

## REALITY AND UNREALITY OF TIME (I)

I propose to dedicate this series of three articles to the philosophising of Prof. D. Y. Deshpande (referred to hereafter as D. Y.) on the concept of time. The nature of these articles is by and large exegetical. An attempt will be made to bring together some of the loose ends of his thinking on what may be regarded as 'one of the proverbially imposing and majestic themes of philosophers'. D.Y.'s papers<sup>1</sup> do reflect a very deep and profound concern for removing some of the misconceptions about 'time' and to develop an analytic perspective which would contribute in a large measure, he hopes, to the proper understanding of the nature of that supposedly intractable concept. Reading of these papers not only elevates the image of their author who already enjoys a great esteem among the contemporary philosophical circles, but also reveals the fact that he does not want to cash on certain accredited opinions of the traditional philosophers, nor does he want to base his views on the disclosures of mystic visions. "In philosophy.....we have ultimately to rely on reason alone."<sup>2</sup> That is his firm conviction and it's the one which he carries all through in his treatment of 'time'.

Of the six papers of his, which bear on the theme the two on 'Bergson's Philosophy of Time' reveal his aversion to the kind of phenomenological but extremely problematic approach which Bergson adopts in construing the reality of time or rather in construing reality as 'time' and nothing else. D.Y. is highly critical of Bergson's views. His searching criticism should indeed serve as a caution for all those who would still want to indulge in such speculative adventures. The other two papers viz., 'McTaggart on Time' and 'The Alleged Unreality of Time', contain his attack against the idealistic line of thinking on 'time'. It is worth noting that in the very first published article of his career,<sup>3</sup> D.Y. is not at all happy with the 'hocus-pocus' of the idealists. It is, therefore, not unexpected that D. Y. is least convinced of the idealistic argument contending the unreality of time. One need not, however, suppose that D.Y. would want to reject the idealistic version of time as unreal, in the manner

of G. E. Moore, who, depending upon the so-called unmistakable deliverances of common-sense, allowed himself to be carried away by the conviction that the idealistic thesis must be false. Unlike Moore, D.Y. is prepared to fight the idealistic opposition by entering into a forbidding jungle of metaphysical and epistemological issues. His paper on 'McTaggart on Time' will ever remain an ideal example of a well-knit philosophical exercise reflecting his talents of analysis, his scholarship and the indomitable spirit with which to pursue a philosophical argument to its last shred. The remaining two papers viz., 'Professor Ayer on the Past', and 'Past, Present and Future—A Philosophical Analysis' together constitute his demolition of Ayer's argument concerning the "extensive" and the "transitory" aspects of time and his own "way" of looking at 'Past, Present and Future'.

Accordingly, one has to divide D.Y.'s philosophising on 'time' into three sections each one dealing *seriatim* with the three phases indicated above. All three put together suggest that D.Y.'s thinking reveals two sides. On the negative side, D.Y. reveals an anti-metaphysical trend and on the positive side, he appears to be proposing something like a Wittgensteinian project of deciphering the deeper grammar of expressions connected with time. D.Y., it is to be regretted, does not carry out this latter project fully either in his papers or elsewhere. Perhaps he has left the terrain to the analytic minded philosophers of the younger generation for fuller exploration. The present series also does not propose to cover the terrain and to explore it further. But it certainly confines itself to the very modest attempt of reporting and commenting upon the two sides. This paper is, however, restricted to the first phase of the negative side of D.Y.'s treatment, with a promise that the remaining two phases will be undertaken in separate papers at a later time.

## I

Citing the usually-held view that time and space are largely similar although there are real differences, D.Y., in his pains taking examination of Bergson's Philosophy of time, first indicates briefly the main features of Bergson's radically different theory that space and time are entirely different from each other and that those temporal features in which time seems to resemble

space are not really temporal at all but only spatial. Relying upon the two principles that (i) the intellect is not an instrument of speculation or theoretical knowledge but is an instrument of practice, and (ii) space and what is commonly supposed to be time but which in reality is nothing but space, are the forms of intellect, Bergson had developed a view that intellect in the interest of action, decomposes the ceaseless, continuous flow of reality into a succession of static states of relatively stable objects with clear-cut outlines. Intellect cannot thus present to us reality as it is in itself. To see reality as reality, we must abandon the analytic intellect and enter into our innermost being. It is *intuition*, which alone can enable us to develop what Bergson called, "the kind of intellectual sympathy by which one places oneself into an object in order to coincide with what is unique in it and consequently inexpressible."<sup>4</sup>

D.Y. lists the following reasons which, according to him, led Bergson to expound a very strange and startling equation of '*durée*' with '*réalité*'.

(i) Our inner conscious life is just one ceaseless stream of change, a duration without mutual externality of successive states.

(ii) The material objects or what we call matter is in itself nothing but a process which makes or unmakes itself but is never something made.

(iii) The real time is the *duration*, which is the very stuff of reality.

(iv) Time with which science deals and which admits measurement is just another utilitarian device like space and hence is not to be confused with the 'real time'—the '*duration*'.

(v) We fail to notice this because our intellect operates mostly like a cinematograph which decomposes into a series of static views what in reality is continuous, undivided movement. We fail to see that intellect decomposes the flux of reality into solids having definite and clear outlines.

(vi) Bergson claimed that it is his view of 'time' as 'reality'—duration which is accessible to intuition alone—that accounts for creativity and freedom—the two inalienable aspects of human activity. In concrete '*duration*', the same reality never

recurs. Determinism which requires that the same cause should have the same effect, is a perverse theory produced by the intellect which is clearly in conflict with the creativity and the freedom of will, the two foundations of aesthetics and morals.

The validity of all these reasons must mainly hinge upon two important points : (a) intelligibility of the Bergsonian notion of 'duration' and (b) tenability of his strictures against the analytic role of the intellect. D. Y. argues stoutly against both these points.

(a) In order to develop a peculiar view of reality as identical with 'duration', Bergson has to justify the following argument :

(1) Duration is a *succession of interpenetrating moments* in which past is preserved and prolonged into present and future.

(2) Past is preserved only in the memory.

(3) Memory cannot exist without consciousness.

Therefore,

(4) There can be no succession without consciousness.

We may accept (3), although one need not suppose that it is unambiguous and philosophically innocuous. D.Y. does not find it necessary to comment upon it since he considers (1) and (2) to be highly vulnerable premises of the argument and therefore (4) to be non-compelling. I think that D.Y.'s argument against (1) is a brilliant piece of reasoning. D.Y. points out first that if the definition of 'duration' as given in (1) is to work at all, then it is obvious that *interpenetration* (of moments in which past is preserved and prolonged into present and future) must constitute an essential feature of 'duration' or 'time' (understood in the Bergsonian sense) alone and of nothing else. But one can hardly maintain this. Interpenetration is not peculiar to 'time' or 'duration' alone. Space itself which is contrasted by Bergson with 'duration' in every respect, is, strangely enough, a good candidate which would pose a serious threat to Bergson's theory. This apart, D.Y.'s main objection to (1) is that the interpenetration of past, present and future in consciousness does not necessarily account for *succession* which constitutes the essential feature of 'duration'. Memory and anti-

cipation, the two states of consciousness which Bergson associates with past and future, being contemporaneous with the present state of perception, do not really explain 'succession'. They are merely present states of consciousness. If that is so, Bergson can legitimately speak of *simultaneous* states of mind as being not discrete. He can maintain that they are fused together to form a certain span of our limited *awareness* of past, present and future. He can at the most succeed in showing that the *simultaneous* contents of our mind interpenetrate but there is nothing in the contents of our consciousness at any moment, which reveals to us interpenetration of past, present and future. D.Y. notes with characteristic acerbity of philosophic mind that the whole doctrine of interpenetration in Bergson's philosophy of time is confused to a degree. Even in drawing the distinction between space and time which is of paramount importance for Bergson, he is not consistent. Bergson declares "that where as the points of space are external to one another, the moments of time interpenetrate". D.Y. points out that the examples of temporal interpenetration which Bergson provides are not of moments interpenetrating but of states of consciousness interpenetrating. "This, I am afraid, is objectionable. The comparison must be drawn not between space on the one hand and the states of consciousness on the other, but between space and time or between the *contents* of space and the *contents* of time".<sup>5</sup> This, I suppose, takes the wind out of Bergson's sails.

## II

(b) I shall not pause here to comment on Bergson's failure to draw the distinction between space and 'duration' that is central to the viability of his view of reality, which cannot even get off the start unless (1) is justified. From what has been already said, the failure is glaring. Nor shall I comment upon D.Y.'s treatment of (2). Most of the points which he makes are well-thought-of and I think that he succeeds in showing that the preservation of the past in memory can only be taken to mean that it can retain a *representation* of the past to be brought into relation with the perception of the present. All that this can accomplish is the *knowledge* of succession and not succession itself. Memory is neither a necessary condition for the occur-

rence of a succession nor a sufficient condition for the knowledge of succession. Bergson is fully exposed on the count of his use of figurative expressions such as 'preservation of past', and 'real time, leaving the mark of its tooth on whatever it touches'. One is certainly driven to one's wit's ends when one reads several analogies which Bergson uses to bring home a *philosophical* point.<sup>6</sup> This is a point which Russell had made long ago when he observed that "as a rule Bergson does not give reasons for his opinions but relies on their inherent attractiveness and on the charm of an excellent style. Like the advertisers of Oxo, he relies upon picturesque and varied statement and an apparent explanation of many obscure facts. Analogies and similes, especially form a very large part of the whole process by which he recommends his views to the reader".<sup>7</sup> The analogy which he draws between intellect and cinematograph is not only misleading but also utterly fallacious. One can, however, see why a philosopher who condemns intellect has to draw so much upon similes and analogies and to depend upon a mysterious charm of his style. A philosopher who wants to condemn intellect cannot in fact use intellect to justify his claims but must base his case on intuitions. Condemnation of intellect with the help of arguments is always self-stultifying but forgetting this, Bergson, at a number of places in his works, employs intellect "in his own defence by advancing arguments which plainly are intended to be intellectually satisfying."<sup>8</sup> D.Y. is also using intellect in his refutation of Bergson's refutation of intellect. One need not lay the charge of question-begging at the doors of D.Y. The battle between intellect and intuition is an old one and is finally tied up with what you mean by doing 'philosophy'. If in philosophy, as D.Y. asserted, we have ultimately to rely upon reason and reason alone, it is very difficult to see how inspite of all the forceful pleas made in behalf of Bergson by M. Wildon Carr<sup>9</sup> and Pitirim Sorokin<sup>10</sup> and Rev. John MacWilliam<sup>11</sup>, one can persuade oneself to accept Bergson's highly speculative vision of reality. In the words of Bertrand Russell, one may suppose that when Bergson's "philosophy has triumphed.....the argument will cease, and the intellect will be lulled to sleep on the heaving sea of intuition, but until that consumation, the protests of intellect will continue".

## III

D.Y. has, however, not touched upon another sort of confusion which is basic to the Bergsonian way of conceiving 'duration'. The confusion can be brought out by reference to a distinction made by Pitirim Sorokin<sup>12</sup> between "*sensate time*" that can be reduced to quantitative measurements and the "*ideational time*" which has a characteristic quality connected with the evolution of the universe. Bergson's '*duration*' is ideational time. This distinction is often referred to as the distinction between 'physical time' and 'psychological time'. We may leave aside for the present the question as to whether space and time are similar or dissimilar to each other. But one certainly expects that a philosopher who wants to cash on the notion of 'ideational time', undertakes to show at first that there is a real distinction to be drawn between *sensate time* and *ideational time*. Why does he have to argue at first that *sensate time* is nothing but space? That we measure *sensate time* by reference to space is no more reason to identify it with space than there is any for identifying the temperature of the human body with the column of the mercury in the thermometer. 'Duration' which is so very crucial to Bergson, can be said to be only a mode of *sensate time*, understood in different ways by means of operational definitions. These operational definitions are given by us in terms of the reading of the angle traversed by the hands of the clock, no matter whether the clock is moved by falling weights or by elastic springs. The operational definition is connected with a certain law of mechanics, having to do with the oscillations of the pendulum or of the hairspring. It is necessary to note that if *sensate time* can be measured in terms of spatial modes, space can also be measured in terms of time as is clear from the notion of 'temporal distance' which allows the scientists to formulate the laws for the propagation of light or of electro-magnetic waves in a simple way. Bergson's case for understanding 'duration' in his own sense rests upon the protest that besides all the definitions of *sensate time* by physical operations, there really is an immediate feeling of time. Bergson wants to cash on this immediate feeling. But if you call it 'duration' then that immediate feeling of time is no more than an operational definition. It simply means that human beings can measure time by reference

to their subjective sensation of time. There is nothing more to it. Bergson, unfortunately, imparts to the expression 'duration' a meaning which does not belong to it. Bergson could afford to throw the phrase out of its gears, we certainly cannot.

Bergson's entire account of freedom, creativity and unpredictability of future is based upon this 'out-of-gears' notion of 'duration'. If you reject the queer sense which Bergson gives to 'duration', you are not indeed obliged to accept Bergson's account of free-will, creativity and unpredictability of future. D.Y. rejects 'duration' in the Bergsonian sense and yet takes seriously Bergson's argument that time is reduced to mere appearance if we regard the future as unpredictable. D.Y. tries to show that time would be real even if the thesis of determinism is true. But I think that the point which D.Y. is trying to make is unnecessary and futile. If D.Y. is trying to show that *sensate time* is real even if determinism is true, then this will have no force whatsoever against Bergson's claim that determinism is incompatible with 'real time' or 'duration', taken in the Bergsonian sense. Nothing will be gained by showing that determinism is compatible with 'time' taken in its non-Bergsonian sense, i.e. *sensate time*. Bergson's argument is irrefutable, not because it is intrinsically flawless but because it's of such a nature that any evidence which you bring against it will fail to count as counter-evidence. Not only D.Y. cannot refute the argument but none else can. Nature may be free creative, and the future may be unpredictable, but not for the reasons which Bergson offers. One cannot afford to wind one's way to the truth of these assertions, through blind alleys which Bergson's philosophy provides.

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#### NOTES

1. (i) 'Bergson's Philosophy Time' (I), *Journal of The Indian Philosophical Association*, Vol. I, 1954, pp. 41-45.

(ii) 'Bergson's Philosophy of time' (II), *Journal of The Ind. Philo. Association*, Vol. II, 1955, pp. 41-43 [ Referred to as BPT ( II ) hereafter ]

(iii) 'McTaggart on Time', *Journal of The Ind. Philo. Assn.* Vol. III 1956, pp. 71-96.



(iv) 'The Alleged Unreality of Time,' *Proceedings of The Ind. Philo. Congress*, 1956, pp. 207-11.

(v) 'Prof. Ayer on the Past,' *Mind* vol. LXV, 1956 pp. 85-89.

(vi) 'Past, Present and Future—A Philosophical Analysis,' *Nagpur Uni. Journal*, 1948, Vol. No. 12, pp. 1-15.

2. 'Mayāvāda,' *Journal of The Uni. of Bombay*, Vol. XIV Sept. 1945, p. 57.

3. *Ibid.*

4. Bergson, Henri : *Introduction to Metaphysics*, p. 6.

5. *BPT* (II), p. 45.

6. *BPT* (II), p. 53.

7. Russell, Bertrand : *The Philosophy of Bergson*, London, 1914, p. 11.

8. *Ibid.* p. 36.

9. Carr, H. Wildon : *The Philosophy of Bergson* by the Hon. B. Russell with a reply by H. Wildon Carr, London 1914.

10. Pitirim Sorokin : *Social and Cultural Dynamics*, New York, 1933.

11. MacWilliam, Rev. John : *Criticism of the Philosophy of Bergson* Edinburgh, 1928.

12. *op cit.*



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