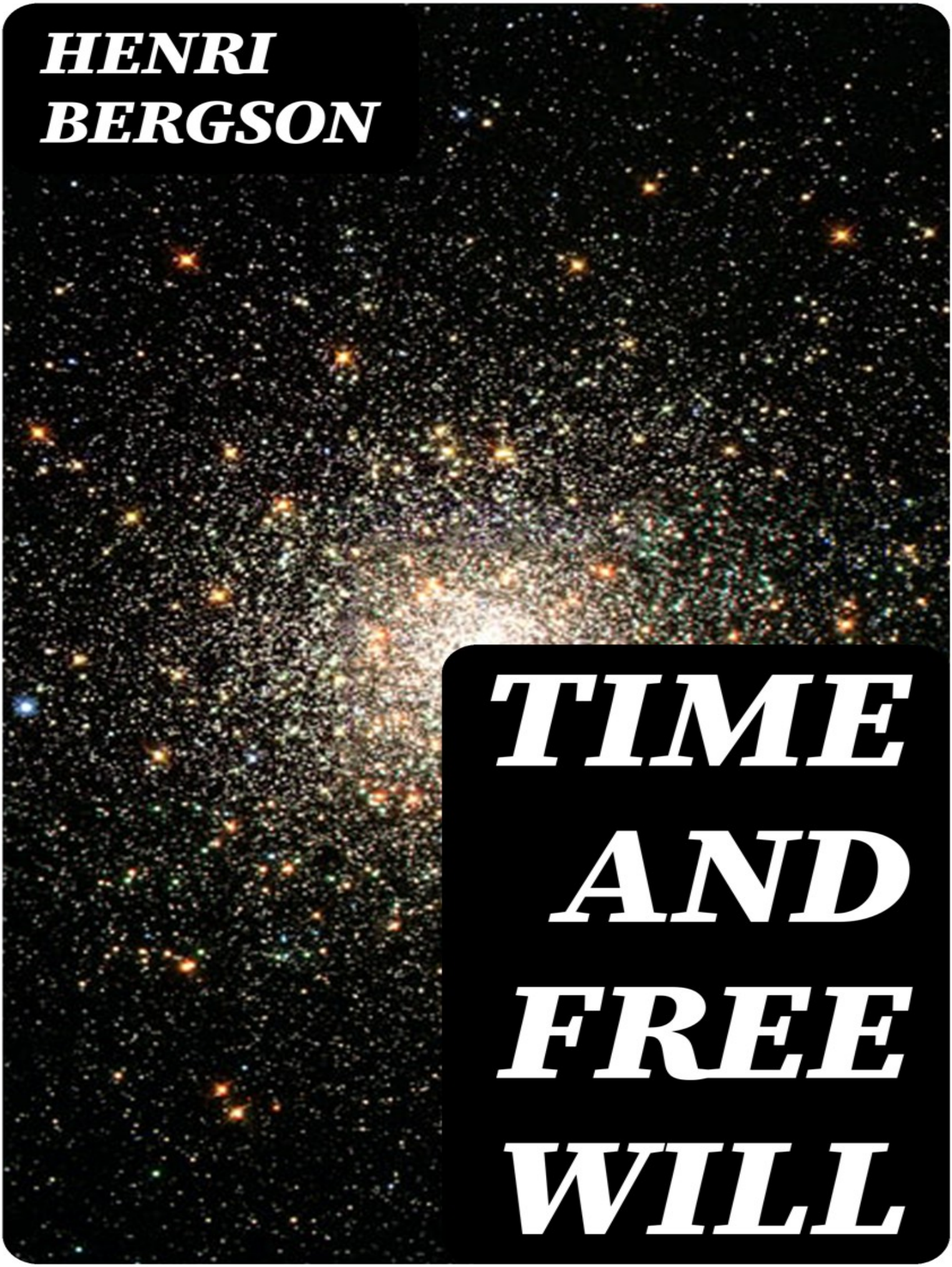
HENRI BERGSON



TIME AND FREE WILL

Henri Bergson

Time and Free Will

An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness

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TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE

Henri Louis Bergson was born in Paris, October 18, 1859. He entered the École normale in 1878, and was admitted agrégé de philosophie in 1881 and docteur ès lettres in 1889. After holding professorships in various provincial and Parisian lycées, he became maître de conférences at the École normale supérieure in 1897, and since 1900 has been professor at the Collège de France. In 1901 he became a member of the Institute on his election to the Académie des Sciences morales et politiques.

A full list of Professor Bergson's works is given in the appended bibliography. In making the following translation of his *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience* I have had the great advantage of his co-operation at every stage, and the aid which he has given has been most generous and untiring. The book itself was worked out and written during the years 1883 to 1887 and was originally published in 1889. The foot-notes in the French edition contain a certain number of references to French translations of English works. In the present translation I am responsible for citing these references from the original English. This will account for the fact that editions are sometimes referred to which have appeared subsequently to 1889. I have also added fairly extensive marginal summaries and a full index.

In France the *Essai* is already in its seventh edition. Indeed, one of the most striking facts about Professor Bergson's works is the extent to which they have appealed not only to the professional philosophers, but also to the ordinary cultivated public. The method which he pursues is not the

conceptual and abstract method which has been the dominant tradition in philosophy. For him reality is not to be reached by any elaborate construction of thought: it is given in immediate experience as a flux, a continuous process of becoming, to be grasped by intuition, by sympathetic insight. Concepts break up the continuous flow of reality into parts external to one another, they further the interests of language and social life and are useful primarily for practical purposes. But they give us nothing of the life and movement of reality; rather, by substituting for this an artificial reconstruction, a patchwork of dead fragments, they lead to the difficulties which have always beset the intellectualist philosophy, and which on its premises are insoluble. Instead of attempting a solution in the intellectualist sense, Professor Bergson calls upon his readers to put these broken fragments of reality behind them, to immerse themselves in the living stream of things and to find their difficulties swept away in its resistless flow.

In the present volume Professor Bergson first deals with the intensity of conscious states. He shows that quantitative differences are applicable only to magnitudes, that is, in the last resort, to space, and that intensity in itself is purely qualitative. Passing then from the consideration of separate conscious states to their multiplicity, he finds that there are two forms of multiplicity: quantitative or discrete multiplicity involves the intuition of space, but the multiplicity of conscious states is wholly qualitative. This unfolding multiplicity constitutes duration, which is a succession without distinction, an interpenetration of elements so heterogeneous that former states can never recur. The idea of a homogeneous and measurable time is shown to be an artificial concept, formed by the intrusion of the idea of space into the realm of pure duration. Indeed, the whole of Professor Bergson's philosophy centres round his conception of *real concrete duration* and the specific *feeling* of duration

which our consciousness has when it does away with convention and habit and gets back to its natural attitude. At the root of most errors in philosophy he finds a confusion between this *concrete duration* and the *abstract time* which mathematics, physics, and even language and common sense, substitute for it. Applying these results to the problem of free will, he shows that the difficulties arise from taking up one's stand *after* the act has been performed, and applying the conceptual method to it. From the point of view of the living, developing self these difficulties are shown to be illusory, and freedom, though not definable in abstract or conceptual terms, is declared to be one of the clearest facts established by observation.

It is no doubt misleading to attempt to sum up a system of philosophy in a sentence, but perhaps some part of the spirit of Professor Bergson's philosophy may be gathered from the motto which, with his permission, I have prefixed to this translation:—"If a man were to inquire of Nature the reason of her creative activity, and if she were willing to give ear and answer, she would say—'Ask me not, but understand in silence, even as I am silent and am not wont to speak.'"

F. L. POGSON.

OXFORD,

June, 1910.

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AUTHOR'S PREFACE

We necessarily express ourselves by means of words and we usually think in terms of space. That is to say, language requires us to establish between our ideas the same sharp and precise distinctions, the same discontinuity, as between material objects. This assimilation of thought to things is useful in practical life and necessary in most of the sciences. But it may be asked whether the insurmountable difficulties presented by certain philosophical problems do not arise from our placing side by side in space phenomena which do not occupy space, and whether, by merely getting rid of the clumsy symbols round which we are fighting, we might not bring the fight to an end. When an illegitimate translation of the unextended into the extended, of quality into quantity, has introduced contradiction into the very heart of the question, contradiction must, of course, recur in the answer.

The problem which I have chosen is one which is common to metaphysics and psychology, the problem of free will. What I attempt to prove is that all discussion between the

determinists and their opponents implies a previous confusion of duration with extensity, of succession with simultaneity, of quality with quantity: this confusion once dispelled, we may perhaps witness the disappearance of the objections raised against free will, of the definitions given of it, and, in a certain sense, of the problem of free will itself. To prove this is the object of the third part of the present volume: the first two chapters, which treat of the conceptions of intensity and duration, have been written as an introduction to the third.

H. BERGSON.

February, 1888.

CHAPTER I

THE INTENSITY OF PSYCHIC STATES

Can there be quantitative differences in conscious states?

It is usually admitted that states of consciousness, sensations, feelings, passions, efforts, are capable of growth and diminution; we are even told that a sensation can be said to be twice, thrice, four times as intense as another sensation of the same kind. This latter thesis, which is maintained by psychophysicists, we shall examine later; but even the opponents of psychophysics do not see any harm in speaking of one sensation as being more intense than another, of one effort as being greater than another, and in thus setting up differences of quantity between purely internal states. Common sense, moreover, has not the slightest hesitation in giving its verdict on this point; people say they are more or less warm, or more or less sad, and this distinction of more and less, even when it is carried over to the region of subjective facts and unextended objects, surprises nobody. But this involves a very obscure point and a much more important problem than is usually supposed.

When we assert that one number is greater than another number or one body greater than another body, we know very well what we mean.

Such differences applicable to magnitudes but not to intensities.

For in both cases we allude to unequal spaces, as shall be shown in detail a little further on, and we call that space the greater which contains the other. But how can a more intense sensation contain one of less intensity? Shall we say that the first implies the second, that we reach the sensation of higher intensity only on condition of having first passed through the less intense stages of the same sensation, and that in a certain sense we are concerned, here also, with the relation of container to contained? This

conception of intensive magnitude seems, indeed, to be that of common sense, but we cannot advance it as a philosophical explanation without becoming involved in a vicious circle. For it is beyond doubt that, in the natural series of numbers, the later number exceeds the earlier, but the very possibility of arranging the numbers in ascending order arises from their having to each other relations of container and contained, so that we feel ourselves able to explain precisely in what sense one is greater than the other. The question, then, is how we succeed in forming a series of this kind with intensities, which cannot be superposed on each other, and by what sign we recognize that the members of this series increase, for example, instead of diminishing: but this always comes back to the inquiry, why an intensity can be assimilated to a magnitude.

> Alleged distinction between two kinds of quantity: extensive and intensive magnitude.

It is only to evade the difficulty to distinguish, as is usually done, between two species of quantity, the first extensive and measurable, the second intensive and not admitting of measure, but of which it can nevertheless be said that it is greater or less than another intensity. For it is recognized thereby that there is something common to these two forms of magnitude, since they are both termed magnitudes and declared to be equally capable of increase and diminution. But, from the point of view of magnitude, what can there be in common between the extensive and the intensive, the extended and the unextended? If, in the first case, we call that which contains the other the greater quantity, why go on speaking of quantity and magnitude when there is no longer a container or a contained? If a quantity can increase and diminish, if we perceive in it, so to speak, the *less* inside the *more,* is not such a quantity on this very account divisible, and thereby extended? Is it not then a

contradiction to speak of an inextensive quantity? But yet common sense agrees with the philosophers in setting up a pure intensity as a magnitude, just as if it were something extended. And not only do we use the same word, but whether we think of a greater intensity or a greater extensity, we experience in both cases an analogous impression; the terms "greater" and "less" call up in both cases the same idea. If we now ask ourselves in what does this idea consist, our consciousness still offers us the image of a container and a contained. We picture to ourselves, for example, a greater intensity of effort as a greater length of thread rolled up, or as a spring which, in unwinding, will occupy a greater space. In the idea of intensity, and even in the word which expresses it, we shall find the image of a present contraction and consequently a future expansion, the image of something virtually extended, and, if we may say so, of a compressed space. We are thus led to believe that we translate the intensive into the extensive, and that we compare two intensities, or at least express the comparison, by the confused intuition of a relation between two extensities. But it is just the nature of this operation which it is difficult to determine.

> Attempt to distinguish intensities by objective causes. But we judge of intensity without knowing magnitude or nature of the cause.

The solution which occurs immediately to the mind, once it has entered upon this path, consists in defining the intensity of a sensation, or of any state whatever of the ego, by the number and magnitude of the objective, and therefore measurable, causes which have given rise to it. Doubtless, a more intense sensation of light is the one which has been obtained, or is obtainable, by means of a larger number of luminous sources, provided they be at the same distance and identical with one another. But, in the immense majority of cases, we decide about the intensity of the effect without