

Bergson, "The Perception of Change." Lecture 2.  
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FIRST POINT: *Change is indivisible.* We unwittingly interpose artificial schemas (habits of thinking and perceiving that have become natural) between reality and us. If we succeed in returning to the direct perception of change / motion we will see that all change / movement is absolutely indivisible.

We begin with movement as change of a thing's location in space. We think that we *could* stop at any point. But then we'd have two movements, with an interval. We only imagine that the movement itself is divisible, like the space that it has traversed, once it's complete. We need immobility, as it's the condition for action. But in reality, there's no immobility, there's just synchronized motion. But this synchronicity is enough for us to act. In imagining that reality is immobility, we have projected our practical needs onto our idea of reality. Zeno's paradoxes depend upon confusing indivisible movement with the space traversed by the completed movement. Each of Achilles's steps is indivisible, and the motion is a series of steps. But we tend to think of motion as a series of positions resulting from infinite divisibility of space.

Indivisibility holds not just for motion, but for all change. Again, all change is indivisible, but we treat it as a series of states (just as we treat motion as a series of positions). But all we really have is synchronized changes. For instance, the oscillations of a thing's color and the variation in our constantly changing self can resonate together enough for our perception. This confusing of synchronized change with immobility is "favorable for action but fatal for speculation."

SECOND POINT: *Change is absolute and radical: it has no support.* We are misled by sight, which is only the avant-garde for touch: it prepares us for action. But if we switch to hearing a melody, we have a better sense of indivisible change, although we still do have a tendency to hear a series of notes. This is due either to our thinking of the discontinuous series of efforts needed to sing the melody, or because we see the notes on the conductor's script. But if we come back to sight and think about what science teaches us, we see how matter is dissolved into action, how there are no things that move, but only changes in the rhythms of motion.

Nowhere do we see this "substantiality of change" better than in our inner life. We are misled by thinking of a series of invariable states with an unchanging ego for support, like actors passing over a stage. But there is no underlying thing-ego that changes. All we are is a melody; this is our duration (interfused heterogeneous continuous change), although we are led by practical interest to spatialize this time.

THIRD POINT: *the present varies according to attention to life.* We usually think of the present as a point on a line, as an instant or now-point; but you can't make time out of a series of present instants any more than you can make a line out of a series of points. Instead, the present is variable, but once we lose our interest, it falls back into the past. If we had a sufficiently powerful attention, we could hold all our past history to us in an enduring present, as in a melody. We see thus that the past preserves itself automatically, and comes rushing back in involuntary memories when attention is no longer directed to the action necessary to preserve life. From the perspective of our duration, what we need to explain is forgetting rather than memory. This explanation is found in our brain structure, which is turned to the future and away

from those past moments which are not directly relevant to present action; the brain “completes” present experience by selecting simplifications of our past (these are “memories”). B mentions here his critique in MM of the picture theory of memory; the bottom line is that the brain selects, diminishes, simplifies, and uses the past, but does not preserve it. The past is preserved of its own accord in the indivisible change that is duration.

We can dispense with a number of philosophical enigmas and false problems by a focus on duration. For instance, the enigma of the relation of substance and change dissolves when we see the substantiality of change: radical instability and absolute immutability are only abstract external views of real duration. We can also do away with the problem of free will if we see the radical creativity and novelty of concrete duration.

But even more importantly, we will find a practical change in ourselves when we relate to the concrete, real duration that we are. Art changes our perception, but at the surface. Philosophy changes things in depth: we see the dynamism of reality, and we come to contact the life that we are and that carries us along.

Questions for discussion:

1. If our practical needs push us toward thinking of motion as a series of positions (or change as a series of states) how do we reverse this tendency and get in touch with indivisible change? Does Bergson have a method for this reversal, or does he just exhort us to somehow overcome this natural tendency?
2. How does he know that reality is change? What role does science play in this knowledge?
3. Why do we tend to spatialize time?
4. What is the relation of memory and forgetting? The past and the present?
5. What is the relation of art and philosophy?