

HENRI BERGSON'S REJECTION OF SUBSTANCE ONTOLOGIES

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Does a different account of personhood emerge from Bergson's rejection of substance ontology?

In this essay I will investigate whether Henri Bergson's rejection of substance ontologies could lead to an account of personhood distinct from those that supervene on such ontologies. By coupling the motivation for Bergson's alternative ontology, namely his rejection of associationism, with a more general political-cum-genealogical worry about our underlying reasons for holding any given philosophical position, I hope to highlight how ontological assumptions found our conceptions of personhood, thus having profound ramifications for our idea of human potentiality and social organisation.

I will demonstrate this in the following manner: First, I will unpack the question at hand by presenting Bergson's rejection of substance philosophies as well as a genealogical approach to social ontologies, and the substance conception of personhood as seen in this light. Secondly, I will go through the basic elements of Bergson's ontological view. Thirdly, I will discuss how these elements could come together in an account of personhood. I will dismiss a comparison between Bergson and Schopenhauer, which upholds a view of Bergsonian persons as appearances, leading to no real change in conceptions of personhood. Finally, I will discuss Bergson's view in depth, with special attention to his theory of creative evolution.

In light of this I will conclude that Bergson retains the ontological significance of the world *as it seems to us*, instead of rejecting the idea that we can have direct knowledge of the world through our existence in it, which could easily follow as a result of his skepticism of the deeper significance of scientific investigation. Almost surprisingly, Bergson's worry about empiricism stretched beyond its bounds, paired with his rejection of any metaphysical view supposedly detached from the experiential realm, does not prompt him to hold some kind of transcendental idealism. Instead, it leads to a revision of how we discuss and understand our own experiential realm, and how this supposedly more profound self-understanding can be used as a starting point for a broader ontology. As a result of this, I will show that Bergson must also hold a fundamentally different view of human dynamics, sociality and potential than what follows from the substance ontologies he is deeply skeptical of.

Worth noting is that Bergson does not give an account of the foundations of personhood *per se*; most of his ideas on the topic are found in his ethical work. However, I will only touch on this literature, as it is primarily concerned with the level of already organised relations. Moreover, Bergson never actively connected his ethical and metap-



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physical theories (Lawlor 2003:xi). I therefore believe that Bergson's *ontological* framework, paired with a general political worry about the justificatory use of certain ontologies, is due an investigation in terms of whether or how change in basic ontology also can influence our understanding of the social realm.

Unpacking the Question

Bergson's Rejection of Substance Ontologies

Bergson's rejection of substance ontologies was motivated by his reaction to associationism, a position held by figures like Locke, Hume, Mill and Russell, claiming that our psychological reality could be understood in a way that directly mirrors the current scientific understanding of material reality (Barnard 2011:46). Scientific methods proven successful in natural science should therefore provide

The trajectory of duration cannot ever be completely determined.

broadly construed. Bergson was not averse to the idea that we have fundamental knowledge of the reality of the world through knowledge of our own experiences. However, he rejects associationism in a manner similar to William James' rejection of psychology (James 1913:195), namely by claiming that the explanation of the fact is confused with the fact itself when the concrete phenomena of mind are replaced with philosophical reconstruction (Bergson 1889:163).

It follows that Bergson also takes issue with substance metaphysics, which claims that the primary building blocks of the world must be static, isolated units, in the way we perceive matter in space (Seibt 2013). Coupled with associationism, it grounds the idea that mental phenomena as mirrored in physical reality must be separate units holding external relations, in the same way that we perceive things and their relations at the level of appearance (Barnard 2011:85). Personhood, broadly construed, can be understood as the unification of a self and its body. This means that any account of personhood presupposes accounts of both the constituents of selfhood and of bodies. Substance ontologies assume that there are things and their external relations. These relations are not essential to

the things. At the level of bodies, persons must therefore be individuated units.

Bergson argues that the division of the world into things and their relations, as they appear in space, inevitably leads to self-contradiction by never capturing the full reality of the world as it is experienced (James 1910:29). If the reality of our experiences is the only thing that is directly given to us, the knowledge we have of reality can only be the nature of these experiences themselves, and the appearances they produce for us. This is opposed to the associationist stance that knowledge of appearances is foundational, and that these in turn are responsible for producing experiential phenomena. Bergson's rejection of substance ontologies might therefore have ramifications for views of personhood as rooted in a conception of the extended reality of appearances.

Marx on Associationist Conceptions of Personhood

It is possible to expand on this intuition by examining Karl Marx' critique of the extension of the social appearances into substantive accounts of personhood. In the essay *On the Jewish Question*, Marx suggests that there is a connection between the assumptions people make about the essence of persons and the material and political organisation of society (1844:31). For instance, the introduction of general suffrage and equal treatment under the law is justified by the claim that all (wo)men are born equal. Such an assumption leads to (wo)men acting against each other, as they are no longer treated as relationally connected by the authorities. It becomes a view of persons as atomistic units, thus privileging the dynamics of property, instead of the dynamics of human beings (Marx 1844:33). What *looks* like emancipation through the introduction of equality under the law actually reinforces pre-existing structures. Thus, social appearances, i.e. our specific perceptions of what persons are and how they relate to each other, are produced by social power structures, which in turn are created by persons, rather than creating persons. The spatial appearance of an embodied thing (person or anything else) is not what this thing is, but what it is for us at a specific point in space and time, and this contingency can be exploited, overplayed or downplayed, for the benefits of a given power structure. Thus associationists can again be argued to approach their project at the wrong end when they claim that our scientific method should also be

employed in an account of the human mind.

Marx never produced a complete positive account of personhood after his critique of the substance view. Given the role of Bergson's ontology as an alternative to associationism, could an alternative account of personhood emerge from his theoretical framework?

The Cornerstones of Bergson's Ontology

A brief summary of the cornerstones of Bergson's positive stance, more specifically his conception of space, time and duration, is in order.

To Bergson, "space is what enables us to distinguish a number of identical and simultaneous sensations from one another; it is thus a principle of differentiation other than that of qualitative differentiation" (Bergson 1889:95). Space is the medium in which mind builds up number (Bergson 1889:85). This idea of spatial number allows Bergson to create a distinction between the subjective and the objective: The subjective is what is adequately known, the objective is what is replaceable by new impressions (Bergson 1889:83). Our experience of the same house will change as we familiarise ourselves with it. However, two identical pictures of the same house are interchangeable insofar as they create the same mental image. The spatial representation is identical in both instances. Number amounts to this latter idea, namely the counting of interchangeable units. From this background, Bergson argues that spatial knowledge is not adequate knowledge of the world *as it actually is* experienced. Space is the way we *organise* the world to ourselves, categorising things around us. It is therefore the source of our perception of things as distinct, fungible units.

To Bergson, the body occupies space, but the movement between spatial positions is not itself spatial. This positional transition is the result of duration, i.e. change itself. Change cannot be *spatially* represented as other than the difference between two static positions (Bergson 1889:119). Hence, space cannot be anything but the symbolic representation of duration (Bergson 1889:110). It follows that our idea of time as the succession of events must also ultimately be spatial (Bergson 1889:91). Thus, Bergson complies with the Kantian idea of time as somet-

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hing space-like through which we organise our perceptions (B203). The radical move he makes is to separate duration, actual temporal progress,

from this successive idea of time. He argues that when we perceive moments as units adding up, we are not perceiving the moments themselves, but the traces they have left in space in their passage through it (Bergson 1889:79).

Surprisingly, this discussion leads Bergson to distinguish between two kinds of memory, as the role of image, experience and organization is not only crucial to present experience, but how we relate to and interpret our own past. The first kind of memory appears to us as a specific image of a past event, the second is that of duration. Memory as duration is a process of accumulation of ever-new experiences, and is always changing its character due to this accumulation. It is not unified by a principle that divides its instances into units; it is prior to the notion of unit itself (Bergson 1889:81). A unit is a spatial conception, as it is both one and infinitely divisible (Bergson 1889:83).

In light of this, duration must be both multiplicitous and total. This multiplicity cannot be that of many essentially distinct things, but of differences that are still deeply interrelated and affecting each other. This multiplicitous totality can be understood in analogy to a piece of music, which has different parts, but whose whole character would change if any of the parts were removed (Bergson 1889:101). Thus, although duration cannot be a smooth unity, it must be a totality. It is a fluid process of accumulation, affecting itself and its elements in an ever-changing past producing the future (Bergson 1907:7). Duration cannot be founded on a mechanistic principle that drives accumulation, as its process itself changes as new layers of memory are accumulated and affect its totality. The trajectory of duration cannot ever be completely determined. Its future is indeterminable in the way that an artist may plan a portrait but never be entirely sure exactly what it will end up looking like. The work and the plan is modified by each moment of creative progress. The continuous drive of duration towards creation and change is what Bergson names the *vital impetus* (Bergson 1907:98), which is driving duration forward by the intake of ever new impres-

sions. “Pure duration is that which the succession of our conscious states assumes when our ego lets itself live, when it refrains from separating its present state from its former states” (Bergson 1889:100). Pure duration, is therefore allowing the vital impetus free reign without attempt at organization or restraint. Duration is pure qualitative experience; space-time is purely quantitative (Bergson 1889:90).

Bergson’s critique of associationism therefore makes sense through the claim that space misrepresents action “by invading the series of our psychic states, by introducing space into our perception of duration, it corrupts at its very source our feeling of outer and inner change, of movement, and of freedom” (Bergson 1889:73–74).

Personhood

From this basic outline of Bergson’s ontology it is possible to construct a potential conception of personhood. Although he rejects the idea of substance ontologies, it is not evident that his view of personhood diverges from social atomism. Persons may well be isolated units at the level of bodies. Even though our qualitative experience is that of duration, our physical manifestation is spatial, seemingly following the rules of other spatialized things. That duration is ontologically prior does not delegitimize our conception of the material world as it is organised around us.

Bergson and Schopenhauer

In this respect, Bergson’s ontology bears striking resemblance to that of Schopenhauer. A comparison between the two might serve to highlight how Bergson’s view of personhood in fact must differ from a purely atomistic view.

Schopenhauer also claims that spatial representation is simply organised after certain quantifying principles as a way for the world to make sense for us (Schopenhauer 1813). The world is the objectification of will, which is the ontologically prior force of everything (Schopenhauer 1818:§31). Will, therefore, bears a certain resemblance to duration; it is a felt drive that must be organised in space such that persons can navigate, and act through it. The non-objective, yet experienced, is foundational to both accounts (Lawlor 2003:xiii).

However, there are significant differences between Bergson and Schopenhauer. For instance, Schopenhauer claims that action cannot be free, since it always falls under

the regulating principle of appearances (François 2004:3). Since will simply amounts to action insofar as there are no material obstacles, will cannot be free (Schopenhauer 1839). Bergson, however, rejects determinism for the same reason he rejects associationism. He claims that all determinism involves a psychological hypothesis, since it adheres to our idea of causation, which is an organisational feature of our experience. Psychological determinism thus rests on an inaccurate conception of the multiplicity of conscious states, or rather of duration (Bergson 1889:142–143). Moreover, free will cannot seek to go against the causal mechanisms through which we make sense of the world, as this would also merely be a way to organise appearances. Instead, free will must rest in itself by following its own natural developmental trajectory, and maturing into actions that intelligence can break down into infinitely many bits, but never complete (Bergson 1907:48). The error of Schopenhauer, according to Bergson, is to assume that humans stop evolving while we really evolve all the time (François 2004:3). When we believe that we are trapped in causal chains it is because we spatialize duration, which is never static, mechanistic or repeated.

It is important to note that in this comparison between Bergson and Schopenhauer, Schopenhauerian will is arguably closer to Bergson’s idea of vital impetus than to duration as such, as this impetus simply denotes the underlying drive of experience. However, duration and vital impetus are not concepts that come apart for Bergson. Duration is always changing, driven forward by a vital impetus, but this impetus is not a separate underlying force that drives the accumulation of memory. As mentioned, duration does not follow one specific principle or mechanism -- there is nothing unifying about it. It is simply the inevitable accumulation of ever-different experiences by the simple fact that there is something alive that has experiences. Duration is necessarily tied to actual, *specific* spatial experiences in order to *have* a vital impetus, and the specificity of these experiences are essential to the progress of duration itself. On this picture, will is the force underlying experience, whereas Bergsonian duration is driven forward by experiences *as much as* being the source of the development of new ones.

In addition, it is also important to note that, in the regulation of appearances that Schopenhauer proposes, matter is by its very definition static. To Bergson, matter is only static in our images of it. Like looking at old

baby pictures of oneself, the picture is an object frozen at a specific point in duration, while the person’s body is durational (Bergson 1889:115). Our perceptual organization of the material seems static, but it is not simply what the material world is. Matter changes, creates and is created, whereas perception itself is not creative; it is selective (Bergson 1889:131). Frédéric Worms therefore notes that “[i]t is not the world which is a content of consciousness, but consciousness which is a property of the world” (Worms 1997:103). Consciousness is not inexplicably produced by the interactions of inert matter, neither is it some underlying substratum of subjectivity objectifying itself, as it is for Schopenhauer (Lawlor 2003:xii). Instead, it is already there under the surface, as a latent aspect of the tangible world (Barnard 2011:124).

Personhood and Evolution

Does this discussion have any real implication for what it means to be a person, something with a specific perception of how the world is organised, and thus organising itself according to these images? *Appearances* of bodies organise the world and our self-understanding. This seems to be an integral part of who we are, and how we relate to others (Bergson 1889:137–138). Human beings are the kinds of things that structure the world spatially to themselves. Our agency leads to spatial, bodily and experiential individuation, and this individuation again guides our action. Persons experience themselves as independent entities, with desire and agency belonging to them only. For instance, although human beings consist of more bacteria than human flesh (Wenner 2007), our perception of ourselves as singular units, not microbe aggregates, is legitimate on a Bergsonian view qua experience of wholeness. The subdivision of individual bodies is relative to our perception (Bergson

1907:12). Thus, while the plane of fixed organisation is that of images created by this perception, creation and development happens at the durational, qualitative level.

This is further supported by Bergson’s claim that a

theory of life and theory of knowledge do not come apart; the phenomenology of experience is at the core of both. The construction of frames of knowledge is developed in life, and knowledge of life must emerge within these knowledge frames (Bergson 1907:xxiii). Our conception of the world for us as things and their relations is a legitimate perception to have for the kinds of things that we are. It therefore seems like social atomism remains a legitimate conception of personhood, given that human beings by their very nature organise the world for themselves. However, a closer look at Bergson’s conception of evolution makes this picture more nuanced.

Creative Evolution

Bergson argues that natural evolution is a durational process with spatial manifestations. It therefore allows for a closer understanding of the connection between duration, bodies, unity and appearance. From this account it becomes clear that human beings are not biologically determined to navigate the world within this *specific* conception of personhood.

For Bergson, the process of evolution must be durational because it is creative, but it is neither mechanistic nor teleological. Evolution cannot be mechanistic because we cannot simply put the required parts together and assume that there is life. Each creature has its own vital impetus, a duration that is unpredictable and non-mechanistic in its own way (Bergson 1907:55). Moreover, evolution cannot be teleological as it is not a unified process (Bergson 1907:42). Evolution as duration is, therefore, always hap-

pening, but not always in evident bursts. There is no essential difference between remaining in (what seems to us) one biological state passing on to another. States are in eternal change (Bergson 1907:2). The perpetual replacement of cells in the

living body vouches for this. Evolutionary success therefore amounts to the maximisation of creativity by being a change capable of producing more change, thus embodying and strengthening the vital impetus of the organism.

Our conception of persons as individuals is therefore correct in itself in both the durational and the spatial part of experience. However, Bergson claims that this individuality is never perfect [...]Therefore, on certain perceptions and in certain actions, whole groups of people can be claimed to embody personhood as a cohesive whole.

This is why humans are more evolved than slugs: we have more creative power; we can do more things (Bergson 1907:29).

Social atomism specifically, which, according to Marx, aims to reduce the conception of the dynamics of persons to the dynamics of property (1844:33) is therefore stunting to the expression of the vital impetus inherent in human beings as particularly creative creatures if property-like interactions is the only outcome of the idea that human beings are autonomous atomistic units. The conception of persons as individuals with a dynamic agency of their own might be the appropriate social organisation of human beings as they have evolved, as long as it does not conform to, and is accompanied and justified by, other social mechanisms which do in fact reduce human agency to mechanistic tools. This is resonated in *On the Jewish Question*, as Marx is firstly worried about whether the motivation for holding the view is solely grounded in mechanisms that already limit human agency to that of property dynamics. This is Marx' rejection of social appearances as reliable sources

of ontological knowledge, not a rejection of social atomism as such. However, Marx goes on to claim that this is a view of personhood that also is limited in its very nature by being founded in a negative conception of persons as not being a thing that bears the inherent potential of forming cohesive units (Marx 1844:34). Bergsonian ontology thus seems to latch on to both intuitions held by Marx.

In order to unravel the specifics of Bergson's alternative

to the substance view, it is necessary to look at his account of creativity in relation to individuation, appearances and duration. Bodies are delineated by perception, through the lines of which action can pass through (Marx 1844:12). This perception has evolved for the purpose of action and creativity. Vision can therefore be understood as a form of negative mechanism; its primary function is to not to absorb content irrelevant to the organisation of action (Marx 1844:104). Thus, our experience of bodies as individuated in appearances is veridical. Moreover, there is a gap between the action itself, performed by our body as limited by our vital impetus, and the representation we have of it as an act seen by other beings. For instance, my experience of standing up is slightly different to me every time I perform the action. This act of "standing up" is different from other acts of standing up, but language will have expressed it as the same event (Bergson 1889:160). There is a personal

element to individual action, something extra added by personhood which is ignored by organising it in language structures. Thus, I also experience being distinctly individuated in duration, through performing an action that belongs to me specifically.

Our conception of persons as individuals is therefore correct in itself in both the durational and the spatial part of experience. However, Bergson claims that this individuality is never perfect. For instance, it is difficult to know how to individuate plants, both from each other and from their roots, surrounding soil and nutrients that are part internal, part external, but always essential to their continued duration. Even in the organised world it is

evident that individualism is to a certain extent a flawed concept. The process of organising life into individuals is always countered by the process of reproduction (Bergson 1907:13). If humans were closed, internally *unified* systems they would not be able to create a new thing out of no new parts.

Bergson operates with a conception of a process of individuation that is never complete. Therefore, on certain perceptions and in certain actions, whole groups of people can be claimed to embody personhood as a cohesive whole (Bergson 1989:139). However, this does not mean that individual and collective consciousness amounts to the same thing. Although they are part of the same totality of duration, they embody distinct aspects, and are therefore not heterogeneous. As with durational multiplicity in general, this does not mean that their parts are not essentially connected. Common consciousness to Bergson is therefore primarily a shared living (Lafrance 1974:57). *Individuals* only exist where matter as substances is conducive to a creative organisation of action, i.e. *for humans* (Lafrance 1974:58).

In light of this, perception of individuation is in fact symptomatic of heightened vital impetus, as it allows for the production of more complex multiplicities. However, the sophistication of creativity is only successful if individuals are not trapped in their role of isolated units, but can oscillate between being part of a larger aggregate and claim their own distinct creative agency. Such aggregates must be able to reconcile the new and the continuous (Lafrance 1974:42). This goes both for human societies and for aggregates of cells in the human body. The difference between human society and mere organism is that the organism is subject to organisational laws, while society is composed of free wills of creative sophistication. However, once wills are organised they assume the guise

of an organism. Here, habit plays the same role as necessity does in nature (Bergson 1932:1). The individual fuses with society through the role it plays, for instance through professional life or civic duties. Social obligations are all external things that form, and are formed by, our actions. They only become experienced as obligations when they involve a huge overcoming of the self, as opposed to corresponding to our intentions (Bergson 1932:10).

Social structure is thus a vague and incomplete schema. It is a state of ambivalence between determinism and indeterminism, the static and dynamic of progress (Lafrance 1974:41). Social life is dynamic on the inside of social structures, which again leads to evident, sudden external change. Societies are closed; humanity is open-ended (Bergson 1932:21). This is also resonated in Bergson's theory of duration in evolution. Change is only evident when the animals in fact mutate, not when their cells renew themselves or when they reproduce. Thus, to draw the analogy between societal development and evolutionary processes further, Bergson must resist the idea of the "perfect" social organisation. This includes our strict conception of persons as individuals.

Conclusion

I can therefore conclude that the connection of action and perception to duration makes human beings non-static in their possible materiality, agency and personhood. That we perceive the world in a specific way, and act accordingly, is only indicative of the kind of thing that what we are at a point in duration. This does not mean that our atomistic perception of personhood is socially restrictive.

As mentioned, the idea of individuation embodies both complexity and multiplicity, but only if it does not trap agents within this framework. To claim that indivi-

duration alone is a human essence therefore elicits a false sense of social progress, as claimed by Marx.

However, as opposed to Marx, Bergson claims that there is no such thing as a fully realised person, only an increasingly able and creative one. This also means that any social structure, atomistic or not, is bound to rupture as our duration reaches a critical point of external restriction. We are atomistic beings in a specific historical context, but it is the duration of consciousness that is foundational to this sense of personhood. Any attempt to curb its impetus cannot be sustainable (Barnard 2011:100).

In this essay I have therefore demonstrated the connection between perception, socially conditioned appearances, ontological assumptions and personhood. Through the lenses of Henri Bergson's critique of associationism and substance ontologies I have shown that non-atomistic conceptions of personhoods can emerge, and that any conception of personhood must rest on an ontological assumption that might be grounded in appearance only. These assumptions must be considered if persons and their role in society are to be properly understood.

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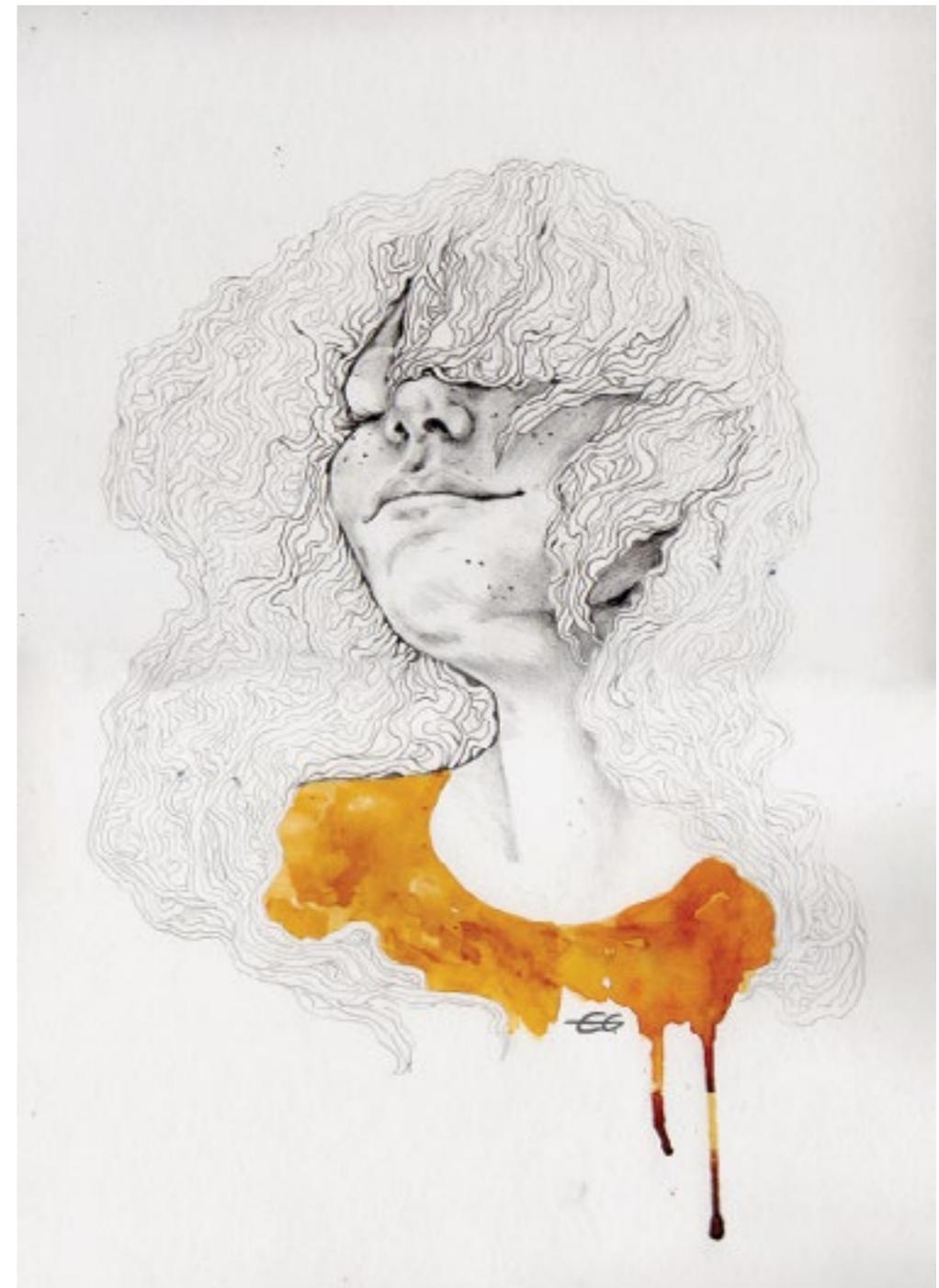


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