

## Untapped Resources for Process Thought II:

### Do You Exist as a Subject Extended in Time? The Process Thought of Henri Bergson

A framework of thought that is to be adequate to experience must forego claims to completeness, for the very idea of definitive correctness — of achieving at once the generality and precision that is desired — is rendered infeasible by philosophy's unavoidable reliance on [the] imperfect instrument of human language. All philosophizing is a matter of imperfect approximation. ... Accordingly, no particular discussion of process philosophy should be seen as presenting a finished and definitively articulated presentation of the doctrine. Any such discussion ... should regard and present itself in the process-congenial manner "not ... of finality but of progress," as Whitehead put it [*Process and Reality*, 21]. It would, in fact, perhaps be preferable to speak of process philosophizing rather than process philosophy, using here, too, the language of activity rather than of things.<sup>1</sup>

#### Introduction

This is the second in a six-part series (and later, I hope, a book) entitled *Untapped Resources for Process Thought*. (The other authors are Hegel, Peirce, James, and, of course, neo-Whiteheadian philosophy). Those of you who heard the first talk might well think that I have now chosen the opposite extreme for today's theme.

Recall that the topic of my last talk was the emergentist process philosophy of Samuel Alexander. Alexander argues that the evolutionary process divides naturally into new stages or levels, and at each stage new types of properties are manifested. Here is a reconstruction of Alexander's seven stages (with some help from Dorothy Emmet):

- (1) At the base of whole thing is Space-Time. Time is "mind" and space is "body." Time is "the mind of space." Space-time is composed of "point-instants."
- (2) Space-Time is differentiated by "motions." Certain organized patterns of motions (today we'd say energies) are bearers of the qualities we can material. So, *contra* Aristotle, matter itself is emergent.

- (3) Organizations of matter are bearers of macrophysical qualities and chemical properties. This is presumably the molecular level.
- (4) At a certain level of complexity, molecules become the bearers of life.
- (5) Here Alexander should have added the evolution of sentience: simple volition (choice of where to move), symbiosis (reciprocal systems), sociality, and thought.
- (6) Some living structures are bearers of the quality of mind or consciousness, “the highest empirical quality known to us.”
- (7) At a certain level mind may be productive of a new emergent quality, Deity.

Alexander speaks of a “nisis” that functions like Creativity in Whitehead, always pulling evolution along toward new expressions of novelty. This is what drives the whole process: “There is a nisis in Space-Time which, as it has borne its creatures forward through matter and life to mind, will bear them forward to some higher level of existence” (2:346).

What separates Alexander and Bergson is their views on the nature of mind or, as I put it in the title, on the question: “Do You Exist as a Subject Extended in Time?” For Alexander mind is an almost purely formal relationship. For *any* two given levels in the seven that I just summarized, “body” represents the lower level — the parts — and “mind” represents the higher level, the whole. If “mind” is merely formal in this sense — if it’s the whole for *any* given set of parts — then clearly there is no such “thing” as mind, no separate substance. As we’ll see, nothing could be further from Bergson’s position.

The debate about mind is of immense importance for the question of God. On Alexander’s view, you may recall, there can be no such being as God. “Mind” or “God” are only emergent properties of the one natural world. Thus Alexander can say that the world “deises” itself, or that the quality of deity emerges within the world; the world takes on the quality of deity as it evolves to higher levels:

As actual, God does not possess the quality of deity but *is the universe as tending to that quality*. This nisis in the universe, though not present to sense, is yet present to reflection upon experience. Only in this sense of straining towards deity can there be an infinite actual God” [2:361, *emph. added*]. ... Thus there is no actual infinite being with the quality of deity; but there is an actual infinite, the whole universe, with a nisis toward deity; and this is the God of the religious consciousness, though that consciousness habitually forecasts the divinity of its object as actually realised in an individual form” [361f.] ... The actual reality which has deity is the world of empiricals filling up all Space-Time and tending towards a higher quality. Deity is a nisis and not an accomplishment” [364].

But, on this view, no divine being preexisted the universe, and no God arises out of, above or beyond it.

In the next few minutes we will explore Bergson’s notion of mind and awareness, using Alexander as a foil but concentrating in particular on its similarities with and differences from Whitehead’s notion. I call this form of comparative and constructive analysis *process pluralism*, and it represents the core of the research program that I pursue as a process-oriented faculty

member at the Claremont School of Theology. I hope to show the theological significance of this method, and some of the results it yields, at the end of the talk. First, however, it's important to establish Bergson's credentials for being considered as one of the central thinkers whom process pluralists need to engage.

### **Bergson as Process Philosopher**

Henri Bergson (1859-1941) represents one of the founders of process philosophy in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Process permeates his thought: "We can find a solution to philosophical problems only if we succeed, by a reversal of our mental habits, to see in mobility the only reality that is actual. Immobility is but a picture ... taken of reality by our mind."<sup>2</sup> And further:

In reality, life is a movement, materiality is the inverse movement, and each of these movements is simple, the matter which forms the a world being an undivided flux, and undivided also the life that runs through it, cutting out of it living beings all along its track. (Quote from *Creative Evolution*, p. 272)<sup>3</sup>

Numerous thinkers have noted the parallels between Bergson's notions of "invention" and "image" on the one hand and Whitehead's theory of "concrecence" on the other.<sup>4</sup> The apparent ontological kinship between Bergson and Whitehead with respect to the theory of perception and experience leads Brougham to conclude that "Bergson's 'invention' closely resembles Whitehead's 'concrecence.' All the elements of concrecence may mutually adjust themselves, including the 'formative' subjective aim."<sup>5</sup> On Brougham's view, the constant interplay of constraint and datum offers a "possible reconciliation of two apparently incompatible features of the ongoing world – efficient causation and final causation."<sup>6</sup> On this point, Bergson's work shows close connections Whitehead's conception. Brougham notes:

What is clearly obvious is that the "interplay operation" of Bergson presaged "concrecive" activity, the linch-pin of Whitehead's metaphysics....All elements, including the subjective aim, undergo reciprocal modification in the concrecive activity.<sup>7</sup>

The hermeneutical circle of perception in Bergson is thus analogous to the more atomistic notion of concrecence and subjective aim propounded by Whitehead.

Randall Auxier also argues for a series of close parallels between Bergson and Whitehead. In *Science and the Modern World* Whitehead acknowledged the direct influence of Bergson, citing him as the source for his notion of the fallacy of misplaced concreteness, which he then modified.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, he admits that he derived the fallacy of "simple location" — that is, the immediate spatialization of sense-experience — from Bergson's philosophy. Auxier concludes, "In any case, at least the fallacy of simple location, and in part the fallacy of misplaced concreteness, two of Whitehead's most important critical ideas, arise from and are explicitly attributed to Whitehead's reading of and engagement with Bergson's philosophy." He adds:

Although Whitehead never credits Bergson explicitly with these insights, it is clear that thinkers within a process framework are the ones who are obliged to come up with a

solution to this sort of problem, while more traditional thinkers do not often or ever worry about the ways in which the intellect distorts reality by subsuming it in a spatialized conceptual scheme, or how the concrete process of thinking is distinct from thought.

Another important area of influence of Bergson on Whitehead, Auxier argues, lies the concept of process itself. To support this claim, Auxier cites convincingly from Whitehead's *Concept of Nature*:

It is an exhibition of the process of nature that each duration happens and passes. The process of nature can also be termed the passage of nature. I definitely refrain at this stage from using the word "time," since the measurable time of science and of civilized life generally merely exhibits some aspects of the more fundamental fact of the passage of nature. I believe that in this doctrine I am in full accord with Bergson, though he uses "time" for the fundamental fact which I call the "passage" of nature.<sup>9</sup>

Finally, Auxier notes the Bergson's influence on Whitehead's notion of creativity, citing Hartshorne with approval:

. . . prehension is a radically one-way dependence of an actuality upon "antecedent" conditions, that is, temporally prior actualities prehending is a form of including, whereby reality is enriched, "increased" in multiplicity of factors. "The many become one and are *increased by one*." Reality is protean and cumulative, as Bergson said. If any Whiteheadian statement conflicts with this, then I think it is to be discarded. For the formula just quoted is said to characterize the "ultimate" principle. And if this principle goes, then I see not much need for Whitehead.

So what *are* the distinctive features of Bergson's view of process?

### **Duration**

Mathematics and the natural sciences can express *physical* time, which one might conceive as points on a timeline. But our primary experience as living individuals is of *la durée*, lived or experienced duration. The biological and psychological realms are pervaded by "a *nisus* or striving to bring to realization something more, something over and above the existing frame of things."<sup>10</sup> (Presumably Alexander's use of *nisus* was drawn from Bergson.) An *elan vital*, a "Vital Impetus" or force, permeates all living things, and it alone explains the creativity and innovation that we find in all life forms.

Along with the contrast between physical time and (psychological) duration comes the distinction between two ways of knowing: intellect and intuition. [use whole paragraph] Bergson writes, "There is one reality, at least, which we all seize from within, by intuition and not by simply analysis. It is our own personality in its flowing through time — our self which endures."<sup>11</sup> What intuition grasps is "a succession which is not juxtaposition, a growth from within, the uninterrupted prolongation of the past into a present which is already blending into the future. It is the direct vision of the mind by the mind .... Instead of states contiguous to states, ... we have here the indivisible and therefore substantial continuity of the flow of the inner

life.”<sup>12</sup> And *what* is intuited must be as spiritual as the faculty that accesses it:

In short, pure change, real duration, is a thing spiritual or impregnated with spirituality. Intuition is what attains the spirit, duration, pure change. Its real domain being the spirit, it would seek to grasp in things, even material things, their participation in spirituality, — I should say in divinity were I not aware of all the human element still in our consciousness, however purified or spiritualized.<sup>13</sup>

### **The Self and Bergson’s dualism**

As James Felt notes, Bergson understands the self as “a unity within ongoing qualitative diversity.”<sup>14</sup> Hence in Bergson’s philosophy, there is nothing like the formal analysis of mind as (I overstate only slightly) any new whole that arises out of a conjunction of parts. Rather, there is a real ontological divide. First, there was no awareness, and later there was; at one point there were no subjects, and at a later point subjects arose.

Bergson offers a robust theory of the self:

And what is the “I”? Something which appears, rightly or wrongly, to overflow every part of the body which is joined to it, passing beyond it in space as well as in time....In time, for the body is matter, matter is the present, and, if it be true that the past leaves there traces of itself, they are not traces of the past except for a consciousness perceiving them and interpreting what it perceives by the light of what it remembers. *This consciousness retains the past, enrolls what time unrolls, and with it prepares a future which it will itself help to create.* (Italics added.)<sup>15</sup>

The self, as that which “endures through time,”<sup>16</sup> forms the nexus of relationships and interactions which are allowed to “overflow” beyond the simple determinism of pure bodies. The body forms the unity of interactions which thereby present the “I” with the horizon of its own possibilities in the past and future. The past is subsequently carried on in the psychical life of the self, allowing past, present, and future to form an unbroken unity within the individual:

Well, I believe that our whole psychical existence is something just like this single sentence, continued since the first awakening of consciousness, interspersed with commas, but never broken by full stops. And consequently I believe that our whole past still exists. It exists subconsciously, by which I mean that it is present to consciousness in such a manner that, to have the revelation of it, consciousness has no need to go out of itself or seek for foreign assistance...<sup>17</sup>

Let’s return to our “foil,” Samuel Alexander. Contrast, for example, the “*nisus*” in Alexander to the *elan vital* in Bergson. Bergson’s thought is, as he says on the opening page of *Matter and Memory* (1896), “frankly dualistic.” As we saw, purely physical forces, purely objective patterns of organization, and purely mathematical relationships (such as temporal succession) lack the life principle. By contrast, everything that is living is driven by and expresses a vital impetus. In the biosphere, the realm of creative evolution, there is not merely succession but also duration, not merely cause and effect but also creative response, not merely

external but also internal, not merely action but also awareness. These features characterize everything that is living, although they are more fully expressed at the higher levels of evolution, particularly in humankind. Here, at least, it is true to say that there are not merely objects but also subjects. Sometimes Bergson puts his dualism quite strongly, as in this famous passage from *Mind-Energy (L'énergie spirituelle)*:

On the one hand, there is matter, subject to necessity, devoid of memory, or at least with no more than suffices to form the bridge between two of its moments, each of which can be deduced from its antecedent, each of which adds nothing to what the world already contains. On the other hand, there is consciousness, memory with freedom, continuity of creation in a duration in which there is real growth; – a duration which is drawn out, wherein the past is preserved indivisible; a duration which grows like a plant, but like the plant of a fairy tale transforms its leaves and flowers from moment to moment.<sup>18</sup>

Yet Bergson's dualism is not a parallelism of mind and body. In the end, mind gains the upper hand (so to speak). Put differently, Bergson denies that he is an idealist, but his dualism is more tinged with idealism than with physicalism. He begins with what appears to be a dualistic framework, namely with memory and perception; and he notes that pure memory is to spirit as perception is to matter. Consciousness is essentially memory and the potentialities of the future, whereas pure perception is the immediacy of the present.<sup>19</sup> Insofar as memory (or, as he prefers to say, "pure memory") is independent from matter, it represents an unconscious psychic state, which functions *de facto* as a concept of soul in Bergson. The brain is the point at which these memories, which are not dependent on matter, can exercise influence on matter, but the memories are not dependent on brain.

In the end, then, matter is what is determined and mind is what determines. Put differently: all real causal efficacy lies on the side of mind.<sup>20</sup>

### **Mind over body**

In short, the relationship between the two sides is not symmetrical for Bergson. Mind is not limited, for example, to what brain can produce:

A close examination of the life of the mind and of its physiological accompaniment leads me to believe that common sense is right and that there is infinitely more, in a human consciousness, than in the corresponding brain.<sup>21</sup>

The brain is like the conductor; the real music is played by the orchestra:

Indeed, the cerebral phenomena are to the mental life just what the gestures of the conductor are to the symphony: they mark out the motor articulations, they do nothing else. In other words, we should find nothing of the higher workings of the mind within the cerebral cortex. Except its sensory functions, the brain has no other part than to *play*, in the full meaning of the term, the mental life.<sup>22</sup>

Mind may overflow into the brain. The brain does not produce mental phenomena, however.

They may be dependent on the brain for their expression, dependent on the brain to have a causal effect in the world, but they are not dependent on their brain for their very existence. Ideas are not the product of cerebral states alone:

You ought to say that this idea is a function not of the cerebral state alone, but of cerebral state *and* the objects determining it, cerebral state and external objects now forming together one invisible block.<sup>23</sup>

As we'll see in a moment, this more robust, more dualistic, more substantial theory of the subject inevitably gives rise to a different understanding of God.

### **The one source: The priority of the mental pole in Bergson**

Now I must admit that there are passages in Bergson that seem to point in another direction — beyond dualism toward an ultimate monism. In such passages Bergson speculates that it may be “mind all the way down.” At these points he questions whether mind arises out of purely inanimate matter, and he suggests that creative mind may be active at all levels of reality. Although there is evidence that Bergson flirted with this (more Whiteheadian) view of reality, one finds no more than hints; he certainly never fleshed this view out in any significant metaphysical detail. Still, the hints one finds are intriguing.

According to Hartshorne, Bergson apparently broke with dualism later in his career. Hartshorne writes, “neither [Plato or Bergson] had much sympathy with materialism, and Bergson in his maturity broke completely with the concept of mere mindless matter as a possible truth.”<sup>24</sup> Hints of this tendency can be found much earlier in Bergson's career:

The only definite hypothesis which the metaphysics of the last three centuries has bequeathed us on this point is that of a strict parallelism between soul and body, the soul translating what the body does, or the body what the soul does, or both body and soul expressing, each in its own way, like translations of the same original in different languages, something which is neither one nor the other.<sup>25</sup>

One finds the same idea also in *Creative Evolution*, where Bergson suggests that the “two realities” of matter and mind are in fact “derived from a common source.” Remember that Bergson throughout his career vehemently denies that he is an idealist. The world strikes us with its “otherness,” and we seem to perceive things outside of us and beyond our control; yet neither of these impressions would be correct, Bergson thinks, if idealism were true.

Still, there is good evidence that at the level of ultimate reality Bergson accepted a sort of panpsychism or what Andrew G. Bjelland calls “proto-mentalistic pluralism”<sup>26</sup>:

But is it only with consciousnesses that we are in sympathy? If every living being is born, develops and dies, if life is an evolution and if duration is in this case a reality, is there not also an intuition of the vital, and consequently a metaphysics of life, which might in a sense prolong the science of the living?<sup>27</sup>

We have seen that many of the building blocks on which mental activity draws are themselves mental or mentally tinged: really existing but nonconscious memories, present-tense perception, intuition, free will, etc. Understanding Bergson's *elan vital* not only underscores this but adds a theistic element. *Elan vital* is a spiritual force, the source not only of all creativity, and hence all life, but also of all moral value and all teleology. Lucius Miller writes, "It is as if ... a supernatural, cosmic Being, has sought to realize [itself]. Thus the destiny of human consciousness and of the human soul is not bound up with the destiny of cerebral matter. This is Bergson's position."<sup>28</sup> Where Samuel Alexander made higher-order functions dependent upon their physical substratum, Bergson held that "by far the greater part of mental life is independent of the brain," using this observation to argue (e.g.) for the likelihood of post-mortem survival of the self.<sup>29</sup>

Much in a philosophy depends upon what its author takes to be the ultimate source or *arche* of all things. If a cosmology holds that the origin of everything is physical matter and energy, and this energy is not preceded by Intelligence, then that cosmology is undoubtedly physicalist. Bergson is clear that all things ultimately spring from the *elan vital* and that this vital impetus is responsible for producing matter. But recall that the vital impetus is essentially a spiritual or psychic force, one that Bergson was inclined to think of as personal: "a spiritual unity expressing itself in the creative process of evolution."<sup>30</sup>

### **Bergson and Whitehead: A comparative evaluation**

Consider now the parallels between Bergson and Whitehead. Both process thinkers are willing to speak of discrete temporal moments, although both also allow for an experiential awareness that refers over large collections of temporal moments, past and future. Whitehead is clear in ascribing the primary mode of existence only to the temporal moments themselves, the actual occasions; aggregates of actual occasions (societies) have a derivative, though still real, existence. Bergson, by contrast, ascribes full, primary reality both to perceptions and to memory, both to moments of experiencing and to an extended subjective awareness. Indeed, in some ways he gives priority to the awareness that extends over many temporal moments, that is, on the immediate experience of duration. Perceptions mark atomistic points within the ongoing flow of experience (though, he notes, all perceptions still have some duration). The recollection of all past perceptions continues to exist in the mind unconsciously, and mind reintroduces relevant memories into the present for purposes of action (free choice) at any given point. Here again Bergson's idealist tendencies peak through: memories have objective existence apart from consciousness.

We saw that Bergson accepts that there is a physical order of succession and that our mental experience is influenced by that physical order — he is not a simple idealist. But we also found a priority of the mental over the physical — perhaps then, like Whitehead, his process philosophy amounts to a sort of idealism in the final analysis. Certainly the mental pole plays the stronger role in this relationship, as I think it does for Whitehead. Yet — and here's the sharp difference from Whitehead — it plays the stronger role in virtue of being extended through time, that is, *by existing as duration*. Remember, mind for Bergson is a creative force or Vital Impetus (*elan vital*). It is related to all of its past events through memories, and it regularly extends itself in a broad temporal present or "now" that encompasses many moments of that

objective succession that we sometimes call physical time. There can be no experience, subjective or otherwise, Bergson would tell us, except experience that is extended over time. This may be the single greatest point of difference between Bergson and Whitehead.

Various commentators have argued that Bergson and Whitehead's theories of the subject are compatible.<sup>31</sup> Seen analytically, the subject can be analyzed into a series of discrete moments, which Whitehead calls actual occasions. Seen through the holistic faculty of intuition, one grasps the unity of experience that extends across time. Does Whitehead not acknowledge this point in *Modes of Thought* when he writes:

The primitive stage of discrimination is not primarily qualitative. It is the vague grasp of reality, dissecting it into a threefold scheme, namely, "The Whole," "That Other," and "This-My-Self."<sup>32</sup>

### **A Process mediation on the possibility of temporally extended subjects**

We have seen that Bergson transforms the relation between mind and body from the Cartesian context of two separate substances to a temporal context — a transformation that Whitehead later follows in developing his theory of prehension. At first, as we saw, it looks as though Bergson gives the past and the future to mind (consciousness), since consciousness is both memory and future possibility; matter then gets the present in the guise of perception. But there are three reasons to think that this interpretation is not quite right. First, Bergson increasingly nuances the role of matter in his middle and later thought. Since perception is temporally extended, it must necessarily include a mental moment as well — as is clear in most of the analyses of perception in modern thought. Next, perception is at the locus of body (or brain), and body is not purely material for Bergson; rather, it is the meeting point of the material order and the mental order. Finally, *creative evolution* suggests that matter cannot be an ultimate. Beginning with *Creative Evolution* and more frequently in later years, Bergson suggests that some unity must precede the division between matter and consciousness. In the end, it's completely clear in his thought that, if push ever comes to shove, the unitative or purposive side — hence, mind — will have precedence over matter. Bergson is no friend of pure matter; recall Hartshorne's words, quoted earlier: "neither [Plato or Bergson] had much sympathy with materialism, and Bergson in his maturity broke completely with the concept of mere mindless matter as a possible truth."<sup>33</sup>

But, one continues to wonder, since Bergson clearly argues that matter exists, how are mind and matter supposed to be related? Bergson's strength lies in granting the real distinctions between matter and mind — and they certainly are distinct in their properties, if not in their ultimate ontological existence — while continuing to think them as interrelated. At the same time, Bergson allows for the real temporal extension of subjects: as a subject, you really *do* exist as extended in time. If this view works, I consider it to be preferable to the theory of multiple actual occasions. But does it work? Does Bergson pull it off, or is his greatest strength also his greatest weakness?

Bergson, Whitehead and Hartshorne agree on rejecting an understanding of time or process in terms of mutually external moments. Bergson's focus on the extended present involves the claim that the various moments of experience "interpenetrate": "Unreflecting

sympathy and antipathy, which so often have that power of divination, give evidence of a possible interpenetration of human consciousnesses.”<sup>34</sup>

Hartshorne finds this view unacceptable: “Over and over Bergson rightly rejected the doctrine of *mutually external* moments of process and treated the contrary extreme of *mutually internal* moments as thereby justified, as though mutual internality were the only escape from mutual externality!”<sup>35</sup> Lewis Ford has put a similar challenge to me with regard to my own use of German Idealist concepts in explicating process thought: “How can one subject include another subject?”

On this point Ford and Hartshorne follow Whitehead. On their view, one must begin with the smallest possible units of experience, the temporally least extended, events in which there is no passage of time: actual occasions. Each actual occasion represents the smallest possible unit within the flow of process. For these thinkers, time is then constituted by the succession of actual occasions. There are logical moments in the concrescence of an actual occasion, but they are not temporal moments. In this way, Whiteheadians argue, Zeno’s paradox is overcome: the temporal process is composed of moments, to be sure, but these moments are not themselves temporally extended.

The Whiteheadian camp then adds this new argument by Hartshorne: the succession can occur only in one direction. A later moment canprehend earlier moments as data, but no actual occasion canprehend its contemporaries or any future moments. Thus Hartshorne and Whitehead find themselves compelled to reject mutual interpenetration in favor of an inviolate arrow of time. Unfortunately, as a result one loses the temporally extended subject, except in the form of an aggregate of moments that we call a society.

I hold by contrast that the notion of a temporally extended subject is viable; and I understand this notion in many, but not all, of the ways that Bergson understood it. We have immediate experience of the simultaneous presence of many moments of time. Many philosophers, including Bergson, have made epistemic claims on behalf of this faculty of immediate intuition which in my view are too strong (I think for example of Husserl’s claims on behalf of “eidetic” intuition and for a *Wesenschau*, an intuition of essences). But intuitions can exist even if they are fallible. I do not think that one can give any adequate account of the “extended present” — or of the simultaneous presence of temporally separate moments in the experience of a subject — without postulating a subject that is extended in time.

The subject as I conceive it is not an aggregate composed of discrete moments, as in Whitehead’s account. Whitehead’s mistake, on my view, was to think that the move from a substance-based account of reality to a temporally based account of reality — from substance metaphysics to process metaphysics — requires temporal atomism and a social view of the self. I follow him in moving from substance metaphysics to a fundamentally temporal, event-based account. Yet within the process there are certain temporally extended events that evidence a continuity over some given span of time. For example, the molecules in a cell evidence the properties of metabolism, motility, and self-replication during the life of that cell — properties that they do not evidence before and after the cell’s existence. Persons likewise have real extension over time, although this form of extension — call it duration — cannot be defined in

purely physical or biological terms. As Brian Cantwell Smith beautifully puts it:

you and I do not exist in [physical explanations] — *qua people*. We may be material, divine, social, embodied, whatever — but we don't figure *as people* in any physicist's equation. What we are — or rather what our lives are, in this [sc., the physicalist] picture — is a group of roughly aligned not-terribly-well delineated very slightly wiggling four-dimensional worms or noodles: massively longer temporally than spatially. We care tremendously about these noodles. But physics does not: it does nothing to identify them, either as personal, or as unitary, or as distinct from the boundless number of other worms that could be inscribed on the physical plenum ...<sup>36</sup>

There may well be different forms of awareness that are associated with different kinds of (temporally extended) agents in the world. (I hold there are some physical objects that are not agents and that do not have experience, but that is a debate to pursue at a later occasion.) More complex agents enjoy more complex forms of experience. Presumably these more complex agents have experiences that are extended over a greater temporal span and that are more internally complex and coherent. Bergson, Whitehead, and I agree that part of what makes this experience more complex is that these agents are more deeply related to other agents and/or are more aware of those relations.

Now one might criticize my view for not providing a fixed criterion for *how* extended in time an agent's experience might be. But I think there are good reasons to think that no ultimate unit of duration can be given. It is a phenomenological fact that we experience an extended present that may be longer or shorter when measured in terms of absolute time. People have described the acute sense of an extended present that is sometimes experienced during an automobile accident or by an athlete playing at the peak of her game. An instant can be etched upon one's mind forever, and an entire lecture that spans an hour or more can be lost forever to one's awareness. (Hopefully the present lecture does not fall in that category.) Certain temporally extended events are generally experienced in a unitary fashion, as an extended present: hearing a melodic line (think of the main motif in Rachmaninoff's second piano concerto), comprehending a poem, making love, experiencing the divine. Certain people live with their past more intensely interwoven in their present, and others live in almost complete ignorance of their past. Indeed, as we age, the past becomes present to us in different ways. Some people live with an intense historical consciousness, their thinking deeply influenced by past centuries and millennia; others (such as our current administration in Washington) seem to have no sense of the past and to have learned nothing from it. As you can see, I do not think that these various differences are matters for metaphysical resolution; they are experiential differences that are to be explored through phenomenological inquiry.

The resulting position, you can now see, does not base its account of persons or subjects on a substance metaphysics, nor on a theory of momentary actual occasions. Rooted in the scientific study of evolutionary emergence and in the phenomenological study of subjective experience, it affirms the existence of extended subjective or experiential events. Certain of these extended events within the ongoing flow of change we call persons. These person-events are downwardly dependent on the physical laws and regularities of our universe and on the particular biological and natural history of this planet, but they are also more than that history.

There are features of your subjective experience at this very moment and over the span of your personal history that are unique and unrepeatable. At this point I can embrace Whitehead's analysis of the unique features, the subjective stamp, contributed by individual occasions in the process of their concrescence. But granting a certain ultimacy or uniqueness to the category of person, as I have done, links my position more closely to the metaphysics of the so-called Boston Personalists (esp. Sheffield Brightman and Peter Bertocci, but also Borden Parker Bowne, Edgar Albert Cornelius Knudson, and Walter George Muelder).

To those Whiteheadians who would cite the Zeno-like paradoxes of extended subjectivity against me, I respond with the medieval maxim, "from actuality possibility follows": if something is actual it must be possible.<sup>37</sup> The extended subjective present is a core feature of our being-in-the-world; without it you would not understand a single sentence that I say (perhaps you don't anyway).

## **Persons and God**

There's more to say here, but I must move on to a closing question of some significance, at least to the theists among us: if there are subjects extended in time, and if you are one of them, how does this conclusion impact our understanding of the question of God in general, and of Christian theology in particular? On my reading of the critics of orthodox Whiteheadian thought, Whitehead's position has faced objections on three fronts: in its dialogue with the natural sciences, because of the claim that nonliving particles are units of subjective experience; in its dialogue with psychology, because of differences over the status of extended subjects; and in its dialogue with theology, because of the question of how to conceptualize the divine experience. I have already spoken of psychology today and will offer a compromise formulation regarding physics this coming October. So let me close with a brief comment on theology.

Although I embrace dipolar theism as one of Whitehead's great contributions to theology, I remain dissatisfied with some Whiteheadian accounts of the subjectivity of God. Neither of the two major options — God as the eternal concrescence of a single actual occasion, or God as a series of actual occasions — seems fully satisfactory to me. If it were metaphysically possible to conceive God in some third fashion, and yet still to preserve divine responsiveness, divine persuasion, and the two poles of God, would this not be preferable?

I have argued today, following Bergson, that it is metaphysically permissible to conceive ourselves as subjects extended in time. What is possible for human persons must also be possible for the supra-personal reality we call God. Like us, God is a subjective event extended in time, with some similar features to our experience as subjects, albeit infinitely greater than our own — features such as agency, internal subjective experience, valuation, creativity, becoming. As a pantheist, I also hold that God is related to the universe in a fashion at least analogous to our relationship to our bodies. Of course, there are many differences. One is that the duration of our subjective event is limited, whereas the duration of the divine experience is eternal.

## **Conclusion**

I have examined the process philosophy of Henri Bergson. In the course of this talk we witnessed a three-way conversation between Bergson, Samuel Alexander, and Whitehead.

Bergson offers a corrective both to the overly dominant physicalist assumptions of Alexander's process thought and to the event-atomism of Whitehead. Of course, I hope I have convinced you that you are subject extended in time, and hence that temporally subjects are metaphysically possible. But I have also tried to model a form of constructive process thought — one that draws on multiple process thinkers, as well as on science and theology — that I called *process pluralism*. I look forward to your comments, questions and criticisms.

## Endnotes

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1. Nicholas Rescher *Process Metaphysics: An Introduction to Process Philosophy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), p. 168.
2. Quoted in Rescher, p. 17.
3. As quoted in Brougham, "Reality and Appearance in Bergson and Whitehead," *Process Studies* 24, no. 1 (1995): 39-43, p. 40.
4. See e.g. Richard Brougham, "Ontological Hermeneutics: An Overlooked Bergsonian Perspective," in *Process Studies* 22, no. 1 (1993), p. 39.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 39.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 39.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 40.
8. See Randall Auxier, "Influence as Confluence: Bergson and Whitehead," originally published in *Process Studies* 28, no. 3-4 (1999), reprinted in <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=2993>. Because the reference is from the internet, page numbers are not given for subsequent citations.
9. *Ibid.*
10. Rescher, p. 17.
11. Bergson, *An Introduction to Metaphysics* (New York, 1955), p. 24, cited in James Felt, "Intuition, Event-Atomism, and the Self" in Andrew Papanicolaou and Pete A. Y. Gunter, eds., *Bergson and Modern Thought: Towards a Unified Science* (London: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1987), p. 40. See also the excellent chapter on Bergson by Pete Gunter in David Ray Griffin et al., *Founders of Constructive Postmodern Philosophy: Peirce, James, Bergson, Whitehead, and Hartshorne* (Albany: State Univ. of New York Press, 1993), pp. 133-63.
12. Berson, *Creative Mind*, p. 32, quoted in Felt, pp. 40f.
13. *Creative Mind*, p. 37.
14. Felt, p. 48
15. Bergson, *Mind-Energy*, translated by H. Wildon Carr (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1920), p. 38.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 39.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 70.
18. Bergson, *Mind-Energy*, pp. 22-23.
19. Yet note that for Bergson individual perceptions within the flow of change already each have some temporal extension!
20. *Ibid.*, 46.
21. *Ibid.*, 52.
22. *Mind-Energy*, 92.

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23. *Ibid.*, 245.
  24. Charles Hartshorne, "Some Under- and some Over-rated Great Philosophers," in *Process Studies* 21, no.3 (1992), 166.
  25. *Mind-Energy*, 49.
  26. Andrew G. Bjelland, "Durational Succession and Proto-Mental Agency," in Papanicolaou and Gunter, eds., *Bergson and Modern Thought*, pp. 19-37.
  27. *Creative Mind*, p. 36.
  28. Lucius Hopkins Miller, *Bergson and Religion* (New York: Henry Hult and Company, 1916), p. 157.
  29. Bergson, quoted in Miller, p. 158.
  30. Louis Levine, "Interview with Bergson," *New York Times*, February 22, 1914, quoted in Miller, pp. 160-61.
  31. See the works by James Felt and Peter Gunter referenced elsewhere in this paper.
  32. Whitehead, *Modes of Thought* (New York: Free Press, 1938, 1966), p. 110. Hartshorne also emphasizes Bergson's great affinity to Whitehead.
  33. Charles Hartshorne, "Some Under- and some Over-rated Great Philosophers," p. 166.
  34. Bergson, *The Creative Mind*, trans. Mabelle Andison (New York: Philosophical Library, 1946), p. 36.
  35. Charles Hartshorne, "The Organism According to Process Philosophy," in Ernest Wolf-Gazo, ed., *Process in Context: Essays in Post-Whiteheadian Perspectives* (New York: Walter Lang, 1988), pp. 69-92, quote p. 85.
  36. Brian Cantwell Smith, 'God, approximately', unpublished paper, 3. This paper provides a brief summary of the broader argument in Cantwell Smith's *On the Origin of Objects* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996).
  37. Cf. Charles Hartshorne: "What is possible for today is determined by what happened yesterday. In this sense possibility precedes actuality. True enough, what is actual today determines the possibilities for tomorrow; in this sense the actual precedes the possible" (Hartshorne, "A Logic of Ultimate Contrasts," online at <[http://www.hyattcarter.com/ultimate\\_contrasts.htm](http://www.hyattcarter.com/ultimate_contrasts.htm)>, verified January 26, 2005).