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The Character of Cognition in Henri Bergson's Theory

Abstract

In the paper, I try to establish in a systematic manner the character of human cognition in Henri Bergson's theory. In the first part of the article, I examine if in this conception one is able to come into contact with the extended world. In this context, I analyze the function of image as well as the original character of human consciousness based on the category of duration. It is discussed whether the specificity of human memory and body make objective cognition of the external world impossible. Images composing the material reality turn out to overcome mental perceptual capacities. On the other hand, sensations coming from the extended world constitute a small part of the whole process in comparison to what memory adds to perception. I argue, however, that Bergson's idealistic theory of cognition goes beyond Kantian scheme of intuition because it relates directly to material reality.

Introduction

Henri Bergson, a French philosopher living at the beginning of XX century, created an original theory of cognition. In his considerations he rejects associationist interpretation of human consciousness whose capstone can be found in Hume's conception. According to that theory consciousness can be described by means of ideas and impressions linked by spatial relations. But if processes taking place in the mind were subject to laws of causality in the naturalistic sense, then human mind could be only passively subject to the operations taking place in the brain. However, the common experience says that in the mind there take place spiritual processes of creation which do not seem to be subject to the conditioning in naturalistic sense but create something qualitatively new. Thus, the French philosopher criticizes mechanistic vision of the world as well as the associationist conception of the consciousness. What character in those circumstances does cognition in Bergson's system possess?

In the article I will make the analysis of the relationship between the act of cognition and the action in the conception of this philosopher. On the one hand, it is claimed that impressions enable one to cognize the external world, and, even place oneself within things, which would imply that the mind is able to perceive

the surrounding reality in an objective manner. On the other hand, the richness and diversity of the world prove to overcome human capacity of cognition. What is more, the consciousness, on which the memory exerts its influence, also distorts the perception of objects. I shall discuss to what degree such perception possesses creative character, which means to what extent it is co-created by the mind.

In my work I shall make an attempt to show that philosopher overcomes – in any case in accordance with his own intention – idealistic as well as realistic limitations. I will use in that analysis some elements of Berkeley's conception of cognition which strongly influenced Bergson's manner of thinking. First, I shall explain what the function of the image in perception is. Then, I will distinguish between the rules governing the material world and the laws acting in the mind. I will present in this context the original character of human consciousness. In the next part of the article, I shall describe two crucial phenomena influencing human perception and I will consider the question if on the basis of Bergson's conception the objective cognition of reality is possible.

I. Berkeley's theory of perception

In Bergson's system the body of the perceiving individual and other bodies constitute a set of images placed on one plane and interacting with each other according to fixed laws.¹ It means that there are no things that would not be images at the same time. H. Bergson refers in that way to Berkeley's theory which claims that "esse est percipi" and the term "image" signifies what is just perceived. Human cognitive capacities as well as the circumstances of perception determine the existence of ideas-objects. That is the reason why the same status is attributed to the phenomenon of perception as well as to the phenomenon of existence.

In Berkeley's system the notion of sensation puts emphasis on the senses but it does not really permit to specify where the contents of sensations come from. On the basis of considerations concerning the character of perception, the modern philosopher comes to the conclusion that the world of extended objects does not really exist and it is God who makes us see images. Image does not constitute the true object of external world or our sight, which is composed of light and colours, but what is impinged on the eye's retina and which can be comprehended or imagined even by a blind person:

Pictures therefore may be understood in a twofold sense, or as two kinds quite dissimilar and heterogeneous, the one consisting of light, shade, and colours; the other not properly pictures, but images projected on the *retina*. Accordingly, for distinction, I shall call those pictures, and these images. The former are visible and the peculiar objects of sight. The latter are so far otherwise, that a man blind from his birth may perfectly imagine, understand, and comprehend them.²

¹ Cf. H. Bergson, *Matière et mémoire*, Paris 1959, p. 354.

² G. Berkeley, *The Theory of Vision Vindicated and Explained*, Cambridge 1860, article 51, pp. 94–95.

Ideas of sensation referring to sensible things can be separated into *minima sensibilia*, which are finite and constitute the lowest threshold of perception.³ Space is composed of the *minima visibilia* or *tangibilia* and time is composed of the *minima temporalia*. Human mind links those ideas in a special order, so they can be united into one object. Bundles of ideas received through sensations or perceptions can therefore constitute separate things. The sharpness, size and location of visual images suggest the character of the objects of touch. Ideas of sight make us in that case envisage ideas of touch in which we have to do with constant size of things determined by the size of our body. However, G. Berkeley claims that the smallest entities of visual perception, *minima visibilia*, and of tactile perception, *minima tactilia* – are divergent. Between both kinds of ideas there is only a habitual connection constructed by human mind, which does not result from the objective relation between them.⁴

What seems extremely important is that only *minimum sensibile* – a simple sensuous perception – constitutes objective part of the experience because it takes place independently of the consciousness. The mind orders series of *minima* in ideas of objects with regard to the past events and to the future actions. It combines both kinds of experience and ascribes them to concrete objects. The manner in which they are connected in human mind possesses therefore a subjective character, directed at practical action. Still, such connection does not occur in the reference to the external space, but is determined by human reason and will.⁵

Berkeley argues that the notion of time can be described as a succession of moments unique for every individual. So there are no objects independent of the mind. But at the same time the collection of ideas of sensation must be standardized in the case where they form coherent and consistent ideas-things. First, in *Principles* it is claimed that those bundles of ideas correspond to physical objects in Lockean sense. But in *Dialogues*, Berkeley argues that the object is composed from a series of objects: “a continued series of visible objects succeeding each other”,⁶ it consists of the flow of ideas which follows the laws of nature.

In summary, perception does not possess a passive character nor there is an objective measure of time where particular substances would be placed, but on the contrary, every particular mind constitutes their own time of experience, it links *minima sensibilia* in an individual way. Therefore the relational nature of time is assumed, time constitutes the order of the succession of perceptions or ideas.

II. Do we cognize the material world?

The question is whether in Bergson's conception consciousness, likewise, creates images in an arbitrary way and whether they belong to the external reality.

³ Cf. D. Hynes, ‘Berkeley's Corpuscular Philosophy of Time, *University of Illinois Press* 4 (2005), pp. 339–356, pp. 347–348.

⁴ G. Berkeley, *The Theory of Vision...*, article 57, pp. 102–103.

⁵ Cf. A. Grzeliński, ‘Wstęp’, [in:] G. Berkeley, *Próba stworzenia nowej teorii widzenia i inne eseje filozoficzne*, Toruń 2011, p. 17.

⁶ G. Berkeley, *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous*, J. Bennett (ed.), London 2004, p. 21. Cf. G. Berkeley, *Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*, London 1734, article 38, pp. 21–22. Cf. D. Hynes, *Berkeley's Corpuscular Philosophy...*, p. 350.

According to the French philosopher, the body and the nervous system constitute the place where the movements received in the form of excitations are transmitted and then returned in the form of reflex actions or actions dependent on will. The objects impress vibrations on the nerves that are next transmitted to perception centres. Human perception depends on those movements. It possesses a specific character, it is not us who direct our attention to the chosen things, but it is the things that act upon us and force us to perceive them. Images of perceived things are thereby placed outside of the image of a receiving body. The brain just manages perceptions caused by the material world and its states are defined as the origin of action. But it is not the centre of reflection, because it is not able to create psychic states.⁷

In Bergson's system it is not sensation like in Berkeley's theory, that constitutes the origin of cognition. It is the action that is the starting point for impressions as well as for perceptions. Its role is to show a possible influence of objects on the body. The term "sensation" implies in that case the relation between senses and the external object for it is based on a real action of objects on the body. A human being receives therefore sensations independently of their will and activity.

In pure perception and sensation, a mind does not construct perceptions but really sees the external world, it comes into direct and immediate contact with objects. We are not in our body like a sailor on the ship because our vital needs determine our perception. Furthermore, if perception is placed in things themselves, it means that a human being is entitled to transcendent cognition.⁸ It is obtained through pure perception: „[...] the material world is made up of objects, or, if you prefer it, of images, of which all the parts act and react upon each other by movements. And that which constitutes our pure perception is our dawning action, in so far as it is prefigured in those images". [„Ce qui constitue le monde matériel, avons-nous dit, ce sont des objets, ou, si l'on aime mieux, des images, dont toutes les parties agissent et réagissent par des mouvements les unes sur les autres. Et ce qui constitue notre perception pure, c'est, au sein même de ces images, notre action naissante qui se dessine"].⁹

But do – according to Bergson – images exist constantly or only when they are perceived? It turns out that they co-create material world and are independent of our perception: „It is true that an image may *be* without *being perceived*; it may be present without being represented". [„Il est vrai qu'une image peut être sans être perçue, elle peut être présente sans être représentée"].¹⁰ The object is, in that case, the image which exists in itself and at the same time it is just like we perceive it. The philosopher claims that such understanding of the matter was accepted also by common knowledge according to which: first, a thing exists independently

⁷ Regarding the character of matter and perception, see H. Bergson, *Matière et mémoire*, pp. 318–319.

⁸ “[...] in pure perception we are actually placed outside ourselves, we touch the reality of the object in an immediate intuition”, H. Bergson, *Matière et mémoire*, p. 84. Cf. V. Delbos, ‘Matière et mémoire: essai sur la relation du corps à l'esprit’, *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* 3 (1897), p. 354.

⁹ H. Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, p. 74. H. Bergson, *Matière et mémoire*, p. 215.

¹⁰ H. Bergson, *Matter and memory*, p. 27. H. Bergson, *Matière et mémoire*, p. 185

of a perceiving person; secondly, it is denied that it is completely different from the way we perceive it or that it possesses neither colour nor texture. These qualities are indeed located in material objects, they are not composed from subjective perceptions of the soul. The view that the secondary qualities are created by primary qualities and do not exist in themselves is in that way rejected.¹¹

The only way to solve the issue how it happens that consciousness – whose states are qualitative – perceives objects in space possessing purely qualitative character, is to grant those objects qualities. The matter is subject to continuous internal vibrations. Among sensuous qualities occurring in representations and those representations understood as countable quantitative changes there is only a difference in the rhythm of duration, in the rhythm of internal tension. Physical phenomena retain in that way quantitative as well as qualitative features.¹²

Both matter and sensation possess in Bergson's conception the extended character. The perception does not therefore constitute a sort of contemplation, neither does it have a speculative character aimed at the disinterested cognition. The reality of extended objects is not reconstructed but experienced. Matter does not possess any mysterious power, we get to know those features of it that are essential for us in pure perception.

III. The category of image

The material objects regained secondary qualities such as colour and texture. That's why H. Bergson can use the category of image in his conception. He characterizes things as images and argues that perceived objects together with sensuous qualities such as smell or touch, do really participate in the material world. He does not change pure perceptions into representations arising in human mind independently of the external world, it is just the opposite, he includes them in that world.¹³

The term „image” does not constitute a copy of the absent original, on the contrary, it permits coming into direct contact with matter. A human being perceives it as a material thing which occurs in a system of images connected to each other via the laws of nature, it is the extension of the past images which gives birth to the future images. It constitutes in that way the crossing point where all modifications of the images in the world meet. Perceived thing is composed in that case from qualities and differs from a figment of imagination which does not stay in strict connection with other images. Finally, it turns out that there is only a difference of a degree between the existence of objects and their perception by a human mind.¹⁴

¹¹ About rejection of the division on primary and secondary qualities cf. H. Bergson *Matière et mémoire*, avant-propos, p. 163. Compare with J. Searle's conception stating biological naturalism, where the secondary qualities come from the primary ones. See J.R. Searle, *Umystna nowo odkryty*, transl. T. Baszniak, Warszawa 1999.

¹² Cf. H. Bergson, *Matière et mémoire*, pp. 319, 376–377.

¹³ Regarding the function of images in human cognition cf. B. Gilson, *La révision bergsonienne de la philosophie de l'esprit*, Paris 1992, pp. 33–38.

¹⁴ Cf. H. Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, p. 30. F. Worms, *Vocabulaire de Bergson*, Paris 2000, p. 29.

At the beginning of the „Matter and Memory”, H. Bergson gives the definition of the image; by this term he understands the existence that is „more than that which the idealist calls a representation” [„plus que ce que l'idéaliste appelle une représentation”], but, still, something „less than that which the realist calls a thing, – an existence placed half-way between the ‘thing’ and the ‘representation’.” [moins que ce que le réaliste appelle une chose, – une existence située à mi-chemin entre la ‘chose’ et la ‘représentation’”].¹⁵ Images are thus placed among objects and their representations. In that case, do they participate in external things or are they things themselves? Can the image be comprehended as a material object in accordance with the tradition of naïve realism?

It seems essential at this stage to refer to the system of Kant who claimed that the matter shows us as an external phenomenon, yet, in fact, we do not know what it is in itself. He represents idealistic standpoint. External phenomena constitute the cause of perception, but still, on the basis of our impressions the existence of material things cannot be deduced. External objects cannot be located inside the mind so they cannot get included in the perception which constitutes the qualification of the apperception and belongs only to the consciousness. Nevertheless, on the basis of perceptions one may be tempted to draw a conclusion that there exist objects which correspond to them. Yet, it cannot be unambiguously stated whether the relation between perception and its cause possesses an internal or external character, whether our perceptions are really caused by external things or maybe just created by internal sense.¹⁶

While constructing his theory, H. Bergson makes an attempt to overcome difficulties raised in the conception of Kant who limited the capacities of human cognition in a drastic manner. At first sight, it seems that as regards the possibility of the cognition of matter, the French philosopher inclines towards the realistic standpoint.¹⁷ He claims that perception possesses an impersonal character at its origin. Sensation makes reaching the material world possible. It permits us to determine the limit between our body and the other bodies, so between what is internal and external, as well as to act effectively on the environment. The body is the centre of the action, its role consists in choosing the appropriate reaction to

¹⁵ H. Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, pp. vii–viii. H. Bergson, *Matière et mémoire*, avant-propos, p. 161.

¹⁶ Cf. I. Kant, *Krytyka czystego rozumu*, transl. R. Ingarden, Kety 2001, A368–A380, pp. 333–340. Cf. D. Leszczyński, *Realizm i sceptycyzm*, Wrocław 2012, pp. 144–150.

¹⁷ According to the contemporary philosopher, J.R. Searle, the world of extended objects is in general cognitively accessible, we are able to cognize it in an intersubjective manner. It is therefore impossible that it constituted only the individual, isolated world of sensuous data. If sensuous data constituted only private experience of individuals, it would be impossible to talk about commonly existing material things. If there existed only bundles of sensations perceived by each person in an individual way – people would not be able to communicate effectively about general objects of reference. Neither could there exist language enabling communication concerning the external world. However, Searle's arguments supporting the existence of material external objects cannot concern Kant's conception where transcendental categories of cognition include at least the whole human species in a way that people order in a similar manner sensual data. Thanks to that common capacity they are able to communicate about information received from senses. Cf. J.R. Searle, *Umysł: krótkie wprowadzenie*, transl. J. Karłowski, Poznań 2010, pp. 272–273.

the received stimulus. Stimulation from outside causes sensations. Every sensation contains a certain quantity of impressions occurring in their respective order. This order comes from a sense organ stimulated by a material object. H. Bergson compares sense organs to a big keyboard on which a thing at the same time does its chord of thousands of notes, causing a huge number of simple sensations.¹⁸

As it is stated that images exist independently of our perception, the existence of external objects is confirmed. In that case pure perception possesses the objective character as far as it enables one to sense the external world and come into contact with it. H. Bergson goes even further, he claims that it allows entering into things: „Perception, in its pure state, is then, in very truth, a part of things”.¹⁹ In the further part of the article, I shall consider if such conception fulfils the postulate of the epistemological realism, if it does assume objective perception of external objects by human mind.

The objective cognition would mean that perception of the material world does not contain the constructivist element; it would consist only in receiving images from which the external reality is composed. It seems that in order to fully understand the nature of cognition in Bergson's theory, the character of human consciousness should be analysed.

IV. The character of human consciousness

In Bergson's theory the creative power [*force créatrice*] existing in the universe has a free and spiritual character. It organizes matter which, from its side, restrains its development. Their union gives birth – in consequence of the evolution – to different kinds of life:

- passive plants which are more like the matter than living organisms;
- animals possessing freedom of an unpredictable action even though their behaviour is first and foremost of the automatic character;
- human beings in whom matter reaches the maximum of instability. They constitute the climax of the creative force because they are able to make choice among different ways of behaviour. Consciousness breaks the chains of captivation by matter. A human being uses their body in order to act unpredictably, they invent language and create social complex structures.²⁰

In the associationist conception, separate elements combine with each other in the brain in a mechanical manner, in accordance with the fixed rules. Yet, H. Bergson claims that only in the material world can particular states be distinguished clearly, then linked by means of laws and unified via the notion of space. Still, in the human mind a dynamic progress takes place. We should distinguish between a profound ego and superficial ego obeying the rules of language and action.²¹ In the second case particular psychic states capable of being described by means of scientific rules can be distinguished, which is forced by practical requirements and

¹⁸ Cf. H. Bergson, *Matière et mémoire*, pp. 212, 273.

¹⁹ H. Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, p. 68.

²⁰ H.M. Kallen, 'James, Bergson, and Traditional Metaphysics', *Mind* 90 (1914), pp. 219–221.

²¹ Regarding two forms of memory as well as automatic and attentive recognition cf. H. Bergson, *Matière et mémoire*, pp. 225–235, p. 364. Cf. F. Worms, *Vocabulaire...*, p. 10.

a rational thinking. Laws in force in the material world manifest themselves in a habit, in which inextended consciousness adopts behaviours describable by means of spatial rules. However, only the shallowest part of consciousness – subject to the necessity of external reality – manifests itself in automatic reactions. In contrast, its profound part is not determined, since it can make a choice how to react to the received stimulus. The possibility of choice between different kinds of behaviour and the dependence on memory contribute to its original and unique character²².

Bergson's conception of consciousness is based on the category of duration. Psychic causality possesses a purely dynamic character in the case where movement and change taking place in consciousness are not strictly connected with actions regarding the external world. From the standpoint of mechanics, a material point exists in the eternal present, yet, on the living bodies – and certainly on the conscious beings – it is memory that exerts its influence. That's why an abstract law of mechanics does not constitute the law of psyche.²³ There is thus a difference between a real duration (*durée réelle*) of the consciousness and the notion of time used in natural sciences where the abstract movement is not capable of explaining the real, experienced changes in their essence. It consists of a series of instantaneous positions, but it cannot fulfil the gaps between them.

It is not possible to return to the initial state in consciousness, not automatized, profound psychic states appear in mind only once and cannot be repeated. Furthermore, it is not possible to clearly distinguish previous and subsequent states, cause and effect within a dynamic memory influencing the functioning of the consciousness, as it would mean the juxtaposition of the particular elements, their mutual exteriority in space.²⁴ And space should be excluded from inextended mental life: „With memory we are in very truth in the domain of spirit”.²⁵ The memory is not composed of particular states which can be juxtaposed; neither does it constitute a mixture of associations. On the contrary, it is one and indivisible. In that way, Bergson rejects determinism which does not only signify the prediction of the occurrence of a particular effect, but implies mechanical causality. Therefore a human ego constitutes the centre of indetermination.²⁶ For the mind the transition from the present state into a future one means the effort which possesses an unlimited possibility of realizations.²⁷ The consciousness is characterized by changeability, continuous flow of impressions, perceptions, thoughts; it is nourished by its past. Reconstruction of exactly the same impression in the mind is not possible, because the circumstances of our perception change as well as the mental state which modifies our interpretation of the same sensation.²⁸

²² For more on the influence of memory on the consciousness, cf. J.-L. Vieillard-Baron, *Introduction: La durée et la nature*, [in:] J.-L. Vieillard-Baron (ed.), *Bergson, la durée et la nature*, Paris 2004, pp.15–17.

²³ Cf. H. Bergson, *Matière et mémoire*, p. 102.

²⁴ Regarding the character of space in Bergson's theory of cognition, cf. F. Worms, *Bergson ou les deux sens de la vie*, Paris 2004, pp. 88–93.

²⁵ H. Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, p. 320.

²⁶ Cf. F. Worms, *Bergson...*, pp. 148–151.

²⁷ Cf. M. Merleau-Ponty, *The Incarnate Subject*, transl. P.B. Milan, New York 2001, pp. 90–91.

²⁸ I purposely pass over the question of identity of a human being, for the reason that it exceeds

The same motives acting on an individual will not cause the same effects in their consciousness.

Against Hume's associationist psychology, experiences that interweave in our consciousness with recollections, cannot constitute portions of discreet impressions or ideas. Mental states combine and form the whole. Furthermore, multitude of psychic states is not quantitative but qualitative. Individual and unique character of human consciousness goes beyond material limits; it is not static but subject to continuous development. Present and past experiences alike take part in this process.²⁹

There is, thus, a basic difference between immaterial soul and extension. However, H. Bergson does not maintain Cartesian dualism. Duration makes cooperation of the two heterogenic categories possible. Distinction between matter and mind should – in that case – be based not on the notion of space, but on the notion of time. Changes occurring in the extension possess infinitely fast rhythm of duration which differs from vibrations happening in the consciousness.³⁰ Still, material object vibrations constitute the repetition of relatively the same act. That is why laws can be applied in reference to the physical world.

V. The creative dimension of cognition

In scientific cognition only common contents of human experience are examined – such as spatial character of bodies. That is because they can be assumed as objective and fixed in laws. Therefore other traits of the external reality which seem relativized to individual perceptions are rejected.

This is how J. Locke operates for he is interested only in an objective sphere of cognition in his work. But G. Berkeley proceeds in the opposite way, he claims that the division into objective and subjective contents of experience is arbitrary. He analyses individual sphere of perceptions as well as the relation between activity of the will and human being's experiences. Such distinct perspective can be found also in Bergson's works.³¹

In direct sensuous experience, a thing can present itself in different situations in different dimensions, depending on the distance at which we are from it. The intellect must correct our perceptions, without its help we would think that every time we have to do with a different object. In reality, there is a huge difference between what we perceive and what we comprehend because the experiences are ordered in organized structures. In Bergson's conception this distinctness results from laws which are in force in the mind and in the material world. Consciousness joins notions to the perceptions and the other way round. Their contents are thus not only the result of sensuous experience but also of the intellect's operations. It is impossible to clearly distinguish between intellect's creations and the data

the confines of this article.

²⁹ Cf. R. Ingarden, *Intuicja i intelekt u H. Bergsona*, transl. M. Turowicz, [in:] R. Ingarden, *Z badań nad filozofia współczesna*, Warszawa 1963, p. 18. Cf. N.C. Barr, 'The Dualism of Bergson', *The Philosophical Review* 6 (1913), p. 650.

³⁰ Cf. V. Delbos, *Matière et mémoire...*, p. 377.

³¹ Cf. A. Grzeliński, *Wstęp*, [in:] G. Berkeley, *Próba stworzenia...*, pp. 20–21.

coming from senses.

Mental structures permit consciousness to get free from the rhythm of the flow of things and to immerse in the past in order to make decisions concerning the present and the future. The recollection is able to influence the reception of sensation because it can come into contact with it and materialize. Memory is constantly present in the mind and enables perception of concrete states of things from different perspectives. It adjusts its stronger or weaker influence to the requirements of the situation. It links bigger or smaller quantity of recollections with present perception, depending on the character of the latter: „concrete perception [...] the living synthesis of pure perception and pure memory, necessarily sums up in its apparent simplicity an enormous multiplicity of moments.” [„La perception concrète [...] synthèse vivante de la perception pure et de la mémoire pure, résume nécessairement dans son apparente simplicité une multiplicité énorme de moments”].³²

Our particular perception constitutes, after all, the combination of pure perception and pure memory and consists of a huge quantity of moments which can be subject to bigger or smaller tension. The tension in a human being limits their perception, adapts it to vital needs, constrains the flow of recollections, emotions and desires that create indivisible multiplicity. Consciousness is able to keep itself in a dream state (e.g. while sleeping) or contract, thanks to memory, different moments of time – such as perceptions and memories – in the way to make use of them in action, in real life situations. It should be therefore considered if in Bergson’s theory a person by means of perception is really placing themselves in things.

As he claims in another fragment of „Matter and Memory” the perception provides opportunity to bring out the right recollections from memory and use them in new behaviour.³³ Thus a look contains more than a perception of an object. Sensuous perception of the external world constitutes a small part of the whole process in comparison to what memory adds to present perception: „memory [...] covering as it does with a cloak of recollections a core of immediate perception, and also contracting a number of external moments into a single internal moment, constitutes the principal share of individual consciousness in perception”. [„la mémoire [...] en tant qu’elle recouvre d’une nappe de souvenirs un fond de perception immédiate et en tant aussi qu’elle contracte une multiplicité de moments, constitue le principal apport de la conscience individuelle dans le perception; le côté subjectif de notre connaissance des choses”].³⁴ Bergson’s theory of cognition can be characterized thereby as idealistic since the perception of the reality is co-created by consciousness. It means that a psychic state is not identical with a brain state neither is it subject to the laws of the material world.

There is also another reason why cognition of the material reality cannot have

³² H. Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, pp. 329–330. H. Bergson, *Matière et mémoire*, p. 376.

³³ Cf. H. Bergson, *Matière et mémoire*, pp. 213, 293.

³⁴ H. Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, p. 25. H. Bergson, *Matière et mémoire*, p. 184. See also F. Worms, *Vocabulaire...*, pp. 29–31 where it is claimed that image shows external reality in an objective way.

an objective character. The body turns out to be “the mould into which my personality is poured, the sieve through which my ideas are sifted”.³⁵ The perception of the external world is limited by human cognitive capacities. It cannot be forgotten that our self can act upon extension only by means of body and its main motive of the action is its protection. Perception does not therefore serve disinterested cognition but action.

Images composing the material world, are independent of us and overcome the capacities of human perception even if we united the past, the present and possible states of consciousness. We do see things for the influence that they can exert on us or depending on to what extent we are willing to affect the surrounding images. Hence the perception of the external world does not have an objective character but it is aimed at body protection and projection of its potential actions on the material world. Yet, objects do not create only a subjective bundle of sensuous data, which is proved by their intersubjective character. One receives a real stimulus from the external world but their decision concerning its meaning has a subjective dimension. Images constitute virtual parts of the external world which can become the object of perception. In that way, matter exists in an objective manner, independently of our perception, but the way of selecting and combining images by mind possesses a relative dimension based on the specificity of the body and the consciousness of the perceiving being. In sciences, material reality is fixed by laws which define how images act on one another. Yet, these laws permit to differentiate only particular fragments from the extended world's matter.

In Bergson's theory, images do not mean representations understood as mental copies of material objects. Things perceived by mind are called images rather than objects because human perception is not able to express the whole richness of relationships occurring among different parts of the matter. It appears that pure perception received from the external world takes on the subjective character in the human brain. The image does not represent a material object in an exact manner but that part which our body is able to see, always in some particular perspective.

Like in Berkeley's theory, one judges reality on the basis of what they are able to cognize and their perceptual capacities are fundamentally relational. But English philosopher's postulate “esse est percipi” is significantly modified. H. Bergson claims that there exists an external extended world. However, human mind simplifies it to the form of limited amount of images.³⁶ The consciousness picks out only singular links from the chain of relations. It occurs so just because it is not capable of getting to know the reality in its whole richness and diversity nor its dynamic character. Yet, on the other hand, memory acts upon the mind and adds to present images – the images of the past, enriching and modifying in that manner our cognition of the external reality.³⁷

³⁵ N.C. Barr, *The Dualism...*, p. 642.

³⁶ Cf. V. Delbos, *Matière et mémoire...*, p. 385.

³⁷ For more on the creative role of the memory in the process of cognition, see V. Jankélévitch, *Henri Bergson*, Paris 1959, pp. 108–112.

H. Bergson rejects in that way the possibility of disinterested cognition by the body of the material world. Those parts which are of no importance at a present moment, are enshadowed and flow imperceptibly. Perception would be in that case a choice of suitable images. They can be understood as parts of the material universe which exist independently of our mind and possesses a realistic character. But images comprehended as mind's perceptions constitute subjective snapshots of the matter adapted to human cognitive capacities.³⁸

The conclusion could be drawn that in Bergson's conception, both realities—mental and extended—do not overlap. If we described memory as set A and body as set B, both sets would turn out to be partially disjoint. However, they do possess an intersection which takes the form of consciousness.

Conclusion

In the empiristic theory, relations have the status of exteriority; which is why particular impressions and ideas composing human experience do not influence each other. In Bergson's conception singular psychic states interpenetrate in the mind and do not stay in upfront determined relations towards one another. Thereby, the philosopher makes an attempt to free consciousness from the laws governing the external world.³⁹

On the other hand, human being links particular ideas as a reaction to present events. The nature can be characterized as a set of phenomena staying in specific relations. It does not constitute the objective object of perception because mind takes a creative role in the process of cognition. Mind receives impressions from outside and then combines them in a subjective manner. What is more, it cannot be forgotten that it is impossible in consciousness [*conscience qui dure*] to fix a moment because relationships between consciousness and things are subject to continuous change; it means that in human mind there takes place the incessant train of succeeding ideas.⁴⁰

The object is the idea linked by different kinds of relation with other ideas. It turns out that the relation of mind to an idea is identical with the relation of the mind to the perceived world.⁴¹ A material thing is described as the image because it constitutes the consolidation of the moments or ideas, a snapshot of reality. The mind cuts out images from the whole of the matter in its individual way, in accordance with the body needs. That is why F. Worms defines Bergson's theory of cognition as pragmatic idealism. We do perceive those elements of things which are essential for our body, since we are not capable of perceiving all relations which simultaneously link a thing with other objects. What is more, a cognitive act has a relative character also because during this act consciousness contracts movements and qualities, adapting them to its own rhythm and unique character of memory. Consciousness chooses the suitable recollections from memory in order to efficiently participate in current actions. It combines particular moments in one

³⁸ Cf. F. Worms, *Vocabulaire...*, p. 29.

³⁹ Cf. N.C. Barr, *The Dualism...*, p. 641.

⁴⁰ Cf. A. Grzebiński, *Człowiek i duch nieskończony*, Toruń 2010, pp. 109–110.

⁴¹ Cf. M. Merleau-Ponty, *The Incarnate Subject*, p. 39.

perception. Every perception takes a certain duration, extends the past in the present participating in memory in this way. Yet, images do not exist only when they are perceived by mind. As already claimed, according to Bergson, the real external world exists.

His theory differs from Kant's conception of cognition where a human being is not capable of cognizing the world of noumena. Yet, in Bergson's system, the relative character of perception enables contact with matter – which constitutes the source of images. This solution goes beyond Kantian scheme of intuition because a man relates directly to material reality through pure perception. In that way, the popular experience according to which one is able to act upon external world and be also an object of its action, is not disregarded. H. Bergson attempts in a subtle way to defend the ontological realism.

It can be claimed that individual perception is characterized by moderate kind of idealism, but if the ontological character of the whole of matter is concerned, it has a realistic dimension. In Bergson's system, a human being keeps contact with the external world, receiving a continuous stimulus from it. On the other hand, the limited character of their mind enables them only a relative cognition. However, the French philosopher makes a hypothesis that if we rejected intellect in favour of intuition as well as got rid of habits such as spatial seeing of the extended world and, furthermore, if we conducted systematic research concerning functioning of consciousness and memory – the direct seeing of reality could be possible. But would that cognition be objective, unfalsified?