

Henri-Louis Bergson (1859-1941)

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Biography

So far as he can be classified, Bergson would be called a 'process philosopher', emphasizing the primacy of process and change rather than of the conventional solid objects which undergo those changes. His central claim is that time, properly speaking and as we experience it (which he calls 'duration'), cannot be analysed as a set of moments, but is essentially unitary. The same applies to movement, which must be distinguished from the trajectory it covers. This distinction, he claims, solves Zeno of Elea's paradoxes of motion, and analogues of it apply elsewhere, for instance, in biology and ethics.

Bergson makes an important distinction between sensation and perception. He repudiates idealism, but claims that matter differs only in degree from our perceptions, which are always perfused by our memories. Perception free from all memory, or 'pure' perception, is an ideal limit and not really perception at all, but matter. Real perception is pragmatic: we perceive what is necessary for us to act, assisted by the brain which functions as a filter to ensure that we remember only what we need to remember. Humans differ from animals by developing intelligence rather than instinct, but our highest faculty is 'intuition', which fuses both. Bergson is not anti-intellectualist, though, for intuition (in one of its two senses) presupposes intelligence. He achieved popularity partly by developing a theory of evolution, using his *élan vital*, which seemed to allow a role for religion. In ethics he contrasted a 'closed' with a (more desirable) 'open' morality, and similarly contrasted 'static' with 'dynamic' religion, which culminates in mysticism.

1. Life

Bergson was born in Paris on 18 October 1859 with a musician as father and a mother from Yorkshire. He married Louise Neuberger, a relative of Proust, and had one daughter. After teaching in Angers, Clermont-Ferrand and Paris, he held a chair at the Collège de France from 1900 to 1921, where his lectures before the First World War attracted so many people that it was seriously proposed to move them to the Opéra. After the war, interest in his lectures declined and he turned from academic teaching (though only partly from writing) to promoting international understanding as a prophylactic against war. Fiercely patriotic, he died at France's darkest hour on 3 January or 4 January 1941, after seventeen years of crippling arthritis, and after supporting his fellow Jews by refusing an offer of exemption from anti-Semitic regulations; the same sympathy may have stopped him officially adopting the Catholic religion, to which in later life he became spiritually close (despite having his books placed on the Index in 1914).

Bergson was a man of wide intellectual attainments. At seventeen he won first prize in an open mathematical competition and also solved a problem left unsolved by Pascal. His subsidiary degree thesis (written in Latin) dealt with Aristotle on place, and he lectured on Lucretius. He

devoted several years to a detailed study of the literature on aphasia, in connection with memory, and similarly used detailed scientific evidence to support his views on evolution. He was also a great stylist and his books can stand beside those of Berkeley, Russell and the early Plato as among the more readable works of philosophy.

2. Time and duration

The core of Bergson's philosophy, which, as he pointed out in a letter of 1915 (1972: 1148), every account of his philosophy must start from and constantly return to, on pain of distortion, is the 'intuition of duration'. Time, for Bergson, is of two fundamentally different kinds, or better, especially for his later philosophy, appears in two fundamentally different guises. For science, time is essentially particulate. It consists of an infinite, dense set of instants, and science uses the calculus to study the world as it is at these instants. Change is nothing over and above the world's being in different states at different instants, and the transition from one state to another is something science can take no account of except by using the calculus in this way. (This interpretation of the role of the calculus for Bergson has been disputed: see Milet 1974.) For experience, however, this transition is the very essence of time, now called duration (*durée*). We do not live from moment to moment, but in a continuous stream of experience (the similarity to William James' 'stream of consciousness' is unsurprising, given the close personal and professional friendship between Bergson and James, who reached their views independently).

One might wonder why change should not consist simply in being in different states at different instants, provided the instants form a dense set, so that no two are adjacent (a feature Bergson unfortunately ignores in his favourite image of time as cinematographic). Bergson's reply, that this overlooks the phenomenology of experience, surely has merit, and helps to solve several problems. We experience the immediate past, and possibly the immediate future, along with the present, as actual, and we can perhaps avoid objections that have confronted James' independently developed 'specious present' if (with Bergson) we avoid treating the act of experiencing as itself separate and momentary. But be that as it may, Bergson can avoid Augustine's problem that time vanishes because only the present is actual and the present does not last long enough to be real at all. He also need not worry about how we acquire a concept of the past when experience only ever presents us with the present.

However, problems do arise. Duration is introduced as essentially linked to consciousness; but does duration exist in the outer world? Bergson's first major book *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience* (Time and Free Will) (1889) states unambiguously that it does not, but his next book *Matière et mémoire: Essai sur les relations du corps avec l'esprit* (Matter and Memory) (1896) does allow duration to the outer world, as do his later works. The change of view was well motivated, for how could a consciousness embedded in duration live in a world devoid of it? Science still treats the world as cinematographic, and so now falsifies it, but inevitably and harmlessly, so long as we do not expect from science more than it can give; it is for metaphysics, using 'intuition', to describe the world philosophically, but only science can give us our indispensable practical understanding of the world. Bergson, however, never seemed conscious of a real change of view, and in his much later *La pensée et le mouvant: essais et conférences* (The Creative Mind) (1934) talks simply of Matter and Memory as getting nearer to

what he wanted to say. Nor did he ever satisfactorily explain the extent to which duration is bound up with consciousness.

Bergson's treatment of time and duration invites comparison with McTaggart's B-series and A-series respectively. McTaggart wrote in 1908, after Bergson's main treatments, but Bergson's later writings show no knowledge of him. In McTaggart's terms Bergson would be a thoroughgoing A-theorist, especially from Matter and Memory onwards (see McTaggart, J.M.E. §2).

Discrete plurality for Bergson is essentially spatial, and time with its multiplicity of moments is duration spatialized. This contrast between space and genuine time (duration) introduces an asymmetry between space and time which puts Bergson at odds with recent philosophy (which tends to treat them alike), and assimilates him in this respect to older philosophers such as the Greeks. One of his favourite examples for illustrating duration is a melody, which we can only hear as a melody if we hear it as a whole. Critics have pointed out that, similarly, we can only see a circle by seeing it as a whole (Boudot 1980: 349), and have claimed that in order to distinguish space and time Bergson uses a distinction between the psychological and the mathematical that applies within space and time equally (Berthelot 1913: 354–5). The critics are somewhat justified, though Bergson does in a lower key distinguish space from extensity, and could perhaps thereby deal with the circle. But the critics do scant justice to the real asymmetries between space and time in terms of directions and 'flow' which support Bergson's general approach (see Time §1).

3. Bergson and Zeno

The ideas so far outlined provide Bergson with a tool which he uses first to deal with Zeno's paradoxes of motion, but then goes on to apply in other spheres, such as biology and ethics. This tool is the distinction between a movement and its trajectory. The reason that Zeno's Achilles never overtakes his tortoise is that Zeno insists on applying to the movement, which occurs in time, the infinite process of division that really only applies to the trajectory, which is spatial (see Zeno of Elea §7). The movement is essentially unitary and indivisible. This gives the spirit of Bergson's views, though only as a rough approximation: evidently Achilles' movement does have parts – his steps – and it is these that have no parts. But Bergson never seems to succeed in giving adequate criteria for deciding just when a movement is unitary and so has no parts.

The use of this tool in other spheres begins with the treatment of free will in *Time and Free Will*, where it joins a sort of dialectical device that Bergson repeatedly employs: the insistence that two antagonistic approaches that together dominate a philosophical topic share a common error, though he often admits that his own view lies nearer to one pole than to the other. On free will, the poles are determinism and libertarianism, and the error, as so often, amounts to replacing a movement by its trajectory. Bergson's own view, that a free act will proceed from the self alone and 'express the whole of the self' ([1889] 1990: 165–6), is nearer to libertarianism, but the libertarian, insisting that the agent 'could have done otherwise', shares with the determinist the view that the trajectory is already there before the action and that it makes sense to imagine a replay, stopping the action halfway through, as it were, and sending it off on a different course.

His point seems to be that there is no 'halfway through' at which the action could be stopped; the process flowing from deliberation to completed action (the doing, as opposed to the things done) is unitary and indivisible (see Free will §1–2).

4. Process philosophy

Process philosophy is a philosophical tradition which goes back as far as Heraclitus, and if Bergson can be placed in any tradition, it is in this, despite his repudiation of allegiance to Heraclitus. Process philosophy stands in opposition to the tradition stemming from Aristotle's scheme of categories, where the world consists of substances which have properties and undergo change. For process philosophy the world consists of processes, and Bergson often says things like, 'There are changes, but there are underneath the change no things which change... movement does not imply a mobile' ([1934] 1946: 173). Objects are like 'snapshots' of a flux, which is duration. This echo of the cinematographic approach of science illustrates another feature of Bergson: his pragmatism. He does not deny that language (itself a pragmatic device for dealing with the world) uses the Aristotelian apparatus of subject and predicate, but we see the world in terms of objects which change because that is the only way we can act in it, just as science gives us our only way of manipulating it.

5. Metaphysics and philosophy of mind

This pragmatism appears again in Bergson's philosophy of mind, which, as we might expect from the way in which he links duration to consciousness, is itself closely linked to his metaphysics. He repudiates idealism, and begins the introduction to the 1911 edition of *Matter and Memory* by calling himself a dualist, 'affirming the reality of spirit and the reality of matter'. But his dualism is not 'vulgar'. It can be called a dualism of time and space (it is tempting to call it one of movement and trajectory), but from another point of view it could be called one of perception and memory, terms which he constantly contrasts as differing in kind, not in degree.

But though matter and spirit are both real, they differ only in degree, and here we reach a central part of Bergson's metaphysics, and also his epistemology, for our knowledge of the world is essentially bound up with the nature of the world itself. Bergson is one of the few philosophers to distinguish clearly between sensation and perception. We cannot start with sensations, treated as unextended and inside ourselves, and somehow turn them into perceptions telling us of an extended outer world, just as we cannot get a concept of the past by starting from a momentary present, and treating memories simply as weaker ('fainter', as Hume would say) sensations or perceptions. Bergson's target here is the associationism that underlies so much of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century empiricism, and his criticisms are of fundamental importance, whether or not his own view also faces difficulties.

Although officially dualist, Bergson's view is somewhat akin to the 'neutral monism' of William James and others (see James, W. §6; Neutral monism). Though perception differs in kind from memory, it essentially involves it in varying degrees. Our perceptions are always affected by our experience, and if we had no memories we would have no real perceptions – another important criticism of Humean empiricism. Perception takes place not inside us but where its object is, and a perception unmediated by memory, and in that sense a 'pure' perception, is an ideal limit, and

not really perception at all; it 'is really part of matter'. In effect it is the object itself, or rather, since it now lacks duration, it is what we might now describe as a momentary time-slice of the object.

Bergson's pragmatism reappears here: we perceive what we need to perceive in order to act (we might think this more obviously true in the case of animals), and the function of the brain is to filter memories so that only those enter consciousness which are of practical use, notably in perceiving; he used his study of aphasia to argue that the brain cannot be used as a storehouse for memories. Superficially, his treatment of memory involves an excessively crude dichotomy between picture-memory and habit-memory, but he was not concerned with many of the problems that interest later thinkers.

6. Humour

Le rire: essai sur la signification du comique (Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic) (1900), probably Bergson's most popular book, can be seen as an appendix to his philosophy of mind and body. For him, a human being is a creature who is both body and spirit (to avoid too intellectual a term: see §7) and uses its body for practical purposes. But sometimes the body takes over and we act as though we were simply a body, either obeying only physical laws – when we slip on a banana-skin, for instance – or when our actions become wooden, mechanical, automatic or stereotyped. It is then that others laugh at us and we have the makings of comedy, low or high. Bergson also gives laughter a function, as a social corrective (his target has something in common with Sartre's 'bad faith'). 'A humorist is a moralist disguised as a scientist' (1900: 128).

7. Science and metaphysics: the *élan vital*

Bergson distinguishes three cognitive faculties: intelligence, instinct and intuition. As evolution has advanced, animals and humans have diverged and developed instinct and intelligence respectively as their tools for confronting the world. These are equally suited for their tasks, intelligence being extensible but hazardous, while intuition is limited but safe. Bergson uses detailed scientific evidence to illustrate the remarkable achievements of which instinct is capable. Intuition is a development of instinct, mediated by intelligence, which occurs only in humans but takes them to their highest level, and is the faculty used by metaphysics to say what reality is really like, while science uses intelligence to study reality in a manner inevitably distorted – but essential for practical living. But 'intuition' is ambiguous in Bergson. In one sense it turns quantity into quality, and, for example, enables us to see trillions of vibrations as the colour red, and experience duration; metaphysics uses it to study life and spirit. But in another sense it is insight, the getting of bright ideas, which both presupposes and is essential for the development of intelligence.

On evolution, Bergson again claims that two antagonistic theories, Darwinian mechanism and finalism or teleology, share a common presupposition, that the path or trajectory of evolution is somehow already laid out. His own view involves his famous *élan vital* ('vital impetus', usually left untranslated) which drives evolution on, though not towards any pre-ordained goal. It drives rather than draws, and to that extent resembles mechanism, but it also overcomes obstacles – a

puzzling idea if it has no goals. Perhaps Bergson is here taking up a stance nearer to one extreme (teleology) than to the other, evolution having intermediate goals but no overall goal.

8. Morality and religion

Bergson turned to morality, and to an explicit discussion of religion, late in life in his last major work, *Les deux sources de la morale et de la religion* (The Two Sources of Morality and Religion) (1932). On both topics he uses a dualistic framework, but not, as in previous works, to show how two antagonistic approaches share a common premise. He contrasts closed morality with open morality and static religion with dynamic religion, and in each case his preference for the second term is unambiguous. The open morality is one of aspiration rather than impulsion and is universal in scope. Dynamic religion is somewhat similar, culminating in mysticism, of whose nature and development he gives an extended account. Obligation he sees as the pull of instinct against the waywardness introduced by intelligence, and he rightly emphasizes that we perform the great majority of our obligations as a matter of course and without any heroic Kantian struggle. The contrast between trajectory and movement is used twice here. Just as we can never build up a movement out of elements of its trajectory, but must treat it as something distinct and unitary, we can never construct a motive for moral action from individual intellectual considerations: the motive must already be there, given by instinct (there are echoes of Hume here). The second point is that we can never pass from ever-expanding group loyalties, which always require some out-group as a foil, to the universal love of mankind that open morality demands and that only the mystic can provide.

List of works

Bergson, H.-L. (1889) *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience*, Paris: Alcan; trans. F.L. Pogson, *Time and Free Will*, New York: Swan Sonnenschein, and London: Allen & Unwin, 1990.

(Introduces contrasts between time and duration and between movement and trajectory.)

Bergson, H.-L. (1896) *Matière et mémoire: Essai sur les relations du corps avec l'esprit*, Paris: Alcan; trans. N.M. Paul and W. Scott Palmer, *Matter and Memory*, New York: Swan Sonnenschein, and London: Allen & Unwin, 1911.

(Translation contains a new introduction by Bergson.)

Bergson, H.-L. (1900) *Le Rire: Essai sur la signification du comique*, Paris: Alcan; trans. C. Brereton and F. Rothwell, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, London and New York: Macmillan, 1911.

(Applies his general ideas to the sphere of humour.)

Bergson, H.-L. (1903) 'Introduction à la métaphysique', *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* 29: 1–36; trans. T.E. Hulme, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, New York: Putnam, 1912; and in *The Creative Mind*, 1934.

(More on epistemology than on metaphysics, this is where Bergson introduces his notion of 'intuition'.)

Bergson, H.-L. (1907) *L'évolution créatrice*, Paris: Alcan; trans. A. Mitchell, *Creative Evolution*, New York: Holt, 1911.

(Important for Bergson's treatment not only of biology but of intuition, and also of different types of order and disorder and their relations, and of the concept of nothing.)

Bergson, H.-L. (1919) *L'énergie spirituelle*, Paris: Alcan; trans. H. Wildon Carr, *Mind-Energy: Lectures and Essays*, New York: Holt, and London: Macmillan, 1920.

(Collected essays, mainly on mind and body.)

Bergson, H.-L. (1922) *Durée et simultanéité: a propos de la théorie d'Einstein*, Paris: Alcan; trans. L. Jacobson, with introduction by H. Dingle, *Duration and Simultaneity*, Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965.

(The second edition in 1923 adds three appendices replying to criticisms. Bergson tries to defuse some paradoxical consequences of relativity theory, writing before these were empirically confirmed. It is now agreed he was wrong in the letter, though some say he was right in the spirit and anticipated later developments; see Čapek and Heidsieck.)

Bergson, H.-L. (1932) *Les deux sources de la morale et de la religion*, Paris: Alcan; trans. R.A. Audra, C. Brereton and W.H. Carter, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, New York: Holt, 1935.

(Distinguishes two levels, higher and lower, in each of these spheres.)

Bergson, H.-L. (1934) *La pensée et le mouvant: essais et conférences*, Paris: Alcan; trans. M.L. Anderson, *The Creative Mind*, New York: Philosophical Library, 1946.

(Essays, historical and on method, including 'Introduction à la métaphysique' and two new introductions which form perhaps the best entrance-point for newcomers to Bergson.)

Bergson, H.-L. (1959) *Oeuvres*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.

(Centennial edition containing all the above except *Durée et simultanéité*, with an introduction by H. Gouhier and critical and historical notes by A. Robinet.)

Bergson, H.-L. (1972) *Mélanges*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.

(Edited with notes by A. Robinet and with foreword by H. Gouhier, this contains virtually all Bergson's writings whose publication he allowed (except those in *Oeuvres* 1959), including his early thesis on place in Aristotle and *Durée et simultanéité*.)

References and further reading

Barlow, M. (1966) *Henri Bergson*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.

(Brief French biography which succeeds in integrating Bergson's life and works.)

Barreau, H. (1973) 'Bergson et Einstein: A propos de Durée et simultanéité', *Les Études bergsoniennes* 10: 73–134.

(Extended but accessible discussion, critical of Bergson.)

Berthelot, R. (1913) *Un Romantisme utilitaire: étude sur le mouvement pragmatiste. Troisième partie. Un Pragmatisme psychologique; le pragmatisme partial de Bergson* (A Utilitarian Romanticism: A Study of the Pragmatist Movement. Part 3: A Psychological Pragmatism; The Partial Pragmatism of Bergson), Paris: Alcan.

(Full and scholarly, though rather unsympathetic, treatment of Bergson and influences on him.)

Boudot, M. (1980) 'L'Espace selon Bergson' (Space According to Bergson), *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* 85 (3): 332–356.

(Mentioned in §2. Very hostile discussion, claiming, among other things, that the asymmetry Bergson sees between space and time is illusory.)

Čapek, M. (1971) *Bergson and Modern Physics*, Dordrecht: Reidel.

(Full and scholarly treatment of Bergson, going well beyond its title, but accessible. Much more sympathetic to Bergson than Berthelot.)

Čapek, M. (1980) 'Ce qui est vivant et ce qui est mort dans la critique bergsonienne de la relativité' ('What is living and what is dead in Bergson's critique of relativity'), *Revue de synthèse* 101 (99–100): 313–344.

(Sympathetic and accessible.)

Gale, R.M. (1973–4) 'Bergson's analysis of the concept of nothing', *The Modern Schoolman* 51: 269–300.

(On a topic on which Bergson says some important things in chap. 4 of *Creative Evolution*, though not covered in this entry.)

Gunter, P.A.Y. (1974, 1986) *Henri Bergson: A Bibliography*, Bowling Green, OH: Philosophy Documentation Centre.

(Massive work with over 6,000 entries by and on Bergson, many with summaries, extensive in the case of Bergson's main works.)

Heidsieck, F. (1957) *Henri Bergson et la notion d'espace* (Henri Bergson and the Notion of Space), Paris: Le Cercle du Livre.

(Influential in the rehabilitation of Bergson after the Second World War. See especially the discussion, with some technicalities, of *Durée et simultanéité*, claiming that Bergson was right in spirit, though not in letter.)

Husson, L. (1947) *L'intellectualisme de Bergson*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.

(Emphasizes that Bergson's use of intuition does not imply that he was anti-intellectualist.)

Kolakowski, L. (1985) *Bergson*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

(Brief elementary overview.)

Lacey, A.R. (1989) *Bergson*, London: Routledge.

(The book on which this entry is based. Confined to philosophy, not the history of ideas.)

Milet, J. (1974) *Bergson et le calcul infinitésimal (Bergson and the Infinitesimal Calculus)*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.

(Referred to in §2. Nontechnical discussion claiming Bergson saw the calculus as a means of dealing with duration, not as something limited to the ‘cinematographic’ method. See English résumé of his views in Papanicolaou and Gunter 1987.)

Moore, F.C.T. (1996) *Bergson: Thinking Backwards*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

(Good attempt to give brief and accessible expression to some of Bergson’s more difficult doctrines, and to bring out their significance.)

Mullarkey, J. (1998) *The New Bergson*, Manchester, Manchester University Press.

(Essays aimed at bringing out the contemporary relevance of Bergson in a wide variety of spheres.)

Papanicolaou, A.C. and Gunter, P.A.Y. (1987) *Bergson and Modern Thought*, Chur, Switzerland: Harvard Academic Publishers.

(Essays, sometimes technical, claiming Bergson anticipated elements of various modern scientific developments, which confirm many of his ideas.)