

THE PHILOSOPHY OF HENRY BERGSON AND SYNDICALISM

The Forthcoming Lectures of the Noted French Professor at Columbia Make of Especial Interest This Comparison of His Theories with Those of Such Writers as George Sorel.

No recent force in the world of thought has made so profound an impression as Henry Bergson, Professor of Philosophy at the College de France. His lectures here as visiting French professor at Columbia University, beginning next week, will be of unusual importance, and make the following article of especial interest.

By Louis Levine, Ph. D.

THE Frenchman's proud assurance that France leads in the intellectual and social progress of the world would seem more or less pardonable at the present time. Probably not since the times of Rousseau and of the Encyclopedists did Europe and America take such deep interest in the philosophical thought of France, and, surely, not since the days of 1848 did French social ideas and ideals sway men and women of other countries to the extent they do now.

This recent rise of French influence is closely bound up with two movements entirely distinct in character and origin. One is purely philosophical, and originated in the mysterious depths of the heart and brain of one man—Prof. Henry Bergson. The other is both practical and theoretical, destructive and constructive, and originated in many hearts and many brains, aspiring and working in common. Its name—syndicalism—bears no etymological relation to any one individual. It tersely expresses the idea of the foundation of this movement—the supreme social value of the producing group.

Though independent in origin, both movements developed approximately during the same period of time. Prof. Bergson's idea was first put forth in 1888 in "Time and Free Will," and developed in 1896 in "Matter and Memory," and in "Creative Evolution" in 1907. The syndicalist ideas found their first more or less definite expression in 1895, when the General Confederation of Labor was founded, and grew steadily with the growth of that organization after 1900. And both movements of thought began to stir public opinion about the same time—in the interval between 1906 and 1908.

Rising simultaneously the two currents of thought caught a group of writers who had always stood midway between the realm of philosophy and the world of social struggles trying to unite both in one large synthesis. These writers—of whom George Sorel is the most brilliant and best known—were in full sympathy with the revolutionary programme of the syndicalist workers who challenged and attacked the Government fought the employers, defied the leadership of the Socialists, and who boldly declared their intention to abolish existing social relations and to rebuild society according to their own ideas of social justice and social expediency. On the other hand these writers were deeply impressed by the profound and sparkling ideas of the Bergsonian metaphysics, which threw the gamut to the traditional philosophy of the day. Caught and carried on by both streams these writers conceived the idea of combining the newest social movement with the newest philosophy of the day and advanced the idea of this synthesis in a series of brilliant sociological studies, which are a most interesting contribution to contemporary thought.

As a result of these writings the idea has spread abroad that there is a logical and inevitable connection between the philosophy of Prof. Bergson and the ideas of syndicalism. Many speak and write as if syndicalism were the sociological application of Bergsonian philosophy and Prof. Bergson's metaphysics the theoretical basis of the syndicalist movement. The idea has been so often put forth in books and articles by people who were supposed to know both that it has become firmly lodged in the minds of those interested in the subject.

Should there be such a logical and inevitable connection between Bergsonian philosophy and syndicalism it would certainly be a fact of the greatest significance. It would mean that Bergsonian philosophy is revolutionary through and through and that its general ideas lead to the most extreme conclusions in sociology and ethics. It would further mean that syndicalism could be deduced from a philosophical theory and that its destinies depended on the theoretical validity of a system of metaphysics. Furthermore, it would mean that at different points of life the same general truths were arrived at independently, and if this were true, Bergsonian philosophy would certainly strengthen the position of the syndicalists, and syndicalism would serve as the sociological confirmation of the Bergsonian method.

The importance of these questions for the philosophical and social thought of our day sufficiently justifies the attempt to determine the relationship of the two trends of thought. As the idea of this relationship rests on the particular interpretation of Bergson's philosophy by such syndicalist writers as George Sorel, the examination of the relationship of the two systems of thought has to proceed in a somewhat circuitous manner. It is necessary, first, to grasp the essential ideas of Prof. Bergson's philosophy; secondly, to familiarize one's self with the application made of them by the syndicalist writers mentioned above, and, thirdly, to understand the character of the syndicalist movement as it expresses itself in political and economic life. Then only may the question of their relationship be approached. This method will here be followed as thoroughly as the limitations of space will permit.

Prof. Bergson's ideas may be grouped about three points: His theory of intellect and intuition, his idea of duration and creative evolution, and his conception of free will and personality. In developing and combining these three central lines of thought in an original manner, Prof. Bergson achieved the synthesis which stamps his philosophy as unique.

In common with evolutionary psychology, Prof. Bergson emphasizes the relative and pragmatic or utilitarian

See G. Sorel: "Les Illusions du Progrès"; "Essai Reflexions sur la Violence"; Edouard Berth: "Les Nouveaux Aspects du Socialisme"; Hubert Lagardelle: "Les Socialismes

function of the intellect. The latter has arisen in the course of evolution mainly as a means of adaptation to material conditions and has remained throughout an instrument for dealing with matter and its properties. It achieves its greatest triumph in mathematical science because the latter deals with matter in its most general aspects. But if this is the origin and nature of intellect, the latter is evidently but one phase of the evolutionary process of life and remains outside of and foreign to the other phases of life. It is entirely within its sphere of jurisdiction when it summons matter for examination, and it actually touches the absolute nature of matter when it pronounces judgment upon the latter. But it can do no more than that. The whole of the life-process eludes it, and it is absolutely illogical and useless to try to grasp the nature and meaning of life and of evolution with the aid of an instrument which has been designed for more limited use.

This view of the intellect destroys the pretension of science to explain everything and to give us a comprehensive theory of the universe. The limits of science are fixed by the limitations of the instrument which it uses. There is only one way for penetrating beyond the narrow limits, and that is to make use of another power which is within us and which is in closer kinship with life itself. That power is intuition.

The intuitive method, in the description of Prof. Bergson, is rather complicated. It does not exclude reasoning entirely. On the contrary, it gets its first impulse from reason eagerly and everlastingly seeking an answer to the eternal problems. But being led by ideas it asserts itself only when it merges into a sympathetic and almost organic contact with the things sought and gets the direct feeling of the pulsation and flow of the life-process. It then emerges again to the surface of reason and tries to crystallize in words and ideas the things which it saw and felt directly.

The intuitive method of Bergson throws the doors wide open to mysticism and to introspective vagaries. As it leaves room for other truths than those won by the hard labors of science it is welcome to religious thinkers who have not been slow to recognize the value of Bergson's philosophy for their point of view. Prof. Bergson, however, would seem to be anxious to guard his method from misuse, and he has carefully pointed out how important it is for intuition to be guided by ideas. The clearer and more numerous the latter the more helpful they are to intuition.

Abandoning himself to intuition and plunging into the depths of his inner being, Prof. Bergson discovers within himself a streamlike flow of consciousness in which there is no interruption, no parts or breaks, but a continuous and unceasing interpenetration of past and present. He finds that he endures, that every moment of life is a moment lived through full of experiential content and not a mere point in a void and abstract time. Duration is the essence of the life-process. It is a continuous accumulation of experiences and a ceaseless creation of new forms and contents. The fullness and richness of life when it is lived—not reflected on—is the result of this accumulation of concrete experiences, and the latter are inexhaustible because they are created ever anew.

Human consciousness, however, is but one phase of life. In the universe at large and in the world of organic life there is the same continual creation of new forms and contents. Evolution is not integration and differentiation of elements given at the outset—as Spencer would have it—it is the life-process of a conscious force endowed



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with creative possibilities which are continuously exercised. It is this creative force which is the source of the variety of the forms of life. It is, in fact, the whole of life, for matter is nothing but the interruption of its life process.

The full meaning of creative evolution is grasped when contrasted with the mechanistic idea of the universe at the basis of science. Mechanism rejects creation at any point of the evolutionary process. Every new development is but a rearrangement and a recombination of pre-existing elements. Nothing could be more radically opposed to this conception than the idea of creative evolution. The latter comes to strengthen the vitalistic tendencies in modern biology and the spiritualistic ideas in contemporary metaphysics.

There is a breath to the idea of creative evolution which makes for spiritual expansion and joyful endeavor. Wide vistas are opened up, because creative evolution has no particular ends to realize, no set form to materialize. "A plan," says Prof. Bergson, "is a term assigned to a labor; it closes the future whose forms it indicates. Before the evolution of life, on the contrary, the portals of the future remain wide open. It is a creation that goes on forever in virtue of an initial movement." Having no particular end in view, the creative process is left free to its own resources and possibilities. The greatest and grandest creations are possible and the world may become what it can make of itself.

This is no less true of personality. "The route we pursue in time," says Prof. Bergson, "is strewn with the remains of all that we began to be, of all that we might have been." We are what we make ourselves to be, and our actions determine our character. There is creation of personality just as there is creative evolution in the universe. But the evolution of our true self is hampered by our social and individual habits, which hide ourselves from ourselves. To feel our true selves we must break through the outer shell, abandon ourselves to the enormous volume of our accumulated consciousness, arouse the dormant possibilities that are within us, and act in accordance with the dictates of that deeper

consciousness. On the rare occasions when we do so we experience the freedom of will, for at such moments our acts transcend the limits of reasoned motives, and become creative acts in the full meaning of the term. From this outline of Bergsonian philosophy one may see that it tends to satisfy the metaphysical and mystical cravings of the individual rather than his practical and ethical demands. Prof. Bergson's intuition is focused upon the past, it is intent upon getting into direct touch with the life-process, it is moved by the desire to know and to contemplate. The application of these ideas to sociology and ethics is hardly touched upon by Prof. Bergson.

In the absence of any definite ethical and social theory of Prof. Bergson himself there was nothing to hinder a syndicalist interpretation of his ideas. The manner in which the syndicalist thinkers adopted, and adapted Prof. Bergson's ideas was determined by concrete conditions in the social world. Syndicalism arose partly as a protest against so-called "scientific" or Marxian socialism. The "scientific" Social-

ists taught the workers that Socialism was inevitable, and that the belief in its coming was based on the "scientific" analysis of economic evolution. "Reverential awe to science and to what was given out as its irrefutable truths was never and howsoever so cultivated as in the ranks of the 'scientific' Socialists. The syndicalists, on the contrary, felt that this conception held them back from daring and doing. They rejected it, and they could find no better argument for doing so than Prof. Bergson's theory of the nature and limitations of the intellect and of science.

They accepted this theory in full. Applying it to society, the syndicalists began to emphasize the complexity and mysterious nature of social life, contrasting with it the simplicity and limitations of the scientific procedure. They pointed in particular to the complexities of production, and claimed that no analysis could lay bare the profound mysteries of the productive process which is the basis of social life. Production goes on and develops in the same mysterious way as life in the organic world, and as Socialism bears primarily and essentially on production it must remain a mystery in its most characteristic aspects.

Thus, the scientific basis of Socialism was demolished. It was no longer the inevitable future of social evolution as foreseen by the keen vision of the sociologist. What, then, was it, and whence the belief that it would come?

To these questions the answer again was found in the syndicalist movement. The syndicalist workers—in opposition to the "scientific" Socialists—had declared enthusiastically for the general strike. The latter was to them the coming hour of triumph, the supreme act of their class-will, which would send existing society tumbling into the abyss of the irrevocable past and which would enthroned the workers as the owners of the social wealth and as the managers of all socialized industries. Indeed, it was the idea of the general strike as the means of revolutionizing social relations which gave coherence to the syndicalist movement.

Seizing upon this idea the syndicalist philosophers readily found a new basis for Socialism by viewing it in the light of Bergsonian philosophy. The idea of the general strike—says George Sorel, the "metaphysician" of syndicalism—is a synthetic image of battles which the workers expect to fight in the future against the employers, and in which they hope to crush their enemies. It is an image of future actions, a "social myth" unconsciously created by the working-class as a means of keeping up their faith in their future emancipation.

As a "social myth" it is not an exceptional phenomenon in history. On the contrary, history has seen the rise of "social myths" all along. When the primitive Christians thought of the final battle which was to come between the Lord and Satan, when the Protestants thought of the real battles by which they would crush the Catholics in all countries of Europe, when the people of the French Revolution were moved by the idea of taking up the fight against all the "reactionary" nations of Europe—they were creating such "social myths"—images of their future battles and of their future triumphs. These myths were mysterious creations expressing the hopes and the expectations of historic groups who longed for deliverance from the misery in which they lived: in this lay their tremendous power to move masses of men to passionate struggle and to heroic deeds.

The "social myth" is the form in which the creative consciousness finds expression in the social world. In the case of the working class the general strike is the result of their creative consciousness which is stimulating them to seek and to fight for new forms of life. The myth once formed

becomes a force stirring the very depths of the group consciousness. That is why under the influence of the general strike idea the organized workmen feel even more assured than before that socialism—the ownership of the world by the producers—must come. Its coming is guaranteed by the irresistible faith of the workers and by their incessant creative efforts on behalf of their faith.

Creative evolution in the social world—as in the organic world—advances through struggle and strife. In the organic world the conscious creative force has to overcome the obstacles of "brute" matter. In the social world the creation of new forms of life is hampered by existing institutions and by vested rights. The rising classes striving to create a new society have, therefore, to keep on a constant warfare against the ruling classes until they overcome the obstacles. No matter how harsh and unjust their class-struggle may appear at times, it is the creative force of evolution—the sole factor of a new and better society in the future.

The class struggle carried on by organized workers through strikes, boycotts, manifestations, and the like, is a severe strain upon the individual syndicalists who take an active or a leading part in it. The syndicalists are condemned and persecuted, they have to face hardship and privation. To be ready for suffering and self-sacrifice the syndicalists must feel that—as Bergson expresses it—"the living being is, above all, a thoroughfare, and that the essence of life is the movement by which life is transmitted."

The syndicalists must keep before their mental vision the grand future which their class is creating and find heroic satisfaction in the consciousness that they are working for it. They must overcome the petty ambitions of life and arouse within themselves the deeper motives and aspirations that are in them. In doing so they transcend the limits of reasoned motives and become creative and free personalities in the Bergsonian sense of the term.

Such is the fabric of thought in which Bergsonian metaphysics has been woven into syndicalist ideas and on which is based the entire idea of the connection of the two. Can it stand close scrutiny?

Even from the brief outline presented above it is clear that the syndicalist writers have proceeded in a rather superficial manner. They have simply made use of Bergsonian terms to describe and analyze the syndicalist ideas which had already been formulated by the organized French workmen. They have neither tried to work forward from the general Bergsonian ideas to syndicalist conclusions nor backward from concrete syndicalist practices to general Bergsonian ideas. In other words, their work has been mainly analytical and they have failed to present a synthesis which would in any logical way connect Prof. Bergson's philosophy with syndicalism.

In fact this would hardly seem possible. Undoubtedly Prof. Bergson's philosophy has a well-marked revolutionary tendency. It views life as a ceaseless effort toward new forms, and it boldly proclaims its faith in the possibilities of the creative process. But it views the creative process as a stream carried forward by the pressure of an original impulse (élan) and accumulating on its onward march all its experiences and elaborations. There is, in Prof. Bergson's view, a solidarity between past and present and a total incorporation of the past in the present. This idea, when applied to social life, would seem to be but little in harmony with the fundamental syndicalist ideas of class struggle and social revolution which—if anything—mean a break between the past and future and a total destruction of the culture of the past by the civilization of rising classes.

Besides, it would seem that the philosophy of Prof. Bergson has a fundamental individualistic character. To Prof. Bergson the social world is essentially the result of the rational activities of man, the product of man's adaptation to material conditions. As such, society makes no demands on the true self of the individual, and is anxious, on the contrary, to compress the individual into a fixed type obedient to habits and general rules. The social world would, therefore, seem to be an obstacle to be overcome by the creative process, the latter finding its vehicle in the individual revolting against social constraint.

On the other hand, the syndicalist movement—represented by the organized workers—has but little use for metaphysical ideas, and is animated by sentiments foreign to any one outside of the movement. To the hard-working men and women who are engaged in the rude struggles of the day, abstruse metaphysics and subtle dialectics are but the frivolous play of idle minds in which they take no interest. Their programme is determined by conditions of life, their ideals by their ideas of human dignity and human solidarity. They fight not because they want to, but because they have to; but, having been driven into the struggle, they are determined to keep it up until they win, no matter what becomes of any and all metaphysical ideas.

It is preposterous, therefore, to speak of any inherent connection between Bergsonian philosophy and syndicalism. The works of George Sorel are undoubtedly interesting and suggestive, but they are not representative of the syndicalist spirit as manifested in real life. Besides, even if they were, they fall in the attempt to construct a real synthesis. All that George Sorel and his associates have accomplished was to call attention to interesting points of contact between Bergsonian philosophy and syndicalism. But these points are of comparatively less significance and far between along the divergent lines which separate the metaphysical elaborations of the Professor of the Collège de France from the concrete and practical programmes of the workers of the General Confederation of Labor.