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Abstract	<p>Henri Bergson (1859–1941) was one of the main exponents of evolutionary thinking in the latter nineteenth and early twentieth century. He gave that kind of thinking an unprecedented metaphysical turn. In consequence of his versatility, he also encountered the notion of truth-making, which he connected with his ever-present concerns about time and duration. Eager to stress the dimension of radical change and of novelty in the nature of things, he rejected (in one form) what he called “the retrograde movement of the true” while championing it—with undeniable delight in the air of paradox—in a derivative form. In this chapter, I explain what “the retrograde movement of the true” consists of—in its two forms.</p>	
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## Chapter 33

# Bergson, Truth-making, and the Retrograde Movement of the True

Daniel Schulthess

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### 11 33.1 Introduction

12 We may have different levels of expectation relative to an account of truth-making.  
 13 Many things may vary: the questions to be addressed, the distinctions to be made,  
 14 the logical aspects to be taken care of, and the kind of dialectic to be engaged in. A  
 15 minimal notion of what an account of truth-making should consist of may include  
 16 the following elements:

- 17 1. The explicit identification of truth-bearers
- 18 2. The correlative identification of “that in virtue of which” a given true truth-  
 19 bearer is true; i.e., of the relevant truth-makers
- 20 3. The idea of a specific, asymmetric, noncausal relation, between a truth-maker  
 21 and the correlative true truth-bearer: with the phrase “that in virtue of which”,  
 22 this idea is already implicit in the preceding clause

23 Furthermore, an account of truth-making may either have the aim of articulating a  
 24 formal theory of truth—the theory being an end in itself—or it may do some work  
 25 in addressing other issues. A comparison can be made with ethics, where we find,

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26 as distinctive areas of inquiry, ethical theory on the one hand and applied ethics on  
27 the other.

28 In an author like Henri Bergson, we discover an account of truth-making to the  
29 extent that our requirements remain minimal, technically speaking; and that we ac-  
30 cept that the account stays embedded in the treatment of questions which go beyond  
31 the formal theory of truth.

32 This is not to say that we should forget about an account such as Bergson's;  
33 and this for two main reasons: (i) On the side of the theory of truth-making, we  
34 may benefit from extending its thematic spectrum to such an author, even quite  
35 radical, because of the wealth of interesting investigations which his writings con-  
36 tain. Bergson's case study in truth-making will provide an original material, able to  
37 enrich other, more focused accounts. (ii) If we take the side of the understanding  
38 of Bergson, it is obvious that we have to articulate certain of his preoccupations in  
39 terms of an account of truth-making. They cry out for such a treatment. As we shall  
40 see, Bergson does not belong properly, given his views on truth-making, to the con-  
41 text of pragmatism, to which no doubt he was close in some respects (see Chap. 7,  
42 "On William James' Pragmatism: Truth and Reality" in his 1959a). What he has to  
43 say about truth requires the rejection of the antirealism otherwise characteristic of  
44 pragmatism.

45 One last introductory consideration: Bergson, given his philosophical predilec-  
46 tions, addresses most issues from a concern for the role of time and duration. This  
47 is true also with the present topic. At an earlier stage, accounts of truth-making did  
48 little to interfere with views on the metaphysics of time; but this has changed signif-  
49 icantly. But following Armstrong's chapter on time in his 2004 (Chap. 11), we have  
50 seen a growing interference between accounts of truth-making and the metaphysics  
51 of time. So the obstacles to the idea of addressing the views of Bergson concerning  
52 truth-making can be overcome.<sup>1</sup>

### 53 33.2 A Minimal Account

54 What Bergson has to say, as far as his account of truth-making is concerned, be-  
55 longs principally to the first and third chapters of his collection of articles of 1934,<sup>2</sup>  
56 respectively: "The Retrograde Movement of the True" ("Le mouvement rétrograde  
57 du vrai") and "The Possible and the Actual" ("Le possible et le réel"). The title "The  
58 Retrograde Movement of the True" is slightly odd, because this retrograde move-  
59 ment is something which Bergson precisely *rejects* in its primitive form (though he  
60 accepts it in a derivative form). We may say that according to him there is a *problem*

<sup>1</sup> My interest in the topic of this chapter originated with a mention of Bergson's view on "retrograda-  
tion of truth" by Vuillemin (1996, p. 148–149).

<sup>2</sup> Ironically enough, the main treatment of these questions was elaborated by Bergson for his Eng-  
lish lectures at Columbia University (New York) in 1913 (see Bergson 1959a, p. 1264, note 1). The  
lectures have not been recovered to this day.

61 of the retrograde movement of the true, and that his analysis of this problem leads  
62 him to the conclusion that in primitive form there is no such thing as the retrograde  
63 movement of the true.

64 Now the problem is couched in terms that depend on an account of truth-making—  
65 minimal as it may well be. So let me first say a few words about the three basic is-  
66 sues listed at the beginning of this chapter.

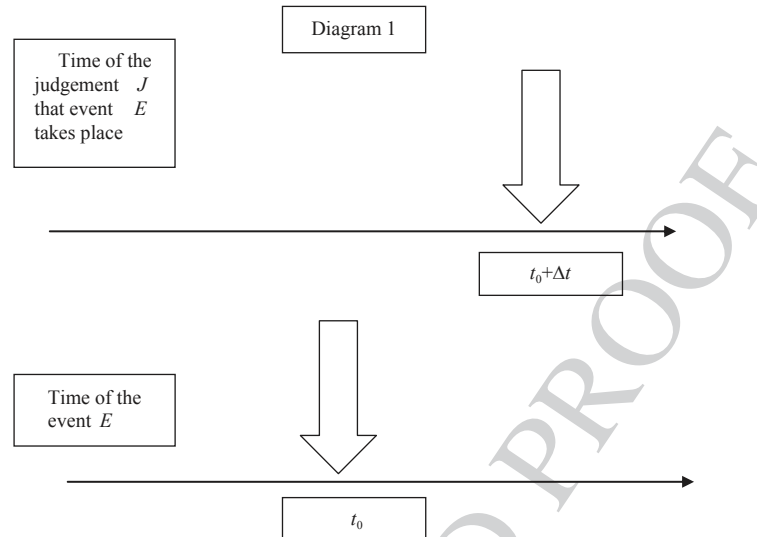
67 **Truth-bearers** Bergson's truth-bearers are basically judgements, dated acts of  
68 judgement; they have an inner structure, given that they contain terms. Otherwise,  
69 Bergson gives no specific account of judgement content. He moves without much  
70 ado from the act of judging as a token, to the judgement as a type; and from there to  
71 the judgement as an ideal content (1959a, p. 1263).

72 **Truth-makers** Bergson's account here is not fine-grained either; the truth-maker  
73 is "the occurrence (*apparition*) of a thing or of an event", which the judgement  
74 "records" (1959a, p. 1263).

75 **The relation** Bergson writes very little about this relation: "the judgement, which  
76 records the occurrence of a thing or of an event, can come only after them" (1959a,  
77 p. 1263). The phrase "can only come after them" jointly conveys the temporal  
78 aspect of succession and the ontological aspect of asymmetric dependence.

### 79 33.3 The Canonical View of Judgement

80 Bergson basically addresses only one type of judgment: singular, historical,  
81 contingent judgement. And, we may add, *affirmative* judgement. Once an event  
82 has taken place, its occurrence can then be stated, it can be recorded by the  
83 judgement. Thus, the formation of a given truth-bearer is posterior to the rele-  
84 vant truth-maker. For Bergson, the lesson is this: there is basically an insertion  
85 in time for any historical judgement: "[the judgment] thus has its date" (1959a,  
86 p. 1263). When he writes this, he speaks of the date of the judgement—as an  
87 act. This date indicates the time of the very existence of the true judgement. It  
88 does not overlap with the date of the event (which features in the judgement-  
89 content, locating the event in time). Indeed, what is at stake is not the time  
90 of the truth of a truth-bearer either (in the sense in which a tensed judgement  
91 may first be false and then become true at a time). Here the truth-bearer is not  
92 exposed to truth-value changes, because the content includes a date. So overall  
93 in a correct account of truth-bearers, we must take heed of two dates: the usual  
94 date which indicates the temporal location of the event and another date which  
95 determines the time at which the judgement is formed. This time is dependent  
96 on the date of the relevant event, and is slightly posterior to it. This has the  
97 following structure (Diagram 33.1):



98

99 We may conclude that according to Bergson, a judgement in canonical form (CF)  
100 has to be given in the following way:

101 (CF) At  $t_0 + \Delta t$  there is the true judgement  $J$  that the event  $E$  takes place at  $t_0$ .

102 This is the legitimate structure concerning judgement; it applies as such to historical  
103 judgements. Now we wish to express the dependence of such a formula (CF) on the  
104 realization of the event (DE for “dependence”):

105 (DE) If at  $t_0 + \Delta t$  there is the true judgement  $J$  that the event  $E$  takes place at  $t_0$ , then  $E$  takes  
106 place at  $t_0$ .

107 An additional condition must be provisionally taken into account; namely, that the  
108 event has been observed (DEO for “dependence” and “observation”). (We come  
109 back to this later.)

110 (DEO) if at  $t_0 + \Delta t$  there is the true judgement  $J$  that the event  $E$  takes place at  $t_0$ , then  
111 ( $E$  takes place at  $t_0$ , and  $E$  gets observed at  $t_0$ ).

112 All of this is unproblematic to Bergson, or to anybody else.

### 113 33.4 The Retrograde Movement of the True: 114 How It Works

115 Now I come closer to the properly Bergsonian topic of the retrograde movement of  
116 the true. In order for the retrogradation to take place, a first step is needed. The “obser-  
117 vation clause”—the requirement for an actual observation to have taken place—has

118 to be lifted from (DEO), and replaced with a “*de jure* conditional” (DJ, for *de jure*,  
 119 *en droit*). Bergson describes this in the following way: “The true judgement may well  
 120 have been left unformulated: it did set itself *de jure*, before it was factually set out”  
 121 (1959a, p. 1263). Presumably, the idea is that in itself the actual observation makes  
 122 no real difference to the proceedings. The suppression of the clause concerning actual  
 123 observation also allows us to treat the occurrence of the event as sufficient for the cor-  
 124 relative “virtual” judgement.

125 (DJ) If the event  $E$  takes place at  $t_0$ , then at  $t_0 + \Delta t$  there is *de jure* the true judgement  $J$  that  
 126  $E$  takes place at  $t_0$ .

127 As far as I can see, Bergson does not object to this specific step, which leaves the  
 128 time constraints intact. Given that he does not insist on actual observations, obvi-  
 129 ously he is not a verificationist. The kind of ontology of judgement and terms he  
 130 stands for remains in need of a thorough investigation.

131 Now comes the decisive step. The view prevails in common thinking that the  
 132 first date featuring in the CF can be suppressed. Bergson writes: “To every true  
 133 [judgement] [...] we impress a retrograde movement” (1959a, p. 1263). Elsewhere  
 134 he comments: “[Modern philosophers] make of truth something which is anterior  
 135 to the well-determined act of formulating it for the first time” (1959a, p. 1446; see  
 136 also p. 1445).

137 On account of this step, we switch, from a dated view given by (CF) above, to an  
 138 omnitemporal view of judgement (OV for “omnitemporal view”).

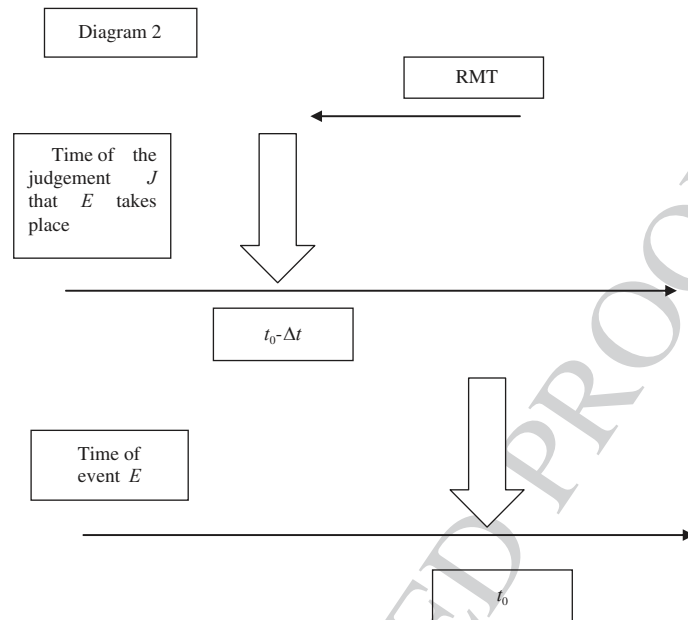
139 (OV) If at time  $t$  there is the true judgement  $J$ , then at all times there is the true judgement  $J$ .

140 This principle (OV) comes into application from the use of our understanding (*in-*  
 141 *telligence*). Bergson writes: “This date [which attaches the existence of the truth-  
 142 bearer to a particular time] gets immediately erased, in virtue of the principle, which  
 143 is rooted in our understanding, that every truth is eternal” (1959a, p. 1263). In Berg-  
 144 son, human understanding has to do with action: “understanding is well fitted to  
 145 deal with material things” (1959a, p. 1279). He never tires of insisting on the adap-  
 146 tation of understanding to practical concerns.

147 Taking advantage of the principle (OV), we can make the following substitution  
 148 in the principle (DJ) above, and reach the principle (AT) (AT for “any time”):

149 (AT) If the event  $E$  takes place at  $t_0$ , then at any time there is *de jure* the true judgement  $J$   
 150 that  $E$  takes place at  $t_0$ .

151 Of course, there is no problem if the judgement  $J$  is moved to the right, down the  
 152 arrow of time. But if we move the judgement  $J$  to the left, up the arrow of time,  
 153 problems are in view. Here, we reach the “retrograde movement of the true” (RMT),  
 154 represented in Diagram 33.2.



155

156 In order for the problem to arise in its primitive Bergsonian form, we have yet to  
 157 introduce a tensed view of time and then to pull  $t_0$  into the *future*. This means that  
 158 we have to insert, in Diagram 33.2, an index  $N$  ( $N$  for “now”) between  $t_0 - \Delta t$  and  $t_0$ ,  
 159 which brings us to the following formulation (RMT<sub>FT</sub>; FT for “future time”):

160 (RMT<sub>FT</sub>) If  $E$  takes place at a future time  $t_0$ , then at any time (including at future times  $< t_0$ ,  
 161 at present and in the past) there is de jure the true judgement  $J$  that  $E$  takes place at that  
 162 future time  $t_0$ .

163 Strikingly, as we shall see, (RMT) will also come in an innocuous form, (RMT<sub>PT</sub>;  
 164 PT for “past time”). This means that we have to insert, in Diagram 33.2, an index  $N$   
 165 ( $N$  for “now”) to the right of  $t_0$ .

166 (RMT<sub>PT</sub>) If the event  $E$  takes place at a past time  $t_0$ , then at any time (including at times  
 167 past  $< t_0$ ) there is de jure the true judgement  $J$  that  $E$  takes place at that past time  $t_0$ .

168 **33.5 On the Convertibility of Prior Truth and Anterior**  
 169 **Possibility**

170 Before going into more detail, we must notice that the retrograde movement of the  
 171 true closely connects with the notion of the possible such as it is treated by Bergson  
 172 (see 1959a, Chap. 3). We may say that the retrograde movement of the true and a  
 173 corresponding “retrograde movement of the possible” fully *overlap*. To say there is  
 174 an antecedently true judgement about an event  $E$ , on Bergson’s account, amounts to

175 saying: it is antecedently possible that  $E$  and vice-versa. This is surprising, because  
 176 on the usual view there are unrealized possibilities. In such cases, we would like to  
 177 say that it is antecedently possible that an event  $E$  will happen; but not, at the same  
 178 time that there is the antecedently true judgement that  $E$  will happen (because  $E$  will  
 179 not happen). Bergson rejects this. Generally speaking, Bergson is strongly opinion-  
 180 ated on the issue of possibility,<sup>3</sup> and his position can be expressed by means of what  
 181 is usually called the “principle of plenitude” (PP). The principle (PP) says that what  
 182 is possible also gets realized at some time.

183 (PP) If the event  $E$  is possible (untensed), then at some time  $E$  is actual (untensed).

184 In Bergson’s view, a principle of plenitude applies in a degenerate way, which speci-  
 185 fies an even tighter link between possibility and actuality:

186 (PP<sub>B</sub>) If the event  $E$  is possible (tensed), then  $E$  is actual (tensed).

187 Here is how Bergson expresses himself: “There is more, and not less, in the pos-  
 188 sibility of each of the successive states, than in their actuality. Indeed, the possible  
 189 is nothing but the actual, with a mental act added to it; a mental act which projects  
 190 the image of the actual in the past once the actual has taken place” (1959a, p. 1339).  
 191 Or alternatively, “the creation of possibilities coincides with the creation of the  
 192 corresponding actualities; they are not created ahead of their actualities” (1959a,  
 193 p. 1262). Given these elements, the basic insight comes as the contraposition of  
 194 (PP<sub>B</sub>):

195 (Contrap<sub>PPB</sub>) if the event  $E$  is not actual (tensed), then  $E$  is not possible (tensed).

196 This formula captures the restrictive view of possibility characteristic of Bergson  
 197 (see 1959a, p. 1267). In what follows, then, “antecedently true” and “antecedently  
 198 possible” will be treated as convertible. Bergson expresses much of what he wants  
 199 to say in relation to the possibility of an event  $E$ , rather than in relation with the true  
 200 judgement that an event  $E$  is to take place.

### 201 33.6 The Retrograde Movement of the True: 202 What Is *Not* Wrong with It

203 Bergson considers the retrograde movement of the true (RMT<sub>FT</sub>) as illegitimate.

204 What is at stake for him, we may say, is the existence of certain temporal limits  
 205 of truth-making, limits that (RMT<sub>FT</sub>) fails to respect (though (RMT<sub>PT</sub>) does not!).  
 206 But why should we admit such limits? What’s wrong with (RMT<sub>FT</sub>)? Is this struc-  
 207 ture not basic for all our deliberation, for all our previsions, and therefore for our  
 208 capacity to be active on the basis of anticipation? In anticipation, we judge now that

<sup>3</sup> Quite in tune with other philosophers of the early twentieth century—one thinks of R. Carnap’s *Scheinprobleme* (1928)—Bergson holds that many questions taken to be important in philosophy are merely consequences of defective assumptions. The usual view of possibility involves such assumptions.



209 such and such an event will happen, and often we are right. After deliberation, we  
 210 end up doing—quite often—one of the things we have been deliberating about. The  
 211 conjunction of our anticipation of an event  $E$  and of the future realization of  $E$  then  
 212 satisfies the formula  $(RMT_{FT})$  without problem—or so it seems, when we look at  
 213 this retrospectively.

214 I begin this section by considering two points *that do not count* for the explana-  
 215 tion of the illegitimacy of  $(RMT_{FT})$ :

- 216 • Bergson's criticism does not relate to the epistemic difficulties of prevision. His  
 217 problem is not one which would have the following expression: Judgements as  
 218 such aptly characterize what will happen, but given that we cannot know about  
 219 these future events, we better avoid making any judgements about them. This is  
 220 not what Bergson argues about.<sup>4</sup> His quarrel with  $(RMT_{FT})$  is really linked to the  
 221 question of truth.
- 222 • Bergson's criticism does not overlap with the long-established problems of “fu-  
 223 ture contingents” and of “logical determinism”. In spite of his familiarity with  
 224 Aristotelian topics, his concern is not specifically with what happens with future  
 225 events normally given as contingent. And however close he may be to the great  
 226 Aristotelian tradition according to which truth about the future is a threat for  
 227 matters that are taken as important, he has a view of this threat that is differ-  
 228 ent from the one which constitutes the usual problem of future contingents. He  
 229 never identifies as a problem that—perhaps—true judgements about the future  
 230 will make the future necessary, suppress contingency, etc. Bergson's criticism of  
 231  $(RMT_{FT})$  is focused on a much more specific view he holds about the relation  
 232 between the truth-bearer and the truth-maker. And given his stance on this, the  
 233 problem of future contingents *vanishes*. To bring the point to a pitch: Given that  
 234  $(RMT_{FT})$  is false (in this case there is no retrograde movement of the true), the  
 235 traditional problem of future contingents does not arise at all!

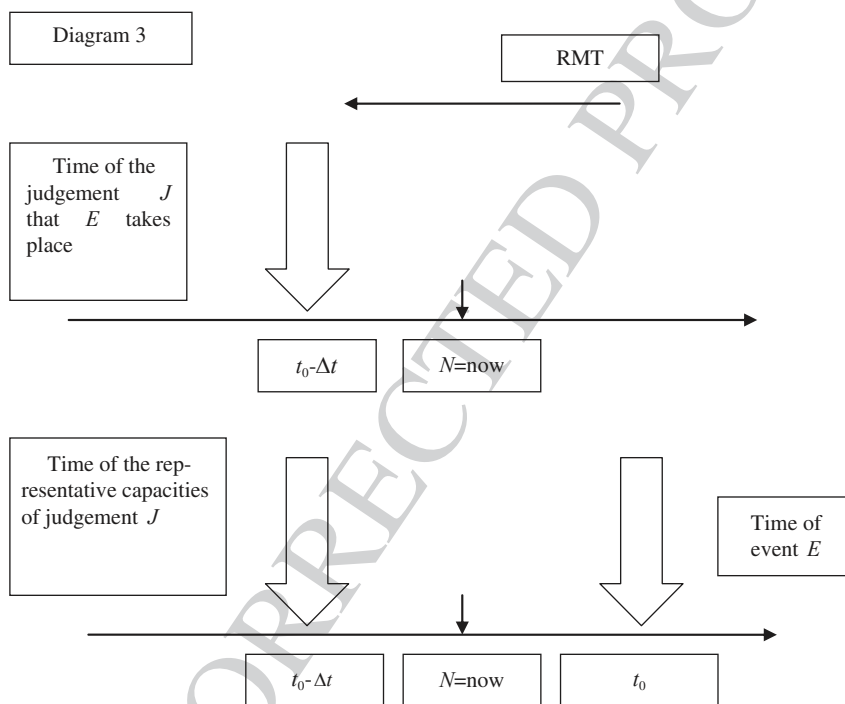
### 236 33.7 The Temporal Condition on the Representative 237 Capacities of the Judgement

238 Let us come back to our question: Bergson considers the retrograde movement of  
 239 the true  $(RMT_{FT})$  as illegitimate. What is at stake for him, we may say, is the exist-  
 240 ence of certain temporal limits of truth-making, limits that  $(RMT_{FT})$  fails to respect.  
 241 But why should we admit such limits? What is wrong with  $(RMT_{FT})$ ?

242 The point is that we have to take heed, we may say, of a “time of the representa-  
 243 tive capacities of a judgement”. This has to do with the content of the judgement,  
 244 and therefore with its semantics. The semantic condition, requiring a temporal rela-  
 245 tion between what represents and what is represented, is conveyed by means of the

<sup>4</sup> Of course, epistemic restrictions to foreknowledge can be philosophically sophisticated as Karl Popper's example shows (1960).

246 terms that are constitutive of the judgement. Bergson puts his point in the follow-  
 247 ing rhetorical interjections: “As if a judgement could have pre-existed to the terms  
 248 which enter into its composition! As if these terms would not themselves date from  
 249 the time when the objects which they represent did appear!” (1959a, p. 1263) Basi-  
 250 cally, the representative capacity of a judgement concerning an event  $E$  cannot be  
 251 formed ahead of  $E$ . Alternatively, an event of the same type must be available to  
 252 account for the representative capacities of the judgement. With this possibility in  
 253 view, I represent, in Diagram 33.3, the circumstances in which (RMT)—given the  
 254 semantic condition—can be legitimate.



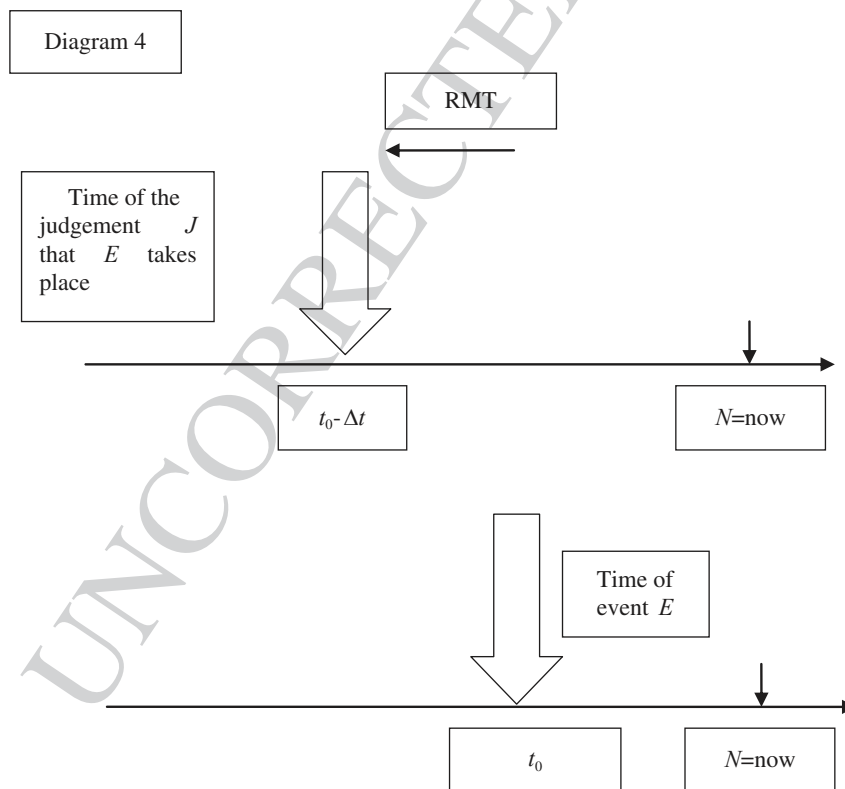
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256 Diagram 33.3 applies insofar as the nonliving domain is concerned (here there is a  
 257 simple unfolding of events, *déroulement*). Here, successive events of the same type  
 258 or events resulting from a mere rearrangement of data are available. But Diagram  
 259 33.3 does not apply where life or art are concerned. Even though, Bergson avers,  
 260 “[philosophers] prove unable, whatever they do, to figure out to themselves what  
 261 radical novelty (*nouveauté*) and imprevisibility are” (1959a, p. 1260). With radical  
 262 novelty, the semantic condition of the capacities of the judgement to represent what  
 263 it has to represent is not satisfied. Then, providing representative capacities for a  
 264 judgement requires simultaneity in time with the truth of the judgement. In the ab-  
 265 sence of representative capacities, there is no proper judgement, no truth-bearer. So

266 in such circumstances (RMT) is false. This amounts to a very specific view of the  
 267 “relativity of truth”, a view of a kind which is not discussed as such by Kazimierz  
 268 Twardowski (1900). We may add that Bergson has his own approach to the rejection  
 269 of what we may call, with Peter Simons, “platonism about truth-bearers and their  
 270 parts” (2003, p. 38).

271 **33.8 The Retrograde Movement of the True:**  
 272 **The Last Twist**

273 Now that we have reached this point, it is necessary to take account of one more  
 274 original feature of Bergson’s position. The rejection of (RMT) is strictly tied to a  
 275 tensed view, with consideration of the present/future break. Once we swing over  
 276 to the past, (RMT) is not restricted any more (see Diagram 33.4): “Its possibility  
 277 [i.e., the possibility of a given event], which does not precede its actuality, will have  
 278 preceded it once the actuality has appeared” (1959a, p. 1340).



280 This gives a feeling of a “growing-time” view of time; all the time past is basically  
 281 available to ensure that for a given judgement, the semantic requirement is met. It  
 282 is worth remarking also, that in a very specific sense, we have here a breach of the  
 283 principle of the irrevocability of the past. A given scheme of things, where (RMT)  
 284 does not apply, passes, with the passage of time, into to a scheme of things where  
 285 (RMT) does apply. Bergson especially underlines this change in respect to possibil-  
 286 ity (see 1959a, p. 1340). The retrograde movement of possibility, which does not  
 287 take place in respect to future events, takes place once those very events are present  
 288 or past. So the past is changed in respect to the possibilities it contains; *past* possi-  
 289 bilities progressively crop up in virtue of the actualities which in the course of time  
 290 the novelty of things brings forward.

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 292 preparation of the English version of this chapter.

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