



Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness (Henri Bergson)

Henri Bergson

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Time and Free Will - An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness - Henri Bergson - Translated by F.L. Pogson - Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness is Henri Bergson's doctoral thesis, first published in 1889. The essay deals with the problem of free will, which Bergson contends is merely a common confusion among philosophers caused by an illegitimate translation of the unextended into the extended, as a means of introducing his theory of duration, which would become highly influential among continental philosophers in the following century. WE necessarily express ourselves by means of words and we usually think in terms of space. That is to say, language requires us to establish between our ideas the same sharp and precise distinctions, the same discontinuity, as between material objects. This assimilation of thought to things is useful in practical life and necessary in most of the sciences. But it may be asked whether the insurmountable difficulties presented by certain philosophical problems do not arise from our placing side by side in space phenomena which do not occupy space, and whether, by merely getting rid of the clumsy symbols round which we are fighting, we might not bring the fight to an end. When an illegitimate translation of the unextended into the extended, of quality into quantity, has introduced contradiction into the very heart of, the question, contradiction must, of course, recur in the answer. The problem which I have chosen is one which is common to metaphysics and psychology, the problem of free will. What I attempt to prove is that all discussion between the determinists and their opponents implies a previous confusion of duration with extensity, of succession with simultaneity, of quality with quantity: this confusion once dispelled, we may perhaps witness the disappearance of the objections raised against free will, of the definitions given of it, and, in a certain sense, of the problem of free will itself. To prove this is the object of the third part of the present volume: the first two chapters, which treat of the conceptions of intensity and duration, have been written as an introduction to the third.

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