

BLOG-POST-TURNED-MINI-ESSAY ON POSSIBLE VS. VIRTUAL

Matthew Strother

Following on from last week's class, I've taken a stab at defining "virtual" and "possible" with the help of Bergson's essay, 'The possible and the real,' which Chiara linked to in her post. (I found an English translation, which some kindly blogger broke down into parts 1, 2, and 3.) If you thought we lingered too long over a trivial distinction, then you might want to think again! According to Bergson, clear thinking "about the relationship between the possible and the real" is no less than a "preparation for living well" that will make us feel "happier and stronger." And what could be trivial about living well? Or feeling happier and stronger?

In trying to distinguish between the possible and the virtual in a way that would be helpful for our class, I wanted to define both what we assumed the words to mean colloquially (Italians and Argentines excluded) and what Chiara was arguing for them to mean philosophically. Happily, Bergson did some of this work for us in part 3 of his essay, where he presents a dialogue between himself, the all-knowing philosopher of time, and a puzzled, well-meaning journalist. (N.B. humorous resonances with the classroom encounter between the all-knowing Chiara and a puzzled, well-meaning Burnett)

I quote at some length:

In the course of the Great War, newspapers and magazines sometimes turned away from the terrible worries of the present to consider what would happen later on, once peace had been regained. The future of literature in particular preoccupied them. One day I was approached and asked how I saw the future. Somewhat confused, I declared that I did not see it at all. "Don't you see at least," was the reply, "a few

possible directions? We admit that we cannot foresee the details; but you at least, you the philosopher, have an idea of the set of possibilities. How do you imagine, for example, the great dramatic work of tomorrow?" I will always recall my interviewer's surprise when I answered him: "If I knew what the great dramatic work of tomorrow would be, I would create it myself." I saw clearly enough that he thought the future work locked away, since then, in who-knows-what cupboard of possible works; in consideration of my age-old relationship with philosophy, I was supposed to have obtained the key to that cupboard.

"But," I say to him, "the work of which you speak is not yet possible."

"But it simply has to be possible, so that it will come to pass."

"No, it is not. That said, I will grant you that it will have been."

"What do you mean by that?"

"It's very simple. I mean that a man of talent or of genius will emerge and create a work: and then it will become real and even, by the same means, retrospectively or retroactively possible. It would not be, it could not have been, if this man had not emerged.

In the above, Bergson's straw man journalist seems to be using the same colloquial sense of possible we were using in class, which I'll provisionally define as "something that *could* happen."

A few paragraphs on, Bergson says that the only way to make sense of the journalist's use of "possible" would be to define it as that which is *not impossible*. The possible as non-impossibility. The journalist's error - and ours too, from Bergson's/Chiara's perspective - lies in the way that our vague understanding of the possible as "something that could happen" easily slides from a weak claim about non-impossibility to a stronger deterministic claim i.e. a possible that is somehow "ideally preexisting" the real *before* the

real is actualized. This would be the equivalent of imagining a delimited series of *possible* events were waiting, like so-many ghosts perched on a timeline, for their future flesh and blood actualization.

Bergson offers an interesting metaphor to explain his problem with this line of thinking:

“Close the barrier and you know that no one will cross the road; from there it does not follow that you would be able to predict who will cross that road if you open the barrier. Nevertheless, you pass surreptitiously, unconsciously from the completely negative sense of the term ‘possible’ to the positive sense. Here possibility just meant “absence of impediment”; from this you now forge a ‘pre-existence in the form of an idea,’ which is something completely different. In the first sense of the word, it is a truism to say that the possibility of a thing precedes its reality: by that you understand simply that such obstacles, once surmounted, were surmountable.”

So, to say something is “possible” in this colloquial sense is either a meaningless truism (along the lines of “whatever happens wasn’t impossible”) or it is an illusion.

I understand the former, but what about the latter? Why an illusion? Surely there are scenarios where we can make some basic predictions about the future? Yes, says Bergson, there are. But these only exist within closed, abstract, mathematical systems, and *those* have nothing to do with life. The problem comes when we treat the open flux of life as if it were a closed system, amenable to calculation. Bergson’s ontology utterly rejects any notion of a deterministic/mechanistic universe. For him, “reality gradually creates itself, unpredictable and new.” And he when he says new, he means *radically* new. Life is indeterminate. The universe is an open system. And this cannot be confused with competition between pre-existent possibilities.

I found a great explanation of this idea as it applies to Bergson’s thoughts on evolution in a book called, *Philosophy and the Adventure of the Virtual: Bergson and the time of life*.

The notion of the virtual is opposed to that of possibility. An application of the notion of possibility is to be delimited to closed systems; however, in the case of an open system, such as the evolution of life, the notion of a virtual multiplicity is required in order to bring to light its characteristic features. Why is a thinking of evolution that focuses on the realization of the possible so inadequate? The simple answer to this is that it deprives evolution of any inventiveness or creativity. If the products of evolution are given in advance, in the form of pre-existent possibles, then the actual process of evolution is being treated as a pure mechanism that simply adds existence to something that already had being in the form of a possible. In effect, there is no difference between **the possible and the real** since the real is simply an image of the possible and indistinguishable from it. If the real merely resembles the possible then we are providing ourselves with a real that is ready-made (preformed) and that comes into existence by a series of successive limitations. In the case of the virtual, however, the situation is quite different, for here the process of differentiation does not proceed in terms of resemblance or limitation but rather in terms of divergent lines that require a process of invention. But there is another aspect to our construction of **the possible and the real**, one, as we shall see, that plays a crucial role in Bergson's attempt to expose the operations involved when we think events in terms of space and not time (duration): it is not simply the case that the real comes to resemble or mirror the possible but rather the other way round (the possible resembles the real). This is because our notion of the possible is arrived at by abstracting from the real once it has been made and then projected backwards.

The above reasoning leads Bergson to throw out an ultimatum:

One has to make a choice of the two: it is the real which becomes possible, and not the possible which becomes real.

Reality finds it has been possible only in retrospect. Because it *is* it seems to have always been "possible," but this is in fact a retroactive projection of inevitability into the past. It is the mirage of a present that seems to be contained, in embryo, in what has come before. Though we can only say this of an event once it has transpired. So the possible is something we mentally *add* to the real, once it has taken place. The only way to speak of "a possible which becomes real" is to embrace a naive determinism.

SO if you're going to cling to a sense of the possible as anything *more* than non-impossibility, you are either a naive determinist projecting your desires

for certainty onto a world of flux and becoming OR you're saying something that is not only meaningless but, potentially, existentially detrimental, insofar as a vision of the future that is delimited by projections cast from the present obscures our sense of ourselves as capable of truly creative activity - in the sense of incalculable, unprecedented, transformative, radically new.

++

Colloquial Definition of Possible: What could happen

Colloquial Definition of Virtual: What could happen

Philosophical Definition of Possible #1: The mirage of the present in the past.

Philosophical Definition of Possible #2: The future states of a closed, calculable system

Philosophical Definition of Virtual: The open gates of the indeterminate future of LIFE

++

Attempting to link this to virtual reality, I'd hazard to say that virtual reality, if we understand it as something that is *programmed* and thus exists within a closed system, does not conform to Bergson's sense of the virtual as indeterminate multiplicity, but rather, to his sense of the possible as a notion of the future states of a calculable world.

++

Attempting to link this to the theater, I'll go for a pun:

The possible is preformed (and illusory)

The virtual is *performed* (and vital)