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Taking time seriously: the Bergsonism of Karin Costelloe-Stephen, Hilda Oakeley, and May Sinclair

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the influence of Henri Bergson's (1859–1941) philosophy of time on three early twentieth-century British philosophers: Karin Costelloe-Stephen (1889–1953), Hilda Oakeley (1867–1950), and May Sinclair (1863–1946). I demonstrate that three central claims of Bergson's account of temporal experience (novelty, memory, and indivisibility) were creatively incorporated into their accounts of time. All these philosophers place time at the centre of their philosophical systems, so this study of their views on time and temporality can deepen our understanding of their systems more broadly. Further, this study helps us appreciate the reception of Bergson's thought in British philosophy after it was ferociously attacked by Bertrand Russell in 1912, and can provide more detailed contours on the joint fortunes of temporal experience and Bergson's thought in the history of twentieth-century philosophy. I conclude by emphasizing reasons why contemporary philosophers should pay particular attention to the three figures' treatment of Bergson.

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1. Introduction

This paper explores Henri Bergson's (1859–1941) impact on Karin Costelloe-Stephen (1889–1953), Hilda Oakeley (1867–1950), and May Sinclair (1863–1946). There has been recent interest in these three women philosophers and the primary aim of this study is to further this scholarship by demonstrating how their philosophical systems incorporated key claims from the account of temporal experience elaborated by Bergson.¹ There are three

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¹For history of philosophy scholarship on Costelloe-Stephen, see Vrahimis ("Sense Data"), on Oakeley see Thomas ("British Idealist Monadologies"; "Hilda Oakeley on Idealism") and on Sinclair, see Thomas ("Idealism and Pantheism"). There is much more scholarship on Sinclair from a literary perspective

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reasons why I have chosen these figures. The first is that they all drew on Bergson in interesting and varied ways, allowing for some interesting points of contrast. The second is that temporal experience is central to their treatment of time, and time is central to their philosophical systems.² This means that studying their Bergsonism is not of passing interest but can deepen the understanding of their broader philosophies. The third is that they are all understudied – exploring their thought will contribute to the recovery work on women in the history of philosophy. I argue for the novel thesis that the Bergsonism of their philosophies of time may partly explain their neglect.

This paper also has a secondary aim. This is to use the discussion of Costelloe-Stephen, Oakeley, and Sinclair to give further contours to the influence that Bergson exerted in the period between Russell's critique in 1912 and the late 1920s when his philosophical authority began to wane both in France and in Britain (Gillies, *Henri Bergson*, 34). Studying this period can help us assess Bergson's broader role in the history of British philosophy. Consider the following three periods in the history of twentieth-century western philosophy of time: First, as we will see below, during the 1910–30 period, philosophical discussions about time display two characteristics: a strong emphasis on temporal experience and the philosophy of Bergson.

Second, after the 1930s and 1940s, both Bergson and temporal experience begin to be treated with suspicion.³ The prominence that temporal experience receives from thinkers active before World War II is in stark contrast to the way many of them are discussed in D. C. Williams' seminal paper "The Myth of Passage" from 1951. Williams refers to thinkers who excessively emphasize temporal experience as the "time snobs" (D. Williams, "The Myth of Passage", 458).⁴ They "plume themselves that by refusing to time the dimensional status they alone are 'taking time seriously'" (D. Williams, "The Myth of Passage", 458). Apart from Samuel Alexander, at whom the jab about 'taking time seriously' is implicitly directed (see Alexander, *Spinoza and Time*, 15), figures that Williams enumerates include J. Jeans, C. D. Broad, A. Eddington, W. James, A. N. Whitehead, C. Hartshorne, and –

(see for example Bowler and Drewery, *May Sinclair*; Bowler, "May Sinclair"; Sessions, "The Disconsolations of Philosophy") and Edinburgh University Press are currently publishing critical editions of Sinclair's works.

²By 'temporal experience' I understand time as it is immediately apprehended by the subject, as opposed to its objective description (e.g. in physics). Bergson's own account of temporal experience in contemporary metaphysics is discussed by Dainton ("Bergson on Temporal Experience"), Deppe ("Mind-Dependence"), Olma ("Physical Bergsonism"), Winkler ("Husserl and Bergson"), and C. Williams ("Metaphysics of A- and B-time").

³For a critique contemporaneous with the period studied in this paper, see Elliot (*Modern Science*).

⁴For a similar position, see Smart ("The River of Time"). Williams took this phrase from Wyndham Lewis' *Time and Western Man*.

more frequently than any of the others – Bergson. A few years later, Russell famously re-asserts his earlier view that

[t]here is some sense ... in which time is an unimportant and superficial characteristic of reality. ... [A] certain emancipation from slavery to time is essential to philosophic thought. ... Both in thought and feeling, even though time be real, to realise the unimportance of time is the gate of wisdom.

(Russell, *Mysticism and Logic*, 21–2)⁵

And jump forward 30 years to D. H. Mellor, another Cambridge philosopher, who argues that tense – a key concomitant of temporal experience – should be “replaced where it belongs: namely, in our heads” (Mellor, *Real Time*, 92).

Finally, in the past 20–30 years, the tide has turned. Analytic philosophers have, again, begun to ‘take temporal experience seriously’ (see for example Phillips, *Routledge Handbook*). And the return of temporal experience as a topic of philosophical enquiry is concurrent with the return of Bergson to the analytic philosophical scene (see Başar, “Bergson’s Intuition Memory”; Dainton, “Bergson on Temporal Experience”; Moore, *Evolution of Modern Metaphysics*, 406–28; Mutch, “The Limits of Process”; Williams, “Metaphysics of A- and B-Time”).

The discussion of Costelloe-Stephen, Oakeley, and Sinclair, and their treatment of Bergson, will thus add more detailed contours to the joint fortunes of temporal experience and Bergson in twentieth-century philosophy.

The structure of the paper is as follows: I first provide a description of Bergson’s account of temporal experience broken down into three theses. I then demonstrate how the theses are variously taken up by our three philosophers. I conclude by giving reasons why their work should be of interest to contemporary philosophers.

2. Bergsonian temporal experience in three theses

It would have been difficult not to be aware of Bergson in early twentieth-century philosophical circles in Britain. He gave the Gifford Lectures in Edinburgh between 1913 and 1914; in 1920, he received an honorary doctorate from Cambridge, and scholars have widely documented his legacy within the context of British modernism (see Gillies, *Henri Bergson*). He was travelling the world, giving lectures, and also got involved in the foundation of the League of Nations. Although he had already published two books by 1900, it was the 1907 *Creative Evolution* that sealed his status as a philosophical authority on the philosophy of time.

His philosophy was, unsurprisingly, treated by a large number of philosophers active in Britain during the early twentieth century. Alexander Gunn

⁵See also McTaggart (“Relation of Time”, 362): “I do see a possibility of showing that all that hides ... goodness from us ... is the illusion of time”.

wrote a monograph called *Bergson and His Philosophy* in 1920 and produced significant amounts of additional material on Bergson's philosophy of time (Gunn, "Time and Modern Metaphysics", 260–1; "Problem of Time", 180, 187–9). Bergson wrote a foreword to his 1922 volume *Modern French Philosophy*. Bergson's name appears in C. D. Broad (*Scientific Thought*, 529), A. N. Whitehead (*Concept of Nature*, 36), Samuel Alexander (*Space, Time and Deity*) and A. Eddington (*Nature of the Physical World*, 47; for a discussion, see Canales, *Physicist and the Philosopher*, 176–8).⁶ The same is true of lesser-known figures in the philosophical canon like Beatrice Edgell ("Imagery and Memory"), Susan Stebbing (*Pragmatism and French Voluntarism*), H. Wildon Carr (*Henri Bergson*; Russell and Carr, *The Philosophy of Bergson*) or J. W. Dunne (*An Experiment with Time*, 119–21).⁷ Victoria Welby corresponded with Bergson – a discussion, as well as transcripts of some of the letters, are included in Petrilli (*Signifying and Understanding*) – and offered to translate Bergson's *Introduction to Metaphysics* into English (Petrilli, *Signifying and Understanding*, 74, 413).

Nevertheless, the vast majority of discussions about his role in early twentieth-century British philosophy circle almost exclusively around just one point: Russell's famous critique of Bergson's philosophy.⁸ As a result, the influence of Bergson's thought on time on British philosophy outside the narrow context of Russell's 1912 critique is heavily under-studied and at best involves merely cursory references in accounts of major philosophical figures of the period. Passmore (*A Hundred Years of Philosophy*, 104–6) merely mentions Bergson within the context of pragmatism; and even then Bergson is listed as an influence on William James, not on British philosophers. Mander (*British Idealism*, 475–6) only refers to Bergson in the context of ethics and as an inspiration for a few claims found in Pringle-Pattison (Mander, *British Idealism*, 362–3). Candlish (*Russell/Bradley Dispute*) does not mention Bergson at all, neither does Kenny (*New History*) or Beaney (*Oxford Handbook*). Coppleston (*History of Philosophy*, 396) only briefly talks about

⁶Bergson's influence on Eddington is generally under-appreciated by historians of philosophy who focus exclusively on the Bergson-Einstein debate (Canales, *Physicist and the Philosopher*; Lévy-Leblond, "Le Boulet d'Einstein"; Riggio, "Lessons"; Whyte, *Archimedes*) or on Kant's influence on Eddington (Dingle, *Sources of Eddington's Philosophy*, 39; Passmore, *Hundred Years of Philosophy*, 333). For a discussion of the extent to which Eddington was influenced by Bergson, see Merleau-Ponty (*Philosophie et théorie physique*, 17, 65), Laguens ("Eddington Philosophe", 271) and West ("Philosopher versus the Physicist", 132–4).

⁷Although there has been scholarship undertaken on Dunne's influence on literary works and art (Stewart, "J. W. Dunne and Literary Culture"), there is very little or no scholarship on Dunne's philosophy, the exception being Arthur (*Reality of Time Flow*, 47–9, 59). This is a significant lacuna, as Dunne was taken seriously by several philosophers active during the period (see Broad, "Dunne's Theory of Time"; Gunn, "Problem of Time", 185; and an approving letter from Eddington quoted in Dunne, *An Experiment With Time*, vii) and his work was widely reviewed (Levy, "An Experiment With Time"; Nagel, "An Experiment With Time").

⁸For a discussion of the Russell-Bergson exchange, see Gillies (*Henri Bergson*, 34–5), Riggio ("Lessons", 221–2), Vrahimis ("Russell's Critique"; "Sense Data"; "Russell Reading Bergson"), Watt ("Bergson on Number") and Worms ("Bergson entre Russell et Husserl").

Bergson as a precursor of Samuel Alexander. Even Soulez and Worms' biography of Bergson focuses exclusively on Russell's critique (Soulez and Worms, *Bergson: Biographie*, 124–31). Small-scale scholarship on some of the figures active during the period mentions Bergson in passing, but this engagement has not systematically looked at Bergson's influence.⁹

To show how Bergsonism influenced the philosophers discussed below, I will break Bergson's views on time into three central theses. Although other scholars do not break Bergson's views down in the same way, I believe that my analysis here is fairly uncontroversial and follows observations found in the exposition of Bergson in Sinclair's recent excellent volume (Mark Sinclair, *Bergson*). All these theses can be found in Bergson's *Time and Free Will* (1889), *Matter and Memory* (1900) and *Creative Evolution* (1907), the three books most frequently appealed to by the authors I am looking at. These apply to Bergson's concept of *la durée* (usually translated as "duration") which is, at least in his early works, coextensive with temporal experience.¹⁰

2.1. Thesis 1: novelty

The first thesis claims that *novelty* and unforeseeability are necessary features of temporal experience (see Bergson, *The Creative Mind*, 74–8).

Duration consists of "the continual creation of unforeseeable novelty" (Mark Sinclair, *Bergson*, 70, 184–5, 283; "Bergson on Possibility"). This claim forms the central thesis of Bergson's *Creative Evolution* from 1907 (translated into English in 1911), the book that secured him the status of an international "philosophical celebrity" (Mark Sinclair, "Habit and Time", 131) and that would have been the first book that anyone interested in Bergson would have read.¹¹ To quote just one passage where Bergson links temporal experience to novelty:

Let us seek, in the depths of our experience, the point where we feel ourselves most intimately within our own life. It is into pure duration that we then plunge

⁹For example, Thomas ("Space, Time") briefly discusses Bergson's influence on Samuel Alexander and Canales (*Physicist and the Philosopher*, 181–9) mentions Bergson's influence on members of the Aristotelian Society.

¹⁰Note that although Bergson describes the *nature* and *character* of *la durée* in more or less the same way in all of his books, the *role* that it plays changes. In *Time and Free Will*, it is roughly coextensive with the stream of consciousness. In *Matter and Memory*, Bergson argues for the existence of two different "tendencies" in *la durée*: one in the stream of consciousness, the other in the external world. In *Creative Evolution*, he posits innumerable different coexisting *durées*. For a discussion of this development, see Moravec ("Perpetual Present", 199–200) and Deleuze (*Le Bergsonisme*, 71–91).

¹¹It is worth noting, however, that the centrality of *Creative Evolution* for Bergson's reception in Britain, especially his reading by Russell (see for example Worms, "Bergson entre Russell et Husserl", 93) should not be over-emphasized. Many of the figures active between 1910 and 1930 focus on claims from his earlier *Time and Free Will* (1889, translated 1910) or *Matter and Memory* (1900, translated 1911). Victoria Welby, for example, already quotes *Time and Free Will* in 1907, before it had even been translated into English and before *Creative Evolution* had been published in French (Welby, "Time as Derivative", 392). Most of the figures studied in this article quote Bergson in or from the original French.

back, a duration in which the past, always moving on, is *swelling unceasingly with a present that is absolutely new.*

(Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, 199–200, my italics)¹²

Bergson generally articulates this novelty in purely epistemic terms (as “unforeseeability”) (Mark Sinclair, *Bergson*, 184–5, 283), although he does occasionally extend the scope of this novelty into the ontological domain by claiming that there is much more to time than simply its preventing “everything from being given at once” to observers existing in the temporal stream (Bergson, *The Creative Mind*, 75).¹³

The irreducible and unforeseeable novelty we find in temporal experience is also not just a simple recombination of previously existing elements. Duration and becoming are akin to artistic creation. They produce absolute novelty *ex nihilo* (Mark Sinclair, *Bergson*, 75), they do not merely re-arrange pre-existing items into a new form. This is because every moment of our conscious life is always new since it is ‘coloured’ by the train of memories that it drags with it; the progression of *la durée* does not just reconfigure already-existing memories into a new arrangement.

2.2. Thesis 2: memory and time

The second thesis claims that memory is a necessary condition for time.

This thesis applies both to temporal experience and to time simpliciter. Bergson argues that the survival of the past in the present through the memory of the subject is required for time to exist (Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, 163–4; *Histoire de l’idée*, 160; *L’Évolution du problème*, 339). Time and duration are utterly dependent on the mental synthesis constituted by memory.¹⁴ Of course, Bergson distinguishes between two types of memory in *Matter and Memory* from 1900: the retention of the past in the present and memory as the return of the past into the present perception (Mark Sinclair, *Bergson*, 93–4). It is the first of these that will concern us here, although an aspect of the second, as we will see, may be found in Oakeley.

In a famous example from his 1889 *Time and Free Will*, Bergson asks us to consider a pendulum swinging from side to side:

Outside of me, in space, there is never more than a single position of the hand of the pendulum, for nothing is left of the past positions. Within myself a

¹²By contrast, the earlier-mentioned D. C. Williams reduces the phenomenon of novelty to “the occurrence of an entity, or kind of entity, at one time in the world continuum which does not occur at any previous time” (D. Williams, “The Myth of Passage”, 470).

¹³The discussion of which of the two senses of ‘novelty’ can be found in Bergson is beyond the scope of this paper (for a discussion, see Mark Sinclair, *Bergson*, 183–91). The problem is aggravated by the fact that he does not sufficiently distinguish between the two. Importantly for our purposes, the three Bergsonians discussed below do the same: they emphasize the centrality of novelty for time without deciding whether this is to be taken as epistemic or ontological.

¹⁴For a discussion of this synthesis, see Mark Sinclair (*Bergson*, 50–2).

process of organization and interpenetration of conscious states is going on, which constitutes true duration [*la durée*]. It is because I endure in this way that I picture to myself what I call the past oscillations of the pendulum at the same time as I perceive the present oscillation. Now, let us withdraw for a moment the ego which thinks these so-called successive oscillations: there will never be more than a single oscillation, and indeed only a single position of the pendulum, and hence no duration.

(Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, 108)

Without memory, there would be no time that “join[s] together, by the continuous thread of memory, instantaneous visions of the real” (Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, 69).¹⁵

Bergson’s excessive emphasis on the link between memory and time was already explicitly criticized by some of the key thinkers of the period. Russell specifically objects to Bergson’s connecting time and memory (Russell, “The Philosophy of Bergson”, 341–5). Broad expresses his annoyance at the fact that in explaining time, “[m]emory is once more called in by Bergson and Mrs Stephen [Costelloe] to produce the rabbit out of the hat” (Broad, “New Books”, 233). Similarly, Gunn, otherwise a great admirer of Bergson, argues that at the core of Bergson’s thought is a confusion between the (subjective) mental time (i.e. temporal experience) and the (objective) physical time:

Bergson ignores objective time and dismisses it as entirely spatial, a very grave error. The result is that he really discusses our awareness of Time, and has little or nothing to say about Time. ... Bergson’s whole treatment never overcomes the initial confusion between Time and our awareness of Time, an identification which is mischievous and fallacious.

(Gunn, “Time and Modern Metaphysics”, 260–1)

Furthermore, Gunn pointed out that this confusion is precisely what lies at the root of the mistakes that Bergson committed in his engagement with Einstein (see Lévy-Leblond, “Le Boulet d’Einstein”; Canales, *Physicist and the Philosopher*).¹⁶

2.3. Thesis 3: indivisibility

The third thesis postulates that temporal experience is indivisible (see Bergson *the Creative Mind*, 54; *Matter and Memory*, 202–3).

This thesis is connected to the fundamental opposition between time and space that runs through the entirety of the Bergsonian corpus: Whereas space

¹⁵This idea appears even more frequently in Bergson’s four series of lectures at the Collège de France (1901–1905). For the connection between memory, consciousness, and the existence of time, see especially Bergson (*Histoire de l’idée*, 79; *L’idée de temps*, 43; *L’évolution du problème*, 322).

¹⁶In his critique, Gunn mirrors Russell’s injunction to not confuse ‘mental time’ (the relation between subject and object generating relations of past, present, and future) and ‘physical time’ (the relation between object and object generating the relations of earlier and later). See Russell (“Experience of Time”, 212).

can be infinitely divided, any division imposed upon duration is always artificial (Mark Sinclair, *Bergson*, 38, 56). Space is quantitative, homogeneous, and divisible. *La durée* is qualitative, heterogeneous, and indivisible. For example, in *Time and Free Will*, Bergson describes *la durée* as:

a pure heterogeneity within which there are no distinct qualities. In a word, the moments of inner duration are not external to one another. ... [I]n consciousness we find states which succeed, without being distinguished from one another.

(Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, 226–7)

Here Bergson tries to capture the idea that temporal experience provides us with change and development, but a development that is so seamless that it cannot be divided into distinct elements. Similarly, in *Matter and Memory*:

[P]sychic facts are bound up with each other, and are always given together to immediate consciousness as an undivided whole which reflection alone cuts up into distinct fragments.

(Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, 166)

Our experience of time is “continuous and in [it] we pass insensibly from one state to another: a continuity which is really lived, but artificially decomposed for the greater convenience of customary knowledge” (Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, 186). He also stresses this again in his lecture at Oxford in 1911, where he described true duration as an “indivisible continuity of change”:

[R]eal duration is what we have always called time, but time perceived as indivisible. That time implies succession I do not deny. But that succession is first presented to our consciousness, like the distinction of a ‘before’ and ‘after’ set side by side, is what I cannot admit.

(Bergson, *The Creative Mind*, 124)

We occasionally think that we can divide duration (by, for example, chopping up our temporal experience into minutes or hours), but once we do so, it becomes something else: an incomplete artificial hybrid of measurable spatialized time that does not capture the seamless heterogeneous continuity of real time (Mark Sinclair, *Bergson*, 47–57). The division of the ontologically indivisible character of temporal experience is done purely for reasons of practical utility and is usually motivated by the need to measure time. But it is precisely this measurement that causes the ‘denaturation’ of the immediate indivisible content of *la durée*. As Bouaniche observes:

The measurement of time is based on its denaturation. That is because to measure time, it is necessary to immobilise it, to distinguish within it ‘parts’ in the form of instants or moments, and to abstract from what is in the act of being made – that is to say from its content – which is, however, essential for considering it as anything more than the passage of from one instant *t* to

another. This operation is perfectly legitimate and necessary. What Bergson contests is that science is talking about time.¹⁷
(Bouaniche, “Dossier Critique”, 229, my translation; see also Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, 107; *Matter and Memory*, 122–3)

In the rest of this paper, I will show how these three Bergsonian theses were taken up by Costelloe-Stephen, Oakeley, and Sinclair, and how they creatively incorporated them into their own philosophical systems.

3. The three Bergsonians: Karin Costelloe-Stephen, Hilda Oakeley, and May Sinclair

3.1. Karin Costelloe-Stephen

Karin Costelloe-Stephen studied at Newnham College, Cambridge, where she eventually became a fellow in 1914.¹⁸ She was one of the main proponents of Bergson’s philosophy between 1910 and 1920, before leaving academic philosophy altogether and devoting herself to psychoanalysis. She was the first woman to be awarded a distinction in the Moral Sciences Tripos at Cambridge and was elected to the Aristotelian Society in 1912 (for a short biography, see Waithe, “Twentieth Century Women Philosophers”, 349–50; Vrahimis, “Sense Data”, 821–3). Vrahimis (“Sense Data”) has recently emphasized her under-appreciated role in the Russell-Bergson controversy, my aim here will be to look more specifically at her own views on temporal experience.

The emphasis on novelty in relation to time, captured by the first Bergsonian thesis, is generally associated with the philosophy of Samuel Alexander who himself drew on Bergson (Thomas, “Space, Time”, 556). However, Costelloe-Stephen mobilizes Bergson to make this point much earlier (Vrahimis, “Sense Data”, 819–23). She returns to Bergson’s frequent claim that something novel coming into existence cannot be understood purely through already known matter or mental content and that it is for that reason that the intellect cannot grasp the true reality of becoming and the arising of new forms:

Bergson ... points out that, from the fact that having *durée* involves creation of new forms, it follows that the intellect cannot grasp *durée*.

(Costelloe, “What Bergson Means”, 140)

¹⁷“La mesure du temps repose sur sa dénaturation. Car, pour mesurer le temps, il faut bien l’immobiliser, distinguer en lui des ‘parties’ sous la forme d’instantes ou de moments, et faire abstraction de ce qui s’y fait, c’est-à-dire de son contenu, qui est pourtant l’essentiel, pour ne plus considérer que la forme du passage d’un instant *t* à autre. Cette opération est parfaitement légitime et même nécessaire. Ce que Bergson conteste, c’est que la science prétende parler du temps”.

¹⁸Costelloe changed her name to Stephen after marrying Adrian Stephen (the younger brother of Virginia Woolf). I follow Vrahimis (“Sense Data”, 820, footnote 1) in referring to her as Costelloe-Stephen in the paper, but retaining the name under which she published in the references.

But anything new in reality, or anything which cannot be analysed up into recognisable parts, baffles thought, which was not made to deal with such things, and cannot grasp them.

(Costelloe, "What Bergson Means", 141)

The creation of novelty is also emphasized in Costelloe-Stephen's contribution to the "Time, Space, and Material" symposium from 1919:

Recognition, [Bergson] says, is not the perception either of similar qualities or of relations of similarity between past and present phenomena; recognition combines what is immediately given in the present with memories of past phenomena, and creates out of their combination a new phenomenon. Since recognition contains present perception in addition to memory, this new phenomenon is not a mere repetition but something fresh, different from anything that has ever happened before.

(Stephen et al., "Symposium", 92)

Elsewhere, Costelloe-Stephen also uses Bergson's metaphor of the melody to illustrate this. Even though the notes of a given song can be the same, it is a different song when it is heard for a second time, later (Costelloe, "What Bergson Means", 132). This is because it will have included the development of the self between the first and the second listening. For Costelloe-Stephen, it is not a mere repetition of the same experience but a different experience altogether. This ever-accruing novelty of phenomena (which are affected by the memories that they carry with them) is inseparable from the existence of time.

Costelloe-Stephen similarly adheres to the second of the Bergsonian theses and emphasizes the ontological link between memory and time. She stresses that memory is what differentiates 'matter' – which, Bergson claims in *Time and Free Will*, is purely spatial without the temporal consciousness – and duration (*la durée*), the pure time of Bergson's philosophy. For time to exist, what is required is a mental act which "holds material in tension through a period of duration when a phenomenon is produced, but which is absent when there is no phenomenon, but only material. Bergson calls this act memory" (Stephen et al., "Symposium" 94; Costelloe, "Complexity and Synthesis", 291; see also Vrahimis, "Sense Data", 825). Without memory, there would be no time, since "the *durée* of consciousness [which comprises memory] is the ultimate synthesising principle in reality" (Costelloe, "What Bergson Means", 150; see also Stephen, *The Misuse of Mind*, 84–6). This, in turn, is linked to Costelloe-Stephen's views on novelty: "The modification of the present by the force of the past experience is what Bergson means by memory, when he uses it to illustrate creation" (Costelloe, "An Answer" 151; see also Stephen, "Thought and Intuition", 57).

Importantly, in her reply to Russell's critique of Bergson, Costelloe-Stephen demonstrates that there is a direct link between the first two theses, even though she often criticizes Bergson for failing to distinguish them:

... Bergson's theory of creation rests upon his theory of memory. ... Memory is the clearest possible instance of creative process that Bergson can find, and, unless such an instance can be found, the theory of duration collapses. ... Bergson ... claims that by attending to the way in which our character is modified by past experience we can become directly acquainted with an instance of creation. The modification of the present by the force of the past is what Bergson means by memory, when he uses it to illustrate creation.

(Costelloe, "An Answer", 150–1)

While the third thesis about the indivisibility of time is central to Bergson's writings about *la durée*, Costelloe-Stephen seems to be one of the few Bergsonians of the period to have taken it seriously. The impact that the indivisibility of temporal experience had on her is best evidenced in the way she integrates Bergson's insights to develop her unique concept of 'synthesis' (discussed in Costelloe "What Bergson Means"; "Complexity and Synthesis"; see also De Mille, "Bergson in Britain", 45–6). Costelloe-Stephen argues that the temporal progress of our mental states is so intermingled that it does not make sense to speak of 'several' mental states (Stephen et al., "Symposium", 88). This is also accentuated by her suggestion that a better term to describe Bergson's *durée* would, in fact, be 'interpenetration' – a term, De Mille observes, she borrowed from T. E. Hulme (1883–1917) who was one of the main proponents of Bergsonism in Britain (De Mille, "Bergson in Britain", 38, 45). Instead, the fundamental 'building blocks' of *la durée* on which our attention focuses in the temporal process are indivisible 'syntheses', or indivisible "interpenetrated wholes" (Costelloe, "What Bergson Means", 133). Vrahimis defines them as follows: "[A] synthesis is a datum with which we are immediately acquainted, and which cannot be analytically broken down into simpler units of which it is a complex" (Vrahimis, "Sense Data", 828). For Costelloe-Stephen, these syntheses are the different intermingled interpenetrated 'stages' of *la durée*:

[T]hese parts are united, not like logical parts, by external relations, but in quite a new way, by "synthesis." "Parts" united by synthesis have not the logical characteristics of mutual distinction and externality of relations, they interpenetrate and modify one another.

(Stephen, *The Misuse of Mind*, 62)

The focus on the indivisibility of experience, on the *immediate data of consciousness* of Bergson, forms not only the central focal point of her defence of Bergson against Russell but also an attempt at relating Bergson's introspectively accessible 'syntheses' with Russell's 'knowledge by acquaintance' (Stephen, "Thought and Intuition", 39), as direct access to temporal experience (see Vrahimis, "Sense Data", 819). In this respect, she differs significantly from Wildon Carr, who simply refuses the applicability of 'knowledge by acquaintance' to Bergson's *durée* altogether (Vrahimis, "Sense Data", 822). Her unique and rare attempt at a *rapprochement* between what was to

become ‘analytic philosophy’ and Bergson starts from appealing to “synthesis” to arrive at what de Mille calls “a ‘diffractive’ reading of Russell through Bergson” (De Mille, *Bergson in Britain*, 46).

The indivisibility of change is central to this ‘diffractive reading’ and is articulated against the background of her general views on the relation between directly introspected indivisible temporality and its artificial divisible symbolic representation. In “Thought and Intuition” from 1918, she describes how we move from the immediate experience of becoming accessible by consciousness to its purely symbolic representation, one that leaves out the essential character of time:

Instead of the actual qualities we now take symbols, words, for example, or letters, or other signs, and with these symbols we make for ourselves diagrams of the relations in which we have observed that the qualities which they are to represent stand to one another. ... It will be noted that, as thought proceeds, we are able more and more to dispense with acquaintance with actual experience, and to replace it better and better by symbols. ... Bergson, indeed, does not attempt to deny the utility of this method of treating our experience; what he suggests, however, is *that the sort of experience which it produces – a world, that is to say, consisting of solid tables, green grass, anger, fear, and so on – is but a fragment, and a distorted fragment, of the experience with which we have it in our power to be acquainted.*

(Stephen, “Thought and Intuition”, 1918, 45–6, italics original)

Costelloe-Stephen thinks that although our experience of the qualitative nature of *la durée* is real and always introspectively available, it becomes distorted or obscured once that experience has been translated into language and symbols (Costelloe, “An Answer”, 148–9). Time, Costelloe-Stephen argues, completely eludes science since science can only ever apply itself to matter, which Bergson associates with spatiality and divisibility (Stephen et al., “Symposium”, 1919).

Costelloe-Stephen therefore explicitly adheres to the three central Bergsonian theses. What’s more, he was not just a marginal figure in her philosophical outlook but the key claims of Bergsonism about indivisibility lie at the root of Costelloe-Stephen’s system.

3.2. Hilda Oakeley

Hilda Diana Oakeley, who developed her own distinctive version of British Idealism, studied at Oxford and eventually came to teach philosophy at McGill, Manchester, and King’s College London, publishing several books and a large number of articles. She was elected president of the Aristotelian Society in 1940 and is the only professional philosopher out of the three figures studied here (for a short biography, see Thomas, “Hilda Oakeley on Idealism”, 934–6; Howarth, “Oakeley”). Her work has recently begun to

receive increased attention from historians of philosophy (see Thomas, "British Idealist Monadologies"; Thomas, "Hilda Oakeley on Idealism"; Mander, *British Idealism*, 533).

Oakeley clearly adheres to the second Bergsonian thesis. In a paper from 1926, she appeals to Bergson's *Matter and Memory* to articulate the way through which present experience includes memory, which is precisely what gives it its value:

The great value of M. Bergson's contribution to the philosophy of memory, as I understand it, is his luminous exposition of the truth that, in an important sense, we live and have the greater part of our being in the world of memory –
(Oakeley, "World as Memory", 296)

Reflections on . . . Bergson has confirmed me in the view that memory must be conceived as the soul of the bare event, which becomes real in becoming historic, and in its association with memory gains value.

(Oakeley, "World as Memory", 298)

What Oakeley means by stating that memory is the 'soul' of the bare event, is that it is only through the 'colouring' of memory that any event becomes a truly *historical* event, that is, one incorporated into the overall experience shaped by past experiences. The process of this gaining of value is then used to critique Bradley, whose neglect of the role that the retention of the past plays in the present results in his alleged inability to explain how novelty arises in the course of time:

What we call the past . . . has no less direct a claim upon our knowledge than the present. . . . This view would agree with M. Bergson's rejection of any theory which makes of the past of memory only a fainter present of sense. Such a view is suggested in F. H. Bradley's image of the stream on which we look down, seeing "right under our faces a bright illuminated spot which ceaselessly widens and narrows its area". The spot is "our now, our present", whilst the rest of the stream is "not in total darkness, but illuminated by a fainter light",
(Oakeley, "World as Memory", 298–9)

Oakeley implies that Bradley's thinking about time through a timeless view 'from above' cannot account for novelty:¹⁹

The significance of novelty as an experience belonging to the limitation of consciousness cannot be recognized in philosophies for which time is unreal. History reveals value through a temporal process, necessarily bringing forth novelty because of its incompleteness.

(Oakeley, "World as Memory", 301; see also Oakeley, "Status of the Past")

Or in other words, the novelty of temporal reality is disclosed to us from within the temporal stream and cannot be captured by a philosophical system looking at reality from a timeless vantage point. In addition to the

¹⁹She repeats this critique in Oakeley ("The Philosophy of Time").

explicit references to Bergson's *Matter and Memory*, we find a striking similarity between what Oakeley says above about the 'timeless' vision of reality and Bergson's passages about novelty in *Creative Evolution*, where he criticizes the idea that reality is all timelessly given and that we cannot see it truly merely because we are blinded by 'the illusion of time', as McTaggart ("Relation of Time and Eternity", 362) would have it. For example, in his critique of biological finalism, Bergson says:

[I]f there is nothing unforeseen, no invention or creation in the universe, time is useless again. ... Finalism thus understood is only inverted mechanism. It springs from the same postulate, with this sole difference, that in the movement of our finite intellects along successive things, whose successiveness is reduced to a mere appearance, it holds in front of us the light with which it claims to guide us, ... [S]uccession remains ... a mere appearance, In the doctrine of Leibniz, time is reduced to a confused perception, relative to the human standpoint, a perception which would vanish, like a rising mist, for a mind seated at the centre of things.

(Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, 39–40)

For Oakeley, the relation between time and novelty is itself grounded in a much more fundamental relation: that between time and the memory of the subject, captured by the second of the Bergsonian theses. Oakeley argues that the existence of time is unthinkable without the existence of the self (see Oakeley, "Time and the Self", 182), which retains past experiences and conjoins them with the present one (see Oakeley, "Status of the Past", 233). This insight becomes most pronounced in her concept of 'creative memory'. The novelty required for genuine temporal becoming (as opposed to the timeless view 'from above' discussed earlier) arises from the manner in which past memories conjoin with the present: "Memory is a special form taken by the creative activity of the mind under the condition of contact with the changing material of the event" (Oakeley, "World as Memory", 304). In the same way that Bergson's *Creative Evolution* emphasized the relation between the creation of new forms in the evolutionary development *through* the retention of their past, Oakeley argues that the same happens in the case of temporal becoming, in a characteristically Bergsonian idiom (see Thomas, "Hilda Oakeley on Idealism", 942). It is not simply that memory is required for the synthesizing of the non-temporal manifold – though Oakeley would certainly agree with that –, but the mind actively contributes to the content of the present perception because it "colours its material with value" (Oakeley, "Status of the Past", 247; see also Thomas, "Hilda Oakeley on Idealism", 933–4). And Oakeley extends this to history too: even the very distant historical past is intimately connected to the way that present experience gains value (see Oakeley, "World as Memory", 303–10; Oakeley, "Status of the Past", 247–50; Thomas, "Hilda Oakeley on Idealism", 946–7).

In Oakeley, we, therefore, find the first two theses from Bergson. Unlike Costelloe-Stephen, however, Oakeley applies them in the context of idealism. Their motivations for using Bergson are also different: whereas Oakeley does so to find support for her theory, Costelloe-Stephen aims to improve upon and defend Bergson's philosophy as such.

3.3. *May Sinclair*

May Sinclair (pseudonym of Mary Amelia St Clair), nowadays primarily known for her literary work, published several papers on philosophy and wrote two large volumes arguing for idealism (*A Defence of Idealism* in 1917 and *The New Idealism* in 1922). Just like Oakeley, she presented her works to the Aristotelian Society and her two books on idealism were widely reviewed by philosophers of the period (for a short biography, see Thomas, "Idealism and Pantheism", 138–41; Mander, *British Idealism*, 530–2; Saunders, "Sinclair").

Sinclair accepts the second Bergsonian thesis. In her 1922 book (May Sinclair, *The New Idealism*), she appeals to the Bergsonian "cinematographic metaphor" (Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, 306) when she criticizes the attempt to leave the contribution of the human mind out of the description of reality. Bergson's metaphor is supposed to illustrate the mistake of thinking of temporal progression in terms of a succession of infinitesimally small 'screenshots' of reality, existing *prior* to their synthesis into continuous becoming. Sinclair argues:

For pure Space-Time, there is no bridge from point to point; Time makes none; it only serves, in the form of motion, to pick out point from point, and thus draw attention to the discontinuity. The one instant that covers all points does not penetrate the gaps between them to join them up into a continuum; Time taken by itself, is utterly attenuated; so far from covering Space, it falls like a thin thread of rain, drop by drop, across that immensity and for ever.

(May Sinclair, *The New Idealism*, 224)

Sinclair then argues from the impossibility of time existing independently from the human mind for the truth of idealism (for a summary exposition of the argument, see Thomas, "Idealism and Pantheism", 143). The missing link between these discontinuous points of time is provided by the human mind: "A conscious mind can remember the past and anticipate the future, overcoming the fact the present is a vanishing point between an unreal past and unreal future" (Thomas, "Idealism and Pantheism", 148). Thomas also highlights the influence that Bergson had on Sinclair's metaphysical system:

Sinclair was closely familiar with *Time and Free Will* (indeed, the fourth chapter of *A Defence of Idealism* is largely devoted to it, and translates large chunks from the original French). Although she does not reference Bergson in connection

with our perception of continuous time, I believe this is the kind of process Sinclair has in mind. Consciousness can pull together the disconnected moments of time, forming past and present states into an organic whole.

(Thomas, "Idealism and Pantheism", 149)

However, the influence runs even deeper. While Thomas is right to point out that the *Defence of Idealism* does not explicitly link Bergson and the discontinuity of time – Bergson is discussed primarily within the context of Vitalism (May Sinclair, *A Defence of Idealism*, 51–74) – the end of the chapter on Bergson links the existence of time to memory:

[I]f [the self] had no unity and no duration, there would not only be no final synthesis, but no synthesis anywhere at all. There would, obviously, be no time, and (not quite so obviously) no space. ... And this is positively the last opportunity for the upholders of the superior necessity and priority of Memory. They may say, with the most perfect obviousness: Much more obviously there would be no time and no perception of space without memory. ... It would not be possible unless all consciousness, and time and space themselves, were nothing but memory.

(May Sinclair, *A Defence of Idealism*, 73–4)²⁰

Furthermore, the passage quoted earlier about time being discontinuous bears a remarkable similarity not only to Bergson's pendulum metaphor from *Time and Free Will* but also to Bergson's general concern about the insufficiency of mechanics to capture what happens "between the extremes" (Mullarkey, *Bergson and Philosophy*, 15) of movement, a key issue of *Time and Free Will*. Mechanics, Bergson argues, cannot capture the reality of movement, because it only focuses on static positions of individual objects observed at the beginning and the end of movement, once the object of movement is no longer moving. For example, when measuring velocity, the mathematician merely notes the position of a moving body at distinct points of *space* and then calculates the proportion between the space traversed depending on various speeds: time drops out of the equation altogether (Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, 107).

On a more speculative note, while Thomas ("Idealism and Pantheism", 145) correctly identifies Alexander as one of the sources for Sinclair's treatment of the discontinuity of time, she observes that there is something peculiar about the frequency with which Sinclair returns to Zeno's paradoxes in her discussion of time's discontinuity (May Sinclair, *The New Idealism*, 139–40; *A Defence of Idealism*, 191, 257), even though this is not the case for Alexander: "[U]nlike Sinclair, Alexander makes no reference to Zeno's arrow in describing [the] problem [of the discontinuity of time], so we cannot be certain he has precisely the same problem in mind" (Thomas, "Idealism and Pantheism", 145).

²⁰In the end, Sinclair argues that the existence of the *Self* is more fundamental for this synthesis than memory.

One might perhaps suggest that Bergson could provide a clue here. Zeno's paradoxes are central to Bergson's argument for the insufficiency of explaining time in virtue of discontinuous positions in space. Instead, he argues, to access the continuity of movement, we must resort to *la durée* and temporal experience. Bergson discusses these paradoxes in nearly every one of his books (*Bergson, Time and Free Will*, 112–5; *Matter and Memory*, 191–3; *The Creative Mind*, 120–1; *Creative Evolution*, 308–13) and links them to the question of time's continuity and indivisibility, so it is possible that Sinclair does the same based on her reading of Bergson. This is also supported by the fact that in *A Defence of Idealism*, where one of Zeno's paradoxes is treated, Sinclair mentions Bergson alongside the standard solutions offered by Russell and Cantor based on infinitesimal calculus (May Sinclair, *A Defence of Idealism*, 190–1).²¹

A final and much less speculative indication of Bergson's influence on Sinclair's thought about memory and time can be found in her hypothesizing of a consciousness that would not only be able to remember the *very recent* moment (as is required for the synthesis of continuous time), but also the entirety of the past and an anticipation of the future:

We can at least conceive the possibility of other forms of consciousness: ... Forms in which both memory and anticipation are complete here and now, all space being known at an instant and all time at a point. ... [They are], [i]f they exist at all, forms of the ultimate consciousness which is God.
(May Sinclair, *The New Idealism*, 246; for a discussion, see Thomas, "Idealism and Pantheism", 150)

The part of the quotation addressing time, again, has a precursor in Bergson. Compare with the following passage:

[W]ould not the whole of history be contained in a very short time for a consciousness at a higher degree of tension than our own, which should watch the development of humanity while contracting, so to speak, into the great phases of its evolution?

(Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, 207–8)

Similarly in his *Perception of Change*, a series of lectures presented at Oxford in 1911, he says:

My present, at this moment, is the sentence I am pronouncing. But it is so because I want to limit the field of my attention to my sentence. This attention is something that can be made longer or shorter, like the interval between the two points of a compass. For the moment, the points are just far enough apart to reach from the beginning to the end of my sentence; but if the fancy took me to spread them further my present would embrace, in addition to my last sentence, the one that preceded it: ... Let us go further: an attention which could be extended indefinitely would embrace, along with the preceding sentence, all

²¹It must be said that she finds Bergson's solutions unsatisfactory.

the anterior phrases of the lecture and the events which preceded the lecture, and as large a portion of what we call our past as desired.

(Bergson, *The Creative Mind*, 126; for a discussion see Moravec, "Perpetual Present")²²

Sinclair thus provides another interesting example of a fusion between Bergson's thought and idealism. The angles of Bergson's thought she appeals to are, however, different from those mobilized by Oakeley: for Oakeley, Bergson's key contribution is the recognition of the qualitative impression that the past has on the present. For Sinclair, it is the past's ontological role in grounding of time.

4. Conclusion

We have seen that Bergson's philosophy of time had a significant impact on Costelloe-Stephen, Oakeley, and Sinclair. Their philosophical systems 'take time seriously' and appeal to Bergson in doing so.

All three come to Bergson from radically different prior philosophical commitments. Costelloe-Stephen tries to translate Bergson's thought into what would now appear to be the language of analytic philosophy, a language Bergson explicitly criticized, despite his approving prefatory note to Costelloe-Stephen's *Misuse of Mind*. Oakeley put Bergson into dialogue with her own commitments to idealism, a philosophical position Bergson rejected in *Matter and Memory*. The same is true of Sinclair whose idealism is, nevertheless, markedly different from that of Oakeley. They also place different emphases on different sub-sections of Bergson's philosophy. Costelloe-Stephen's focal point is the thesis about indivisibility, with the theses about memory and novelty merely providing additional argumentative support. Oakeley and Sinclair, by contrast, think of Bergson as the go-to representative for the philosophy of memory. What unites all three of them is the centrality of *time* as a topic that they articulate through appeals to Bergson.

There are two reasons why the thought of the figures presented above should be of particular interest to contemporary philosophers. The first is that its deeper assessment contributes to discussions about the connections between women in the history of philosophy and Bergson. Emily Herring has recently argued that Bergson's philosophy began to be treated with suspicion because it was read by women: Bergson was "damned for his female fans" (*Aeon*, 6 May 2019). Bergson was read by a wide range of British women philosophers: not just the three discussed here, but also Stebbing ("Notion of Truth"; *Pragmatism and*

²²We also find an identical idea in Costelloe-Stephen: "If we could widen the field of our acquaintance so as to include the whole of duration, and attend to the whole without analysing it, we should arrive at the most complete knowledge possible ..." (Costelloe, "Complexity and Synthesis", 296).

French Voluntarism), and Welby (“Time as Derivative”), for example. The disappearance of Costelloe-Stephen, Oakeley, and Sinclair, in whose systems Bergson features so strongly, might thus provide further evidence for Herring’s claim.

The second is that all the three figures creatively demonstrate the potential of putting Bergson into radically new and different contexts. This is deeply consonant with recent developments in Bergsonian studies. For example, the “Kyoto Manifesto” of Bergsonism from 2020 states that scholars should try to “change [Bergsonism] and put it to work in the context which is manifestly very different from Bergson’s own” (During and Miquel, “We Bergsonians”, 18). This was already undertaken a hundred years ago by Costelloe-Stephen, who, as Vrahimis observed, put Bergson to use within the context of early analytic thought (Vrahimis, “Sense Data”, 841). Her project is thus deeply consonant both with the demands of the manifesto and with the more recent attempts at creating dialogues between Bergson and analytic philosophy (see Moravec, “Perpetual Present”, 2019; Moravec et al., “Reassessing Bergson”; Moore, *Bergson: Thinking Backwards*; Williams, “Bergsonian Approach”). The same is true of Oakeley and Sinclair who related Bergson to British Idealism. Incidentally, idealism is also making a surprising comeback on the scene of analytic philosophy (see for example Goldschmidt and Pearce, *Idealism*). Scholars wishing to put Bergson into any of these new and developing contexts may learn a great deal on how to go about doing so from Costelloe-Stephen, Oakeley, and Sinclair, who put Bergson into new philosophical environments that others deemed incompatible with his thought.

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