

Character Beyond Boundaries

Between Pure Repetition and Pure Creation in Bergson and Merleau-Ponty

Donald A. Landes

Faculté de philosophie, Université Laval (Québec)

- abstract -

At the outset of *Creative Evolution* (1907), Henri Bergson poses the fundamental question: what is the meaning of the word “existence”? His sketch of an answer begins from his critique of human intelligence as the faculty of *spatializing* experience, that is, as the faculty of *establishing boundaries*. Intelligence, which has evolved specifically to enable action, constructs for itself a world of juxtaposed objects and states that admit of merely *external* relations. And yet existence, argues Bergson, is *duration*, a heterogeneous “flux of fleeting nuances” that encroach and transgress upon each other, never truly stabilizing clear boundaries. As a result – and as counterintuitive as it may sound – human intelligence is woefully inadequate for philosophical reflection and expression. To illustrate what he means by duration, then, Bergson deploys a series of examples and metaphors in a new methodology that he names “intuition.” One of his recurring examples is that of character or personality as a continuous self-creation. Bergson’s concludes that “to exist” (at least for a conscious being) is to change continually in a movement of “endlessly creating oneself.” He wonders whether the same might be said of existence in general, and *Creative Evolution* aims to establish (I argue) nothing less than a generalized existentialism via a radically genetic phenomenology.

In this paper, I explore how Bergson’s understanding of *character beyond boundaries* reorients philosophical reflection toward fleeting ontological objects that I collect under the term *trajectories*. As differing in nature from the *boundaries* of the world established by “intelligence,” I argue that character (and trajectories more generally) must be understood via the paradoxical logic of expression, a notion I’ve established in my reading of Merleau-Ponty. In short, a *trajectory* is an ongoing self-arrival, a paradoxical movement of expression that is, as Merleau-Ponty puts it, “ever new and always the same.” Since Bergson presents character as an ongoing self-arrival, it must be an *expressive* movement, always between pure repetition and pure creation, between institution and transgression, and never reaching either extreme. In short, *character* is an open movement of self-cultivation. This suggests that an *existential* ethics needs to focus on the virtuous practice of taking up and transgressing boundaries in the trajectories of expression.

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