

A Study of the Bergsonian Notion of <Sensibility>

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Although rarely pointed out, Henri Bergson (1859-1941), a French philosopher, in his later years argues on <sensibility> from his particular point of view. I aim to examine his notion of <sensibility>. In recent years among us aestheticians all over the world, there has been renewal of interest in the concept of <sensibility> from various perspectives. I hope to make a little contribution to this “aesthetic turn,” so to speak.

When we compare *Technical and Critical Vocabulary of the Philosophy*, a French encyclopedia published in 1926, with *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* (1932), where Bergson discusses <sensibility>, we see that Bergson has his conception in common with his contemporaries to some extent, but that on the other hand he is outstanding especially for his paying attention to the <supra-intellectual> component of <sensibility>, which is characterized by activity and unity, in contrast to the <infra-intellectual> component, which is characterized by passivity and multiplicity.

In my opinion, it is as a result of his confrontation with Kantianism that Bergson has come to his own notion of <sensibility>, the notion regarded as exactly opposite to Kant’s one, which is characterized by passivity and multiplicity; for, in *Creative Evolution* (1907), Bergson distinguishes two kinds of intuitions, and describes the one as <supra-intellectual> while the other one, which he considers to be Kantian, is called <infra-intellectual>.

As has been mentioned, on the one hand based on the philosophical atmosphere in the late 19th- and early 20th- century France, and on the other hand fighting with Kantianism, Bergson comes to a unique discussion concerning <sensibility>, probably unique even from a modern standpoint especially in that he pays attention to the active component of <sensibility>.

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Introduction

Although rarely pointed out, Henri Bergson (1859-1941), a French philosopher, in his later years argues on <sensibility> from his particular point of view. I aim to examine his notion of <sensibility>.

Needless to say, though, Bergson has his conception in common with his contemporaries to some extent. So in the first place we will survey the standard conception of <sensibility> in the late 19th- and early 20th- century France. And after that we will look into *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* (1932), where Bergson discusses <sensibility>. By doing so, we will bring his particularity to light.

In recent years among us aestheticians all over the world, there has been renewal of interest in the concept of <sensibility> from various perspectives. I hope to make a little contribution to this “aesthetic turn,” so to speak.

1. <Sensibility> in *Technical and Critical Vocabulary of the Philosophy*

As mentioned above, first of all we take a glance at the standard conception of <sensibility> in those days.

For reason of space, we focus our attention exclusively on a French encyclopedia, *Technical and Critical Vocabulary of the Philosophy*. This encyclopedia was first published in 1926, based on the long-term discussion (to be exact, from 1902 to 1923) among members of the French Society of Philosophy, including Bergson himself. So consulting this encyclopedia, we can grasp the collective opinion of the late 19th- and early 20th- century French philosophers.

1-1. <Sensation> and <Sentiment> as Subdivisions of <Sensibility>

In this encyclopedia, the article of <sensibility> reads as follows:

The totality of affective phenomena. Faculty to experience affective states and to produce affective reactions. “1 The Sensibility is our capacity to feel any kind of sentiments and sensations[.]”¹

Quoting a popular manual of philosophy² in those days, they define <sensibility> as a faculty of affectivity, and subdivide it into <sensation> and <sentiment>.

At the same time, indeed, it is also said that “in a little bit larger sense³” <inclination>, <passion>, <pleasure>, <painful annoyance> and <emotion> are included under <sensibility>. But it is no doubt that <sensation> and <sentiment> are thought to be the most important denotations in this encyclopedia.

1-2. Definition of <Sensation> and <Sentiment>

How about <sensation> and <sentiment> themselves?

The article of <sensation> reads as follows:

[T]he raw and immediate state, conditioned by a physiological excitation susceptible to produce a conscious modification[.]⁴

And <sentiment>:

[P]leasures, pains, emotions that have the moral causes [...] and not the immediate organic causes⁵.

¹ André Lalande (éd.), *Vocabulaire technique et critique de la philosophie*, P.U.F., 2002 (1926^{1re}), p. 981.

² Amédée Jacques, Jules Simon, Émile Saisset, *Manuel de philosophie à l'usage des collèges*, Joubert, 1847.

³ Lalande, *op.cit.*, p. 981.

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 976.

⁵ *ibid.*, p. 985.

There is a striking contrast between <sensation> and <sentiment>⁶; the former is considered to be an affective state caused by physical stimuli, while the latter an affective state aroused by any mental cause⁷.

As seen from the above, in *Technical and Critical Vocabulary of the Philosophy*, <sensibility> is defined as a faculty of affectivity, and subdivided mainly into <sensation>, which is reducible to physical stimuli, and <sentiment>, which is produced by mental causes.

2. <Sensibility> in *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*

We turn our eyes to *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, where Bergson discusses “a psychology which accords so extensive and so handsome a place to sensibility⁸.”

2-1. <Sentiment> and <Emotion> as Subdivisions of <Sensibility>

Let us begin by considering the following quotation.

We must distinguish between two kinds of emotion, two varieties of sentiment, [i.e.] two manifestations of sensibility which have this one feature in common, that they are affective states distinct from sensation, and cannot be reduced, like the latter, psychical transposition of a physical stimulus⁹.

Set aside the alleged distinction between “two manifestations of sensibility” for a while (we will return to it later), what is apparent in this passage is that Bergson regards <sensation>, <sentiment> and <emotion> equally as affective states, and nonetheless

⁶ Here <emotion>, <pleasure> and <pain> are regarded as subcategories of <sentiment>. We have already seen that in a little bit larger sense they are equally included under <sensibility> according to this encyclopedia.

⁷ As a matter of fact, when the word “moral” is used in this encyclopedia, they mean “relating to the mind, not to the body or other materials” (*ibid.*, pp. 653-4).

⁸ Henri Bergson, *Œuvres*, André Robinet (éd.), P.U.F., 1991 (1959^{1^{re}}), p. 1012.

⁹ *ibid.*, p. 1011.

that according to him, <sensation> alone, which is considered to be reducible to physical stimuli, has to be excluded from the sphere of <sensibility>.

Thus we see the similarity and the difference between *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* and *Technical and Critical Vocabulary of the Philosophy*: Bergson defines <sensibility> as a faculty of affectivity like the encyclopedia; but unlike the encyclopedia, he shuts out <sensation>, as for the definition of which he keeps step with the encyclopedia, and instead of it he counts <emotion> among major denotations of <sensibility>, again contrary to the encyclopedia.

2-2. Passive and Active Components of <Sensibility>

What does Bergson think about specific differences between the two concepts equally subsumed under <sensibility>, that is, between <sentiment> and <emotion>? As a matter of fact, he is totally careless about this point throughout *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*. Rather, what is important for him is to “distinguish between two kinds of emotion, two varieties of sentiment,” as is said in the passage quoted above.

Then how does one manifestation of <sensibility> differ from the other?

In the first case the emotion is the consequence of an idea, or of a mental picture; the sensible state is indeed the result of an intellectual state which owes nothing to it, which is self-sufficient[.] [...] It is the stirring of sensibility by a representation, as it were, dropped into it. But the other kind of emotion is not produced by a representation which it follows and from which it remains distinct. Rather is it, in relation to the intellectual states which are to supervene, a cause and not an effect; it is pregnant with representations, not one of which is actually formed, but which it draws or might draw from its own substance by an organic development¹⁰.

Bergson distinguishes two highly contrasting groups of affective states which are, though, equally irreducible to physical stimuli unlike <sensation>. According to him, a certain number of sensible states are caused by intellectual states that precede them, such as ideas and representations; in contrast the other sensible states are, as it were, pregnant with unformed ideas or representations, and do cause or can cause them. Bergson calls

¹⁰ *ibid.*, pp. 1011-2.

the former “infra-intellectual” and the latter “supra-intellectual,” in view of “superiority of value,” “priority in time” and “relation between that which generates and that which is generated¹¹.”

It is clear that the <infra-intellectual> corresponds to what is called <sentiment> in *Technical and Critical Vocabulary of the Philosophy*, because in that encyclopedia <sentiment> is similarly thought to be the effect of mental causes. We are now able to see that Bergson is outstanding among his contemporaries especially for his paying attention to the active¹² component of <sensibility> that he calls <supra-intellectual> in contrast to the purely passive component called <infra-intellectual>.

2-3. Unity as Another Distinctive Character of the <Supra-intellectual>

As for the passage quoted above, the following point is as well worthy of note: a certain number of sensible states, which Bergson calls <supra-intellectual>, are said to be pregnant with unformed ideas or representations. It is reasonable to consider that these unformed intellectual states interpenetrate, confused with each other¹³. If it is the case, then we see that the <supra-intellectual> is also characterized by unity, or to be exact, unity that could be developed into multiplicity.

In fact, Bergson himself mentions this kind of unity.

Anyone engaged in writing has been in a position to feel the difference between an intelligence left to itself and that which burns with the fire of an original and unique emotion[.] [...] In the first case the mind coldhammers the materials, combining together ideas long since cast into words and which society supplies in a solid form. In the second, it would seem that solid materials supplied by intelligence first melt and mix[.] [...] It [The mind] no longer starts from a multiplicity of ready-made elements to arrive at a composite unity made up of a new arrangement of

¹¹ *ibid.*, p. 1012.

¹² Inasmuch as it is part of <sensibility>, though, the <supra-intellectual> cannot be purely active. In fact, Bergson elsewhere refers to it as “an impulse, an impetus received from the very depths of things” (*ibid.*, p. 1191). Therefore we should regard it as partly passive and partly active, to be exact.

¹³ As for this point, see Bergson’s article “Intellectual Effort” (1902), especially *ibid.*, p. 940, p. 955.

the old. It has been transported at a bound to something which seems both one and unique, and which will contrive later to express itself, more or less satisfactorily, in concepts both multiple and common, previously provided by language¹⁴.

Bergson says that an intelligence “which burns with the fire of an original and unique emotion” starts from oneness or uniqueness and then descends to multiplicity, instead of departing from multiplicity to arrive at “a new arrangement of the old.” The <emotion> in this passage should be taken as a <supra-intellectual> one, because it is said to precede intelligence and to spur it on. Therefore unity is certainly the second character of the <supra-intellectual>.

As seen from the above, in discussing <sensibility> Bergson is outstanding among his contemporaries for (1) his excluding <sensation> and including <emotion>, and above all for (2) his paying attention, often by using the word <emotion> instead of <sentiment>, to the <supra-intellectual>, which is characterized by activity and unity in contrast to the <infra-intellectual>.

3. Bergsonian *sensibilité* versus Kantian *Sinnlichkeit*

Taking a broader view, Bergson’s notion of <sensibility> can be, as far as his paying attention to the <supra-intellectual> is concerned, regarded as exactly opposite to Kant’s notion, which is characterized by passivity and multiplicity; as a matter of fact, the former in a sense could be taken as the very result of Bergson’s confrontational attitude towards Kantianism.

It is too involved a subject to be treated here in detail, so we have to restrict ourselves to quoting one single passage from *Creative Evolution* (1907).

He [Kant] did not consider, in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, that science became less and less objective, more and more symbolical, to the extent that it went from the physical to the vital, from the vital to the psychical. Experience does not move, to his view, in two different and perhaps opposite ways[.] [...] There is, for him, only one experience, and the intellect covers its whole ground. This is what Kant expresses by saying that all our intuitions are [...] infra-intellectual. [...] But

¹⁴ *ibid.*, pp. 1013-4.

suppose, on the contrary, that science is less and less objective, more and more symbolical, as it goes from the physical to the psychical, passing through the vital; then, as it is indeed necessary to perceive a thing somehow in order to symbolize it, there would be an intuition of the psychical, and more generally of the vital, which the intellect would transpose and translate, no doubt, but which would none the less transcend the intellect. There would be, in other words, a supra-intellectual intuition¹⁵.

Here we notice that Bergson criticizes Kant for not distinguishing “two different and perhaps opposite” kinds of experiences and accordingly deems it necessary to tell two kinds of intuitions apart, and that as for the newly established one he names it <supra-intellectual> while the other one, which he considers to be Kantian, is called <infra-intellectual>.

Thus, it is exactly as a result of his confrontation with Kantianism that Bergson has come to his own notion of <sensibility>, at least as far as his paying attention to the <supra-intellectual> is concerned¹⁶.

Conclusion

As has been mentioned, on the one hand based on the philosophical atmosphere in the late 19th- and early 20th- century France, and on the other fighting with Kantianism, Bergson comes to a unique discussion concerning <sensibility>, probably unique even from a modern standpoint especially in that he pays attention to the active component of <sensibility>.

¹⁵ *ibid.*, pp. 798-9.

¹⁶ As for the reason why Bergson excludes <sensation>, it cannot be discussed here partly for lack of space, and partly for lack of definite information. But in my opinion, it would be possible to account for this point from a similar point of view; Bergson sometimes identifies <sensation> with Kantian *Sinnlichkeit*. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 1278, and Henri Bergson, *Cours III*, Henri Hude (éd.), P.U.F., 1995, p. 149. I think this is why Bergson, who especially pays attention to the <supra-intellectual> component of <sensibility> which is characterized by activity and unity in contrast to Kantian *Sinnlichkeit*, excludes <sensation>.