. That has frequently happened to me before, with Kant, Hegel, Habermas, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Foucault, Levinas, and Deleuze, to name a few. In content I largely prefer continental philosophy to analytic philosophy, but in style I prefer the latter. Analytical philosophy often is a fountain of clarity compared to the pit of obscurity of much continental philosophy. However, perhaps that is due, at least in part, to the fact that continental philosophy is more willing to turn to the fundamentally more obscure issues of philosophy. However, there are exceptions: Schopenhauer and Nietzsche are a pleasure to read.

First, I turned to a book on Bergson by Deleuze, but that hardly helped. From that I find that I still fail to understand much of both Bergson and Deleuze. Then, recently I found a helpful, clear exposition of Bergson, in Dutch, by Hein van Dongen.¹

To my surprise and delight I then found that my claim of an ‘object bias’ in language, introduced in item 29 of this blog, comes close to a similar claim by Bergson.

I claimed that language, and consequently many concepts and much thought, are biased by an aptitude and irresistible inclination, developed in evolution of the human being, to conceptualize things as if they were objects moving in space. This fundamentally distorts the views we have of abstract categories such as meaning, thought, identity, happiness, justice, culture, , the proper handling and understanding of which now forms the challenge for survival of the human species. Here and there I tried to conceptualize differently.

Bergson had a similar claim, that in language we have a distorted view of everything in terms of objects that are fixed and distinct from each other. In particular, we are captive to a spatial notion of time as a succession of distinct moments, like separate objects juxtaposed in space. Here also, the explanation is that this bias arose because it served survival in past evolution.

As noted by Hein van Dongen, after the ‘linguistic turn’ in philosophy, where models of thought were sought in ordinary language, this constitutes a U-turn, a turn away from language as fundamentally misleading. But of course that presents a huge problem: how to use language to turn away from language. That probably accounts for much of the apparent obscurity of this kind of philosophical talk. Yet it is not an entirely hopeless endeavour, Bergson was convinced. One can seek recourse to metaphors and images.

¹ Hein van Dongen, *Bergson* (in Dutch), Amsterdam: Boom, 2014.

But the use of metaphor can be misleading. After all, the use of objects as metaphor for abstract concepts is precisely what is now misleading us. So, we should look elsewhere. For example, in item 209 for the notion of identity I used the notion of networks of connections between people.

Bergson proposed a conceptualization of time as ‘duration’, as a coherent, connected flow of heterogeneous elements, in ongoing flux of change, emergence, as fundamental to both thought and outside nature. I will return to this theme in following items in this blog.

Similarly, I have followed a pragmatist line of thought, in a philosophy of process, in an interaction between thought and action in the world. That, I argued, is also connected to the thought of Wittgenstein and Heidegger. The pragmatist philosopher William James and Bergson were acquainted, and there is a similarity between Bergson’s notion of duration and James’ view of the ‘stream of consciousness’, which was probably inspired by Bergson’s duration.

249. Duration: the whole and the parts

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A key feature of Bergson’s notion of ‘duration’ is that it constitutes a flow of connected, heterogeneous parts, where a moment now arises from moments past and anticipates moments to come. The paradigm case is that of a piece of music, where moments make sense only as connected parts in the whole of the piece, as part of a melody, say.

The meaning or quality of the whole changes, or falls apart, when it is disassembled into its parts. The meaning of a part depends on the composition of the whole.

In this kind of talk, the fundamental problem of language appears, again, in the way it is formulated, can only be formulated, suggesting that the ‘parts’ exist by themselves, apart from the whole, and are somehow fixed, while in being parts of the whole they themselves become a form of flux. How can we sensibly talk of elements that are not fixed?

In this blog, in the discussion of meaning (in item 32), I proposed that not only the meaning of a sentence is a function of the meanings of the words in it, as was recognized by Gottlob Frege, and became a standard part of analytic philosophy, but also that the meaning of a word is a function of the sentence it is in, and of the broader action context of the sentence.

The wider significance of this is that judgements of what is appropriate or adequate, in language, science, and morality, depends on the context.

In that view one casts a critical eye on absolutes, i.e. claims, in knowledge, ethics and interpretation of texts, that something applies everywhere and always, regardless of conditions. Bergson was not just critical of universals, giving precedence to individuals, to concrete, specific conditions, but, if I understand him correctly, went so far as to reject universals altogether.

I did not do that. Without universals there is no generalization and no abstraction from specific experience, no inference of general concepts, and hence no science. I claimed that we need universals, but only temporarily, as makeshift, and in their application they need to be

enriched with contextual specifics, and in that process general meanings may shift or break. That is part of my thesis of ‘imperfection on the move’. I will come back to this in the following item in this blog.

Bergson associated perception and sense making with memory. Clearly, when we speak and act, perception is affected by memory, by previous experience. But sense making also guides and limits memory. Otherwise we would be swamped by waves of memory, unable to focus and act. Focus entails limitation. Bergson suggested that sensori-motor activity operates to limit and focus memory.

I discussed these issues in a series on ‘The whole and the parts’ (items 184-186). Specifically, I employed the notion of a script, as a structure of connected elements. This includes words in sentences, connected by grammar and syntax; elements of a theory, connected by logic or mathematics; elements of a practice, connected by causality; notes in a piece of music, connected by principles of composition; and games, with actions connected by rules of the game. Along these lines, indeed Bergsonian duration is pervasive. Life itself is to be appreciated as a connected whole.

The action context triggers one or several scripts, and we try to make sense of what we see and hear by trying to fit it into the script. This is called ‘framing’. We cannot make sense, we disregard, or fail to notice, what cannot be fitted into some script. That yields a form of prejudice but also enables fast response. That was needed to survive, in evolution.

All of this, I hope, contributes to a further elucidation and understanding of Bergson’s notion of duration. Or am I distorting it? In following items I continue this quest, from different perspectives.

250. Duration, process and invention

published 6-3-2016

Bergson’s notion of duration entails difference in continuity. Different things unified in time, in a flow of change, or better: of formation, emergence, and transformation. Bergson connected this with his idea of ‘creative evolution’.

In his view, duration is the paragon of qualitative difference, with elements, or moments, which are not additive, not repetitive, in contrast with the quantitative difference of separate, distinct, but similar things lined up in space.

How to conceptualize this? Think of a body growing, and growing old, with body parts, themselves changing, connected in time, in the body. Or think of notes composing a melody, or words a story. Melody and story develop in time, with different connections between notes or words that shift their place and connotation in the process.

The potential importance of this is that it may contribute to a better grasp of the present curse in society where the qualitative, the quality of process, gets overwhelmed by the quantitative, in measurement and control that suffocates the process and erodes the performance of professional work, in education and health care, for example.

I discussed that earlier in this blog (item 75), in a plea for ‘horizontal control’, where room is created for a non-quantitative, dialogical assessment of quality in terms of work processes.

The fundamental move here is that it replaces an object view with a process view, a view in terms of duration, to be tackled not primarily by measurement but by dialogue (though measurement may part of it).

I am regularly invited to give lectures on this, in health care, education and the building industry, for example.

How are we to better understand duration as emergence? Bergson presented it as an exchange, and alternation, between maintenance versus renewal of form. This seems to me close, 'spot on', to my account of the 'cycle of invention', discussed in items 31, 35, and 138 of this blog.

To recall: novelty is proposed to arise from a *generalization* of an established form (theory, technology, practice, ...) to a novel context with novel demands and opportunities, where its survival is challenged. In an attempt to cope with this, the form is *differentiated*. This is the first step in a loosening of form, in a widening of the context of application. Next, when this does not suffice, local failures and opportunities inspire hybrids of the established practice with elements from the novel context, in *reciprocation*. Here the form is beginning to be taken apart. Experimentation with *novel combinations* exhibits what value novelties may have, and what, in the old practice, inhibits realization of new potential. This yields pressures and hints for more fundamental, architectural changes of the form, for experimentation with tentative novel forms, in *accommodation*. Then, a process of selection arises, in which alternative novel prototypes compete for survival, which ultimately narrows down to a *dominant design*, which is then refined and narrowed down to an optimal new form, in *consolidation*. Here, form narrows down again. I discussed how this in some ways resembles evolution but also has important differences.

Now, does this yield an elucidation, a further specification, of the notion of duration? Does this help for further development of Bergsonism (as Deleuze called it)? A clarification of 'creative evolution', with a specification of how it differs from natural evolution?

Next, how are we to understand Bergson's claim that duration is not only a feature of our consciousness, and of our subjective experience of time, but also of everything outside us, in the world. Are there really no stable, autonomous objects in the world? If in evolution we formed an inclination to conceptualize in terms of autonomous objects moving in space, because that contributed to our survival in the world, coping with prey, predators, enemies, sticks and stones, then that notion of stable, distinct objects must have reality value. So how can objects be both stable and subject to the process of change involved in duration?

An obvious idea would be that of 'relative stability'. Things can be more or less stable relative to their change. Words have a volatile meaning, in moving from sentence to sentence, while objects maintain their constitution and form from one position in space to another. At the same time, living things have an internal movement of physiology, cell construction, decay, and death. A bodily organ deteriorates with age but manages to maintain its function more or less, for some more time. Even dead materials, a stone, say, is composed of processes on the level of molecules and atoms and underlying fundamental forces. For our survival in interaction with objects in space that movement is not relevant and hence not experienced.

Here I connect Derrida's notion of 'deconstruction' with Bergson's notion of 'duration', discussed in preceding items in this blog.

Derrida aimed at criticism of established intellectual categories, taking them apart and reconstructing or replacing them. Not just destruction but creative destruction. In particular, he toppled binary opposites, such as presence/absence, differentiation/undifferentiatedness, and justice/injustice, showing how they can morph into each other. Desire for the presence of a distant ideal or love may upon approach turn into abhorrence and a wish for distance.

Also, Derrida claimed that texts do not have one single, 'true' meaning or interpretation, presumably what the author 'really meant'. Meaning is indeterminate. Derrida allows for alternative interpretations that may go on developing after the author has died.

His argument is incontrovertible, in my view. If one accepts that interpretation is assimilation into the cognitive frames of the reader/listener, and that this means that it is partly constructed, or contaminated, or hybridized, by those mental frames, then multiplicity of interpretation follows. Mental frames, constructed by different people in different circumstances, differ. I called this 'cognitive distance' in previous items of this blog.

This does not mean that any interpretation is as good as any other. It is not a case of 'anything goes'. One needs to be prepared to give arguments for one's interpretation, to be subjected to debate. That is the notion of truth as 'warranted assertibility' that I adopted in this blog.

Now, there seems to be a connection between Derrida's deconstruction and Bergson's duration. In both we find the process view of change, transformation, emergence. With Bergson the emphasis lies on the creative (connected with his 'creative evolution'), while with Derrida the emphasis lies on the destruction, but I think the intention is the same.

An important part of my philosophical programme is, and has been for a long time, to clarify and further develop the workings of creative destruction. That is the aim of my 'theory' (if it can be called that) of the 'cycle of invention' presented earlier in this blog and summarized in the preceding item.

In that cycle there is a Derrida-like alternation of the opposites of unity and differentiation, and of maintenance and transformation of form.

However, while with Derrida deconstruction appears to be ongoing, without end or pause, here, while here is no end there is pause, alternation also of stability and change. Stability, with standardization, is needed for making judgements, including moral ones, and decisions, and taking action, achieving efficiency, and encountering obstacles and new opportunities that feed renewed change. That kind of pragmatics does not appear to be present in Derrida's deconstruction. I will return to this point in a later item.

An issue, arising with both Bergson and Derrida, now is this: what remains of analysis, the break-up of a whole into simple, fundamental elements, which has been the ideal of much philosophy, crystallized in 'analytic philosophy'?

Like abstraction, which is a different kind of reduction, we need analysis, in science and in reconstruction everywhere.

The gist of the thought of both Bergson and Derrida is, I think, that while the decomposition of analysis is fine, and indeed needed, one should recognize that the meaning of elements changes in decomposition and abstraction, in preparation of a novel composition where new meanings arise.

As Derrida noted, the quest for ultimate, pure simplicity and singularity of fundamental elements, delved in analysis, is metaphysical, as much as, and perhaps equivalent to, the quest for absolutes in abstraction.

While analysis is a grinding down, abstraction is a distillation, rarefaction, losing the sediment of experience, the salt of the earth. In both analysis and abstraction there is loss of context, of the richness, the variety and variability, of life. In re-construction, elements again acquire the whole-some richness of specific individual conditions.

Losing context, brought into isolation, in analysis and abstraction, elements shrink their actual meaning, losing specificity, becoming a mere item in a repertoire of potential meanings. Subsequently, inserted anew in a different context, in novel composition, they regain a new, specific meaning, entangled with particulars of the new context. I will expand on this in the following item, in a discussion of the 'hermeneutic circle'.

252. Hermeneutics and literature

published 20-3-2016

I have a hermeneutic question: how should we interpret hermeneutics? If it means the search for the single, true or ultimate meaning of a text, I do not go along with it. If it means that multiple interpretations may remain, and ever new ones may arise, I go along with it. That, I think is implied in the 'hermeneutic circle'.

I discussed that earlier, in item 36 of this blog, but here is a summary. Language use entails that terms for concepts (on a 'paradigmatic axis') get inserted into sentences in action contexts, composed by grammar and syntax (on a 'syntagmatic axis'). Paradigmatic concepts arise in abstraction from use in specific contexts. That entails generalization, a reduction of meaning to apply more widely, beyond contexts of application and origination. When inserted again in sentences they connect with other terms, increasing the richness of meaning with context-specificity, narrowing the reference to something specific to the context. This ongoing interchange between the paradigmatic and the syntagmatic axes forms the hermeneutic circle.

I tried to connect this with the 'cycle of invention' proposed in this blog and summarized in a preceding item (no. 250). There, invention of a novelty at first yields a variety of alternative tentative new forms, which next gets narrowed down, converging onto a dominant form (paradigm), abstracted from the context where it originated, and more precise, after getting rid of remnants of the old and ambiguities of the new. This also means that what was liquid gets petrified. This then is embedded in other, new contexts (syntagm), in a variety of forms according to the different contexts, becoming more liquid. Misfits may then be encountered, and novel opportunities for novel modifications, which can yield a novel concept, with trials of different modifications, where we are back at the beginning of the circle. Liquid becomes gas, mixed with other gases, to yield a new distillation.

In the exploration of novelty, unable to specify something in language that does not yet fit, and misses or distorts it, one needs indirect images, associations, or metaphors. After new

meaning becomes more determinate, in a new language, then one needs metaphor again for getting novelty across to others still dwelling in the old language.

Note, however, that metaphor is also misleading. For example, the thesis of an ‘object bias’ in language, proposed earlier in this blog, entails that we conceptualize abstract notions using metaphors from objects in space, and the handling of them, with containers, avenues, vessels, materials, flows, channels and the like, thereby misconstruing those notions. Like being ‘in’ love, ‘grounding’ an argument or theory, then ‘bringing it across’, taking a ‘position’, sending information across a communication ‘channel’, the ‘content’ and the ‘boundary’ of a concept, the ‘expressing’ an idea, ‘absorbing’ a message, and so forth.

The notion of ‘digging’ for an ultimate ‘ground’ of a theory may be a linguistic delusion, Like sticking a spade into the ocean.

Now, I propose literature is connected to all this as follows. It explores new meanings, in images or metaphors. It is not theoretical, i.e. not abstract, not paradigmatic, concerned with the general, the universal, but specific, contextual, syntagmatic, concerned with the singular, the individual. It puts familiar ideas into unfamiliar contexts, deviating from established, taken for granted general meanings and truths, and thereby shifts them. Dare I say it, with a bow to Derrida: it deconstructs. This applies also to conventions, rules, morality, and identity. Crime may turn into virtue, the ugly into beauty. People turn out not be what they were thought to be. Reading literature is an exercise in exploring and shifting meaning and morality. Earlier, in item 120 I asked whether reading literature ‘makes people better’, in exercising and developing their moral sense.

So, literary texts are not only subject to deconstruction by readers, they may deconstruct the reader.

In exploration, science also needs to do all this, and as a result it has a taste of the literary, for which is often condemned, for not (yet) being rigorous, well defined, univocal, unambiguous, determinate, abstract, tightly argued. It is blamed for being ‘ad hoc’, incidental, particularistic, indeterminate. And it is, has to be. The petrification of theory comes later.

Feyerabend once said that demanding a budding theory to be clear and exact is like letting a baby box against a grown man.

253. Jamming time

published 27-3-2016

In classical Greece, two notions of time were recognized: *kairos* and *chronos*. Chronos is sequential time, or what Bergson called spatial time: dots on a line. Kairos is the ‘opportune moment’, the effective thing to do at precisely that moment. It is adapting to circumstances as they arise, grasping opportunities when they arise. It entails a veering away from the plan, disturbing the programme, in taking advantage of contingent circumstances. Improvisation.

I wonder if Kairos is perhaps related to Bergson’s notion of duration.

Recently, I attended a presentation by the ‘Kytman’ (Colin Benders), a young Dutch musician and band leader in the area of HipHop. He decided to get away from playing according to a fixed, prior composition. There, he explained, players are focused on

themselves, fitting their contribution into the composition. The music consists of parallel voices each going their own set paths.

He opted for jamming, where players are intent upon each other as they improvise, adjusting or integrating novelty, in an unpredictable unfolding.

It is not without any order. Prior to playing some themes are proposed, and modes of mutual adaptation and integration. Kytteman stands in front, like a conductor, eliciting entries and exits, mutes and blasts.

Perhaps this is related to the opposition between Chronos and Kairos: with Chronos being associated with a preset order of composition, and Kairos with jamming.

Is Bergsonian duration like jamming?

This is associated, I think, with what Lévy-Strauss called *bricolage*, tinkering, which I used to characterize what entrepreneurs do: they have some initial sense of direction but bend it or veer off in a different direction on the occasion of unforeseeable obstacles and novel opportunities (item 41 in this blog). I think it also happens to artists, say poets and painters, as they find themselves proceeding in directions they did not foresee, pulled along with a sense of 'flow'.

Perhaps this also connects with the notion of *serendipity*: finding something by happenstance, not as part of any programme, not sought for. It seems to fall out of the blue, but it happens only to the prepared mind, building on a store of mental repertoires that can be triggered and connected to produce novelty, in subconscious association.

254. How stable is reality?

published 3-4-2016

Bergson adopted the view, taken from phenomenology, proposed by Husserl, that somehow we can 'bracket' our cognitive or linguistic predilections to see reality 'as it really is'. That appears to be a reversal of the Kantian doctrine that we cannot observe reality 'as it is in itself'. I cannot go along with such reversal.

But to what extent are we caught in biased conceptualization? If indeed, as I have proposed in this blog, we are caught in an 'object bias', conceptualizing everything by analogy to objects in space, is this inescapable?

Bergson claimed that his notion of 'duration', of flux, a process of emergence, yields insight not only into our subjective experience of time, and our thought, but also constitutes the true nature of the world around us. Things are processes. He defined intuition as duration in action, with the ability to dodge the object bias, to grasp the process nature of all things.

I think that perhaps with much trouble we can escape from forms of conceptualization, but while that may bring us into another way of seeing things that may in some sense be better, and we have good arguments, this will be a step in an ongoing 'imperfection on the move'. That we can escape has been proven by modern physics, that managed to escape by means of mathematics, yielding results that are confirmed by experiment but are utterly baffling to our intuition.

Not to be imprisoned in the object bias, we might take metaphors for our thought from other things than objects in space. Earlier in this blog, I suggested to conceive of identity in terms of networks rather than some essential substance inhering in an individual or culture. But I grant that this still entails the basic notion of things (people) taking up positions in such networks. Yet, it allows for insight into the social embedding and development of identity, as opposed to the intuition of the individual as an autonomous object in space.

Now, is ongoing process, rather than enduring substance, the reality of all things around us? Is the apparent stability of objects, as they move in space, an illusion?

In the preceding item in this blog I argued for a combination of stability and change. And then we can grasp a notion of ‘relative stability’: a greater or lesser stability relative to the speed and nature of change.

Living beings grow, age and die as they move around as distinct things in space. Earlier in this blog, in a discussion of identity (items 8-12), I argued that there is no fixed essence of identity that gets ‘expressed’ in life. Identity is not unitary, has multiple, possibly conflicting, aspects, and is subject to ongoing development, or Bergsonian duration, if you like. Yet, counter to David Hume, for example, there is some coherence and stability of identity, with the body as a focal point for perceptions, thought and emotions.

How about lifeless objects? Bergson noted that a cube of sugar changes as it is dissolved in water. How about a stone, say? Chemistry and particle physics teach us that there of molecules and atomic, and sub-atomic processes of all matter.

With human beings it is not only physical growth and aging, but also development of identity, personality, in interaction with the world, especially the social world.

And how about changing mood, as a person moves about, acts and speaks?

Finally, as discussed before in this blog, the meanings of abstract concepts, such as happiness, identity, meaning, etc. have yet more instability. The example I gave was that the meaning of a words changes as it is shifted from one sentence to another. The stability of the form of the word, and its pronunciation, is misleading.

In novels, meaning is more fluid than in established scientific discourse, and in poetry more fluid still.

255. Continuity and discontinuity: Bergson, Derrida and Bachelard

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Gaston Bachelard criticized Bergson on two connected points. First, in his ‘philosophie de repos’² (philosophy of rest) Bachelard claimed that Bergson assumes continuous change too much, in his concepts of duration and ‘creative evolution’, neglecting the discontinuities where development temporarily halts. That criticism would apply also to Derrida. Second,

² In *La dialectique de la durée*, PUF, 1950.

connected to that, in his 'philosophie du non'³ (philosophy of no) he claimed that Bergson neglects the role of destruction, creative destruction, in development, assuming too much cumulative confirmation. That criticism does not apply to Derrida, with his notion of deconstruction in processes of transformation.

I am not sure Bachelard's criticism of Bergson is entirely justified. Bergson did recognize an alternation of maintenance and renewal of forms. But as in Derrida, there is limited recognition, or at least limited discussion, of the role of pause in flux, of discontinuity in continuity.

It seems plausible that in his endeavour to escape from the metaphor of objects in space that distorts our cognition, in what I call an 'object bias', and the crux of 'duration' that it connects past, present and future, Bergson neglected the role of stability in processes of change. He even doubted the stability of objects. In the preceding item in this blog, I indicated the possibility of 'relative stability'. Some things are more stable than others.

After all, my argument for the object bias was my claim that it helped humanity to survive in a world of stable objects moving in space. This still allows for instability in the longer run. In the end even stones will decay. And when one looks at the atomic level of stones one encounter the buzz of elementary particles, or forces, or 'strings'.

Or think of the pressure of a gas. The pressure is stable, but is caused by a 'Brownian' movement of gas molecules hitting the walls of a container.

So, the question now is how much discontinuity there may be in processes of change.

Bachelard offered the apt notion of rhythm, and different rhythms interacting, in nature and thought. Think of the diurnal and seasonal rhythm of life and nature. The circulation of blood has a pulse. Light is a wave (of particles; this is one of the mysteries of modern physics), and as such has a pulse.

I refer again to my 'cycle of invention', where pauses of consolidation are needed, some stability to reflect, to explore the limits and possible alternatives for established practice. Ongoing change without pause would throw us into neurosis, into a blind groping about.

But how are we to understand this: what is it that pauses, remains relatively stable, and how can something be stable while still moving? Here, as I did before, I seek recourse in the notion of a script.

To recall: a script is a structure of nodes, which may represent component activities, elements in a theory, or words in a sentence. The classic example is that of a restaurant, with nodes of entry, seating, ordering, eating, paying and leaving. In a self-service restaurant the nodes are similar (though not identical), but occur in a different order.

Now the point here is this. Nodes in their turn also have scripts, called subscripts, or repertoires of subscripts, such as ways of paying in the node for payment. While the restaurant may be stable, maintaining its overall script, there may be drastic changes in a subscript, such

³ *La philosophie du non*, PUF, 1940.

as, say, in the payment node the replacement of a check subscript by bank cards and credit cards, with their very different scripts.

One can change the composition of fixed parts or maintain the composition of changing parts. But in change of composition parts will not remain identical, though they may be stable relative to the composition, and changing parts will change the composition at least in its potential action, in what it can do.

In sum, there is discontinuity in continuity, and continuity in discontinuity. Perhaps Bergson neglected the first, while focusing on the second.

256. Rest and restlessness

published 10-4-2016

This is the last item in a series on time, duration, inspired by the work of Henri Bergson.

Is restlessness good, or not? Without restlessness there is no development and no creation. But according to the philosopher Schopenhauer we are driven by a restless will to satisfaction that is never achieved, and if we think we have achieved it, we experience insufferable boredom. We may be relieved from that race of craving, but only temporarily, by an aesthetic experience, a piece of Bach, say. For Schopenhauer a genius is able to escape from personality with its frenzied will, literally in ecstasy, stepping out of the self. So what is creation: restlessness or rest?

Ignaa Devisch⁴ defines restlessness as an impassioned striving for what one considers meaningful. Here the positive is built into the definition. It implies voluntariness, not being dragged along in what one sees as senseless. That would not be restlessness but unrest. It yields negative stress. But passion also means suffering (as in the passion of Christ). The passion of creation can be painful. It gives stress, but in a positive sense. It can also be a surrender to a 'flow', an effortless transport, as if arising out of itself.

In the famous film *Amadeus*, about Mozart, there is a scene where Salieri, rival of Mozart, choking with envy, reads through a manuscript by Mozart in which there is no a single correction or strikeout, 'as if God himself whispered it in his ear'.

Serendipity is the apparently unprepared and effortless reception of an illumination, as a strike of lightning, out of nothing. That is only apparent. It presents itself only to the prepared mind. The impression that it is as if there was no preceding thought or effort arises from the fact that much of our mental activity is subconscious, in 'tacit' knowledge. Much learning, doing and thinking breeds mental structures without one's knowing about it, and those provide the capacity for sense making and receipt of an illumination.

But learning also requires rest and contemplation, a settling of the dust, relaxation of impulse. Uninterrupted change, without that, derails in neurosis, a directionless bounding from one hunch to another. I think in letting go also lies the importance of sleep: the mental digestion, sifting, and association of impulses in the brain produced by the action of the day, to settle into stabilized circuits in the brain. Rest, release of control, surrender to that process, is also

⁴ Ignaa Devisch, *Restlessness, plea for a boundless life* (in Flemish), De Bezige Bij, 2016.

needed to allow for chance that generates the illumination. That is how dreams somehow yield nonsensical sense.

This is part, I think, of the more general principle, discussed also elsewhere in this blog, that development and invention require an alternation of stability and change, rest and restlessness, of assimilation and accommodation.

In his early work on aesthetics of Nietzsche offered an opposition and combination of Apollo and Dionysus. Apollo is harmony, equilibrium, rest. Dionysus is orgy, the unrestrained, the destruction of equilibrium, creative destruction, restlessness. Nietzsche was inclined to the Dionysian, but recognized the need for the Apollonian.

People usually have more aptitude for the one or the other, and then the combination of the two requires collaboration or taking turns. In organizations we see that, for example, in the separation of a department of R&D and one of production. In development, exploration, less is fixed, there is more room for surprise, a wider scope, more faces in different directions. In production the perspective is tighter, more oriented to efficiency and fine-tuning, in exploitation of existing knowledge, skills and means.

Here one sees that combination or alternation of the two is needed also for economic reasons, though I think that applies also in the mental and bodily economy of personal development. Without stability there is no functioning for short term survival. Without change and development there arise stagnation and falling back. Another reason is epistemic: one needs to apply what exists in order to learn about its limitations and to gather elements for renewal, and gain inspiration for possible directions for it.