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## WHAT IS THE PRESENT IN BERGSON'S THOUGHT? \*

*O que é o presente no pensamento de Bergson?*

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**Abstract:** Bergson's concept of the present is highly enigmatic one. On the one hand, he is a philosopher who follows common sense and pursues empiricism according to common sense. On the other hand, however, because he places emphasis on flowing continuity of the duration, he only sees the present as a cross section of the flow. Ultimately, it can be said that the present is a non-existent concept in his philosophy. However, in the first chapter of *Matter and Memory*, he assumes pure perception and writes as if it were possible to perceive in the present without duration. Deleuze suggests that this problem can be solved by a metaphysical interpretation of the phenomenon of *déjà vu* which Bergson discusses in his essay "Memory of the Present and False Recognition." In this article, I would like to discuss these complicated but crucial issues.

**Keywords:** Present. Duration. Pure perception. *Déjà Vu*. Deleuze.

**Resumo:** O conceito de presente de Bergson é altamente enigmático. Por um lado, ele é um filósofo que segue o senso comum e persegue o empirismo de acordo com esse mesmo senso comum. Por outro lado, no entanto, porque ele coloca ênfase na continuidade fluida da duração, ele só vê o presente como um corte transversal do fluxo. Em última análise, pode-se dizer que o presente é um conceito inexistente em sua filosofia. No entanto, no primeiro capítulo de *Matéria e Memória*, ele assume a percepção pura e escreve como se fosse possível perceber no presente sem duração. Deleuze sugere que esse problema pode ser resolvido por uma interpretação metafísica do fenômeno do *déjà vu* que Bergson discute em seu ensaio "A lembrança do presente e o falso reconhecimento". Neste artigo, gostaria de discutir essas questões complicadas, mas cruciais.

**Palavras-chave:** Presente. Duração. Percepção Pura. *Déjà Vu*. Deleuze.

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## Introduction

Nobody would dispute that Bergson is a philosopher of *time*. We can see this in the fact that the title given to the English translation of *An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness* (1889), which was approved by Bergson himself, is *Time and Free Will*, as well as in the fact that his *magnum opus*, *Matter and Memory* (1896), deals with the topic of *memory*, which is related to time, though its primary concern is the mind-body problem. The keyword *duration*, which characterizes Bergson's entire thought, also points first and foremost to a temporal *heterogenous continuity*. This is further reinforced by the fact that, especially in the *Essay*, he argues that duration is a temporal entity that cannot be grasped by "spatializing" it, and again, in the fact that in *Matter and Memory*, he tries to reconceive spatially extended matter itself from the side of temporal duration.

There is, however, a deeply curious point that emerges when we consider Bergson as a philosopher of time. This is the fact that, among the three generally recognized aspects of time — present, past, and future — Bergson consistently emphasizes only the *past*.

This does not mean, of course, that Bergson ignores the aspects of time other than the past. In his third major book, *Creative Evolution* (1907), introducing the notion of *élan vital*, he argues that the evolution of life proceeds toward the *future* through diffusion. Furthermore, his final tome, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* (1930), deals with the topic of an "open" society and religion; and what he means by "open" is, again, a propulsive force of diversification into the future (here, he rephrases *élan vital* as *élan d'amour*). On the other hand, one could say that the future that he presents in an indirect manner in these works is only a development of the *unpredictability* of duration, which is one of its properties that cannot be spatialized.

What about the *present*? As Augustine said in ancient times, one possible line of thought is that the three aspects of time — present, past, and future — are all variations of the *present*. Insofar as the past and future both exist *in the present*, generally speaking, it is by no means unnatural to think that the present is the temporality that should be given highest priority.

Bergson, however, does not emphasize the present in particular. Rather, one could say that he disregards the "present itself" to such a degree that it is peculiar. He states, for example, that "there is nothing that is as non-existent as the present instant"<sup>1</sup>, though it should be noted that the context of this statement advises against a straightforward reading.

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<sup>1</sup> BERGSON, Henri. *Matière et mémoire*. Paris: Quadrige PUF, 1896/1939, p. 167.

As was already mentioned, duration is, in the first place, a *heterogeneous continuity*. In contrast to space, whose homogeneity permits one to divide it without changing its nature, duration is a determination laid down to introduce the fundamental continuity of time. If time permitted homogeneous divisibility like space, we would fall into Zeno's paradox; this was an issue of primary concern for the early Bergson. This is what Bergson calls the spatialization of time, which he criticizes as an inadequate description of reality (he mentions Zeno's paradox in a number of places, but see especially *Matter and Memory*, Chap. 4). What is most important for Bergson is the *flow of time itself*, which cannot be divided. We therefore have to avoid speaking of the present as if it were a "point" within the flow. Nor should we conceive of enduring time itself as an "extended present."

We can see this in the opening passages of "Consciousness and Life," included in *Mind-energy* (1919), which we will deal with in the present essay. Here, Bergson clearly states that "consciousness means, before everything else, memory"<sup>2</sup>. This is not a statement that can be understood in a straightforward way. If he had said that "consciousness means perception (of the present)," that would have been easy to understand. The statement that "consciousness is memory," however, is a statement that baselessly overemphasizes the past. In this case, one clearly cannot avoid asking how present perceptions should be understood. Elsewhere, Bergson describes consciousness as memory that is continually swelling as a "snowball on the snow"<sup>3</sup>. If so, then since memory or consciousness is continually "growing," one would think that *a present in which the past comes into being* is indispensable.

Yet Bergson consistently avoids focusing on the topic of the present, which usually cannot be ignored in philosophies of time. One could say that this bias is characteristic of Bergson's metaphysics.

## **1. How Bergson depicts the present**

The foregoing should not be understood as implying that Bergson does not discuss the present at all. Among the passages where he takes up the present, the most conspicuous and difficult to interpret are his discussion of *pure perception* in Chapter 1 of *Matter and Memory*, and his account of *recognition* in Chapter 2, where memory comes into the picture. We should also keep in mind that the term *image* is emphasized in this book.

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<sup>2</sup> BERGSON, Henri. *Énergie spirituelle*. Paris: Quadrige PUF, 1934/1938, p. 5.

<sup>3</sup> BERGSON, Henri. *Évolution créatrice*. Paris: Quadrige PUF, 1907/ 1941, p. 2.

Let's begin by considering the image. The word "image," which is explained in the preface to the 7th edition of *Matter and Memory* and is also used in the subtitles of all the chapters in this book, is introduced in accordance with the aim of this book: to solve the mind-body problem. The mind-body problem, at this initial stage, has to do with the fact that the subject (mind) that sees, the brain and nervous system that are at work when the act of seeing is taking place, and the object that is seen, are all images with the *same credentials*. The action and reaction between these images are what constitute the *specific act of perception*.

But this account of the image holds only at the stage of *pure perception*, where memory still has not entered the picture. The mind-body problem cannot be solved at this stage, insofar as memory is regarded as mind. Bergson postulates a "difference in kind" that is not a mere "difference of degree" between the mind on the one hand, and the brain and nervous system on the other. The mind-body problem should, then, inherently be a problem about the relation between the mind and brain. There is no duration at the stage of pure perception. Therefore, any solution of the mind-body problem at this stage can only be a pseudo-solution. For Bergson, who sees everything *sub specie durationes*<sup>4</sup>, a stage with no duration can only exist *de jure*<sup>5</sup> (MM 31).

But by speaking of the mutual relation between body and matter, Bergson draws a line of thought in the problem of perception. This suggests that the *de jure* present is necessary, even if it only exists *de jure*.

In Chapter 2 of *Matter and Memory*, this stage of pure perception or the present is developed into the case of *recognition*, where memory enters the picture. Here, the relationship between the past and present becomes the issue. There are two kinds of past that Bergson extracts here. However, the past that has to do with recognition is not pure memory (*mémoire pure*) but the memory-image (*image-souvenir*). The latter is none other than the *presentation of pure memory as image*. Thus, even when memory enters into perception, the past is imagined as being in the *present*. The former pure memory, on the other hand, *always remains in a virtual state and is never actualized (excluding abnormal cases like flashbacks of memories just before death, which we will discuss below)*. Since all pure memories are the foundation of duration, these are what we need in order to speak of time. The memory-image *only exists when this pure past intersects with the plane of the present*. But insofar as memory does in fact play a role in recognition, there is a sense in which the past, understood as pure memory, is actualized, or made present. This way of describing the present calls forth various questions.

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<sup>4</sup> BERGSON, Henri. *Pensée et mouvant*. Paris: Quadrige PUF, 1919, p. 176.

<sup>5</sup> BERGSON, *Matière et mémoire*, p. 31.

First, there is the question of whether the present involved in pure perception and recognition are *ultimately real for Bergson*. To repeat, pure perception is the plane of the present *de jure*. When memory enters into this plane, the memory is essentially *made present* as a memory-image. This, however, does not amount to a final solution to the mind-body problem. As will be discussed below, the mind-body problem is solved in *Matter and Memory*, Chapter 4, where Bergson discusses the *contraction and relaxation of duration itself*. This is done by assigning mind (memory) to the side of contracted duration and assigning matter (space) to the side of relaxed duration. Here, Bergson explains that the “subjective” quality of redness arises through the contraction of light of a particular frequency, which, when relaxed, becomes an immense number that can be counted spatially<sup>6</sup>. Bergson, who emphasizes the dualistic principle of space and time and always gives priority to the latter over the former, suggests, at the end, a principled way of reducing the former to the latter, in terms of “differences in the rhythm of duration”<sup>7</sup>. This is a solution to the mind-body problem based solely on the side of *memory and the past*, that is, the side of duration. There is a possibility that this very argument could lead to the idea of an “original present,” which Bergson never dealt with. We will not pursue this point here, however, not only because Bergson never addressed such a possibility, but also because delving into this topic would require discussion of various other issues. Here I want to focus on the “present of perception” that is at issue in Chapter 1 of *Matter and Memory*, and also subsequently in Chapter 2, where it is related to recognition, and furthermore, understanding what exactly is the mind-body problem that is supposedly solved by the introduction of the notion of the image in Chapter 2.

The second question that arises is: *how is the past related to perception, and how does the past come to exist?* As was mentioned above, what is important for Bergson is duration, which is related to pure memory; recall that “consciousness means, before everything else, memory.” But insofar as the claim that “only the past exists” means, in fact, not that the past is something static, like the world of Platonic Ideas, but that the past grows as “a snowball on the snow,” where and how does the past exist and grow? Shouldn’t it exist and grow in the present after all? This is a question that is not addressed in *Matter and Memory*.

## **2. Various attitudes of questioning the present**

Let’s consider these problems in turn. First, we have to keep in mind that on Bergson’s theory of duration, pure perception is clearly a *fictional*

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 230-31.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 278.

entity that only exists *de jure*. Because it is a *cross-section* of duration, its existence presupposes the existence of duration. Nonetheless, we do in fact perceive things. Even if it is only a cross-section, isn't the present that we call "perception" necessary for duration after all?

There's probably more than one way of thinking about this. One could argue that the pure perception of *Matter and Memory*, Chapter 1 is *only the methodological entry-point* for dealing with the mind-body problem and is *not important in itself*. *On the other hand, both perception and turning-into-an-image take place in the plane of the present*. The vertex S of the famous inverted cone of memory is depicted as intersecting with the plane P which forms memory and pure perception<sup>8</sup>. This is not insignificant.

However, since the conical pure memory and the *point of intersection itself* on the plane of pure perception have a "difference in kind," this present, considered in itself, is an obscure point. This is the point that Deleuze, in *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, adapting Bergson's figure of the circuit<sup>9</sup>, will later describe as constituting the point of "indiscernibility" (*indiscernabilité*) between the actual/present and the virtual/past<sup>10</sup>. A certain kind of "leap" is necessary for pure memory to become an image in the present. This turning-into-an-image therefore *takes place in a field that is neither present nor past, but simultaneously both*. We should keep in mind that when Deleuze considers the important time as *crystal-image* in *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, what is at stake is this very field where the present comes into relation with the past itself<sup>11</sup>.

Returning to Bergson, if the present is a cross-section, and if the body and brain are cross-sections as well, how does memory, which is described as the past growing as a "snowball on the snow," arise?

Let's begin by considering the question of where memory exists. First, in *Matter and Memory*, Bergson rejects as a misunderstanding of the mind-body problem (mind-brain problem) the idea that memory resides in the brain. The brain is nothing more than an image on the plane of the present. Perception, which is the result of the brain's actions and reactions, is a mere cross-section of memory on the *de jure* plane of the present. Bergson argues that the brain is a part of memory, and memory itself is "conserved as it is," as memory. While this might seem outlandish, it is indeed a consequence of his theory.

Here, Bergson makes a distinction between "memory" (*souvenir, mémoire*) and "past" (*passé*), but the way he uses this terminology is ambiguous.

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 169, Fig. 1.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 115, Fig. 2.

<sup>10</sup> DELEUZE, Gilles. *Cinema 2: Image-temps*. Paris: Édition de Minuit, 1985, p. 95.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 109.

Normally, we would think that memory is dependent on a particular person, while the past demands an objectivity that transcends individual persons. Bergson, however, claims that “consciousness means, before everything else, memory,” and goes on to link memory directly with the past. How, then, should we distinguish the past and memory?

What is important here again is the indiscernible cone and its intersection with the plane of the present. If, for Bergson, the past is conserved “as it is” and our brain and nervous system are merely cross-sections of this past in the present, then the pure past — just like the “deep ego” in the *Essay* — must be something that encompasses and transcends the “I”, which is generally regarded as having personhood. It is rather *because this past is inevitably related to perception* that it is regarded as memory. It is because memory is made present — turned into an image — in the “point of indiscernibility” of the present that a particular past becomes a past endowed with personhood (that is, in concrete terms, it becomes linked with the brain and nervous system).

From this standpoint, this intersection between the indiscernible plane of the present and the pure past, or in other words, the supposition of a fictional present, *is not merely a de jure issue of pure perception or methodological entry-point for solving the mind-body problem. Rather, it is necessary for distinguishing the past and present. But how should we conceive of the stage of indiscernibility required for this, that is, the “leap” from the past to the present?*

Keeping this point in mind, let’s move on next to “Memory of the Present and False Recognition” in *Mind-energy* and consider how the past comes into being, and how this is related to the point of indiscernibility.

### **3. The splitting of time called *déjà vu* and memory in pre-death flashbacks**

The essay “Memory of the Present and False Recognition” is the only text where Bergson deals with the present itself *in a non-negative way*. Here he explicitly addresses the questions of what the present is, and how the past comes into being.

Bergson, who emphasizes the virtual reality of the past, never gives an empiricist account of the past, e.g. that the past is an attenuated present, or that what was initially present becomes past. As I have already mentioned, the present is only a cross-section of the past, so the past always has priority over the present. Therefore, even though Bergson speaks of the past as growing as a “snowball on the snow,” he never speaks of what was initially present becoming past. How, then, does the past come into being?

In order to reconsider this question, Bergson examines cases of abnormal psychic phenomena under the heading of “memory of the present,” and speaks of the *simultaneous and out-of-equilibrium occurrence of the present and past*<sup>12</sup>. He explains this as follows.

Consider the experience of *déjà vu*, where one feels that one has already experienced in the past something that one is experiencing for the first time. An example is when we are walking in the woods, and we fall into the illusion that we are coming back to the same location over and over again, even though these are all different locations. Bergson explains that this occurs when the mind ceases to function due to fatigue and enfeeblement, and there is no longer any integration into the simultaneously arising past, causing us to confuse present perceptions with recollections of memory. Thus, even though we are perceiving something in the present, we feel as though it were in the past. Bergson argues that such cases give us insight into what is happening in normal situations.

His account is as follows. It is not the case that the present becomes past. In experience, the present time and past memories come into being through a simultaneous bifurcation, like opposing mirrors. In the phenomenon of *déjà vu*, the bifurcation into the past is immediately experienced as taking place in the present, due to an enfeeblement of the functions of consciousness. In other words, in our normal lives, the present is something that immediately disappears. The memory that arises there is altogether conserved as the pure past. However, because this ceases to function in pathological cases, we see “memories of the present,” which are normally not supposed to appear in perception.

Furthermore, in “‘Phantasms of the Living’ and Psychical Research,” also included in the same book, Bergson takes up the case where a person sees their entire life flash back before their eyes just before they die. In states of extreme enfeeblement, human consciousness ceases to function properly, and is no longer directed to present perceptions (the actions and reactions of the plane of pure perception become almost meaningless). When this happens, pure memories which are normally in no need of being turned into images flood into perception, leading us to see our entire life flash back before our eyes in a single instant. This is an abnormal experience where one sees pure memories which are not even memory-images<sup>13</sup>.

Let’s leave aside here the issue of whether Bergson’s account of the two cases mentioned above are correct explanations of the pathological phenomena. In either case, these phenomena give us a good indication of how we normally conceive of the cross-section of the present, and how the past

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<sup>12</sup> BERGSON, *Énergie spirituelle*, p. 136.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 77.

comes into being and exists. The question of how pure memory grows as a “snowball on the snow” can be answered by examining how the present and past become confused as a “memory of the present” in the abnormal state of *déjà vu*. The phenomenon of pre-death flashbacks indicates that when the indiscernible present ceases to function, the consciousness is immediately covered with the entirety of the past, causing the very point of indiscernibility to manifest itself.

What we should note here is the ambiguous position of the present in these two cases. That is, Bergson affirms, and requires, that in *normal states* the consciousness is directed towards the present. This means that the formation of perception centered on the brain and nervous system, which takes place on the plane of pure perception discussed in *Matter and Memory*, Chapter 1, and what Bergson emphasizes in Chapter 2 as the role played by the memory-image in recognition, *normally* proceed without any problems.

Yet it becomes clear that, when human life falls into extreme states, and the intersection that ties together the present and past ceases to function effectively, *the present is pulled into the past*. As for the case of *déjà vu*, the figure that Deleuze uses in *Cinema* to illustrate Bergson’s ideas is suggestive. Here, *the present and past arise simultaneously and bifurcate as in opposing mirrors. But the line of the present is indicated by a point, representing the fact that it is a plane reflected in the opposing mirrors; it can have nothing more than a faintly disappearing existence*<sup>14</sup>. Even in the present, it is the past that is regarded as having true reality.

Let’s recap our points so far, and conclude by summarizing how, ultimately, Bergson conceives of the present.

### ***Conclusion: What is the present for Bergson?***

We can say that Bergson depicts the present in three, fundamentally overlapping ways.

First, there is the Bergson focused on principles, who emphasizes the durational flow of time and thinks about heterogeneous continuity. From this perspective, the present can only be a kind of spatial cross-section of duration. What is always of supreme importance is the virtually existing past, so the present in this case is only a fragment of duration. *The present, described as pure perception or recognition, only has existence de jure.*

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<sup>14</sup> DELEUZE, *Cinema 2: Image-temps*, p. 109, note 22. Fig. 3.

The present, conceived in this way, is still at a stage prior to solving the mind-body problem, which is the subject of *Matter and Memory*.

Next, there is the Bergson who maintains that this present, notwithstanding what was said above, constitutes an indiscernible point of intersection with the past, in the sense that it is in the present that perceptions take place in which we recognize the pure past. It is true that the present itself is not given emphasis here. Yet, Bergson holds that while there is a difference between the present and past, *there has to be a relation between the two; there has to be some ineffable point of intersection between the two*. This point of intersection, in which one could say that the present and past are undifferentiated, is for Bergson an indiscernible point that encompasses the “leap” between the two. This implies that in one respect, this point is substantially necessary for the past and memory to exist. In this sense, *the plane of the present is necessary*.

Finally, there is the Bergson who describes the present and past as arising simultaneously as in opposing mirrors, in phenomena like *déjà vu*. *It is here that Bergson first characterizes the present as being like a “shadow of the reality called the past,” even if the present here is conceived in its fleeting nature*. (Contrary to common understanding, and contrary to what Bergson himself says — that the past is a shadow<sup>15</sup> — in terms of content, it is rather the present which is the shadow). This simultaneous and out-of-equilibrium emergence of the present and past through splitting can itself be regarded as a concrete manifestation of the point of indiscernibility. Paradoxically, the psychical phenomenon of the pre-death flashback of memories, along with *déjà vu*, throws light on this situation.

The present in this last paragraph is neither merely an entity *de jure*, nor fictional. It is rather like a kind of bedrock, a structure that supports that “fictional” nature of pure perception by, on the one hand, emerging via bifurcation simultaneously with the past, and on the other, by disappearing through its own evanescent nature. Here, the present, more than illustrating the nature of perception, is given a metaphysical role in its relation to the past.

To repeat, this is *a peculiar metaphysics which, in an inversion of common-sense (and Bergson’s own claims in some passages), holds that the present is a “shadow” of the past*. Ideally, this would be a good place to discuss the connection with Jacques Derrida, who criticizes the present (to be present), and Deleuze, who, following Bergson, develops a unique philosophy of time based on the idea of *eternal recurrence*. Deleuze’s ideas on time, in particular, are developed in his late book *Cinema* through a systematic

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<sup>15</sup> BERGSON, *Énergie spirituelle*, p. 130.

reworking of Bergson's philosophy. These discussions should be helpful in re-conceiving Bergson's claims. If we regard the *contraction of duration*, which we briefly mentioned in this essay but did not delve into deeply, as an "original present" — a notion that Bergson does discuss — we begin to see connections not only with Deleuze's philosophy of time based on eternal recurrence, but also the images of time that Deleuze highlights in terms of his notion of the *crystal image*.

In this essay we saw, first, that Bergson describes the present in various ways, and second, that the present, which initially only had existence *de jure*, is later posited as a shadow of the past, the side of two mutually reflecting mirrors that disappears, and furthermore, that the present in this case is necessary, even if only has an instantaneous and fleeting existence. My hope is that these observations will be of some help in thinking about the present along Bergsonian lines in contemporary philosophy, and in relation to Deleuze in particular.

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