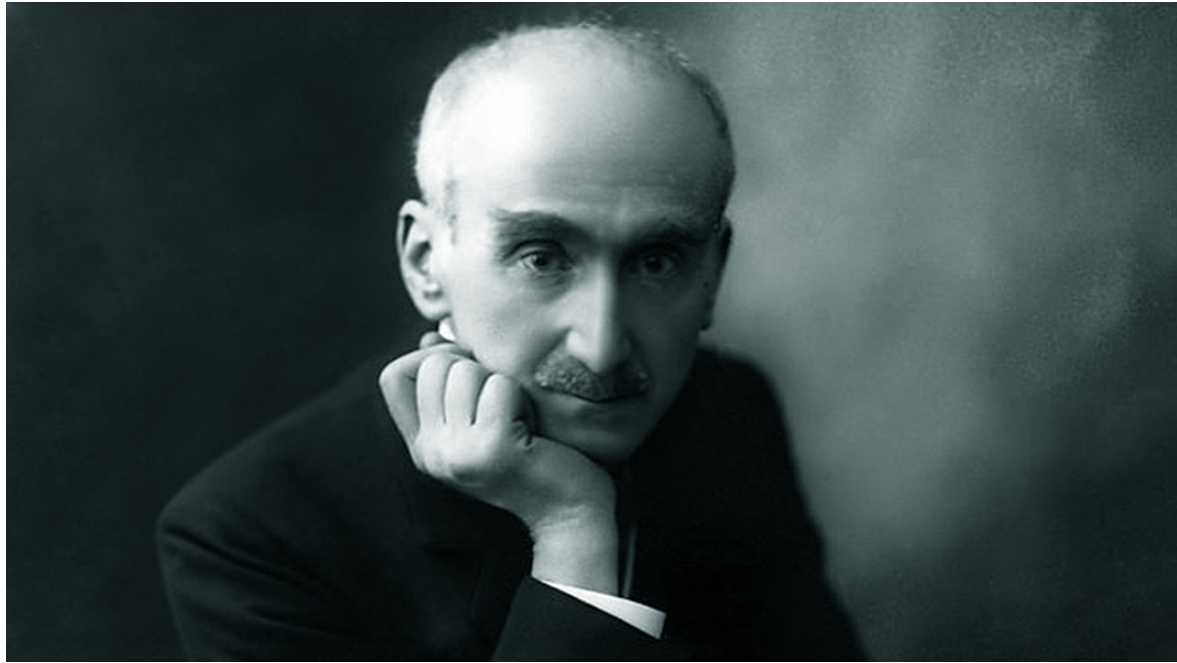


Bergson: Time is not space

Henri Bergson's bold and sweeping conception of a panpsychic world charged with *élan vital*

By [Mark Sinclair](#)



Few philosophers have been as influential and celebrated in their own lifetimes as Henri Bergson (1859–1941). In the years before the First World War, his lectures at the *Collège de France* were society events reported on the front pages; press photographs of the time show groups of his often predominantly female audience craning their necks in doorways and at windows of packed lecture halls. *Le tout Paris* had developed a penchant for metaphysics, and Bergson, the philosopher of time, memory and life, had become an intellectual celebrity. For a while, it seemed that everything new and radical in contemporary culture owed something to him. Cubists, futurists and anarcho-syndicalists, among others in the cultural and political avant-garde, appropriated his ideas.

Bergson's fame was international. A lecture tour of 1911 gave rise to a "Bergson boom" in Britain; a bemused Bertrand Russell admitted that his lectures "were reported in the daily newspapers – everyone has gone mad about him for some reason". Two years later, the enthusiasm spread to the US: his talk, delivered in French, on "Spiritualité et liberté" at Columbia University is supposed to have caused the first ever traffic jam on Broadway.

Bergson did not court this celebrity, and before his vocal support for the French cause in 1914 he had led a quiet, conventional academic life. Though Jewish, he had remained silent about the Dreyfus affair. The academic focus of his life had been shaped at the age of eleven: he stayed in Paris as a boarder at the Springer Institute, where he seems to have lost any real attachment to his religious origins, in order to attend the Lycée Fontanes (now the Lycée Condorcet) when his English mother and Polish father moved the rest of the family to England. He took French nationality at the age of eighteen, gained entry to the Ecole Normale Supérieure and then passed the *agrégation* (the competitive examination qualifying successful candidates for positions in the national education system) in philosophy, coming second in the year.

Bergson's reputation was based on three major philosophical works. His primary doctoral thesis of 1888, submitted after several years spent teaching at *lycées* in Angers and Clermont-Ferrand, developed the "spiritualist" tradition in nineteenth-century French philosophy by offering an innovative account of the experience of the passage of time and, on that basis, a novel defence of a notion of free will. The thesis bears the title *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience*, which was extended in the 1910 English translation as *Time and Free Will: An essay on the immediate data of consciousness*.

If all philosophers have only one idea, one fundamental and guiding thought, as Bergson later remarked, his was expressed already in his doctoral thesis. When pressed on what it was by his audience at the *Collège de France*, Bergson responded: "I have said that time is not space". He must have answered with a wry smile, for sound common sense, despite being unable to say much about what time is, easily recognizes that it is different to space: I cannot go back and forth in time as I can in space. Time seems to flow in a given direction, whereas it is possible to go up or down, left or right, forwards or backwards in space.

But Bergson's distinction is less obvious, and draws on the fact that ordinarily we think about time *in spatial terms*. If I conceive time as a timeline, as a series of instants composed of a present surrounded by past and future instants, I view time through the prism of space (which makes the past and the future, in a sense, present). Even the bare idea of an instantaneous now, exclusive of other instants, has meaning only against the background of space. With these instants we can mark out the beginning and end of a measurable period of time, but the units with which we measure it – seconds, minutes, hours – derive from space in that they represent portions of the earth's motion around the sun; measuring how long it takes, say, to run a marathon is thus to compare two spatial movements. In spatializing time in these ways, we treat time as an object of vision, if only in the mind's eye, and, at bottom, as already having elapsed (this applies to units of time as well as timelines: if sixty minutes have not elapsed we do not have an hour) rather than as elapsing.

The experience of the passage of time, which slips through our fingers as soon as we try to figuratively represent and quantify it, is what Bergson terms *la durée réelle*, real duration. In order to grasp something of it, it is necessary to campaign against the spatializing tendencies of thought. This campaign, and the purified experience we can gain through it, is what Bergson will later name *intuition*. But what can intuition reveal to us? Bergson's insight is, indeed, essentially negative at first ("I have said that time is not space"): duration is not quantitative, but purely qualitative; it is a principle not of simultaneity, but of pure succession (noting that pure succession cannot be a series of instants). In contrast to homogeneous space, whose every part, indifferent to its contents, is alike any other, duration is a principle of difference and heterogeneity; and instead of a separation of instants, real duration presents a fusion or interpenetration of the past and future in the present.

We have the most direct experience of this melting of the past and present into the future in listening to music or, late in the day, to a clock sounding on the hour when we do not attempt to determine what time it is, i.e. when we do not count exactly how many times the bell has been struck. In these cases, experience, when we know how to reflect adequately on it, presents us with a "multiplicity" that is, Bergson claims, qualitative rather than quantitative, in that it is not originally composed of separate, countable units. The passage of music involves change and difference, certainly, but this multiplicity is pre-quantitative in that it is not originally the difference of particular determinate sounds to others. Given that time as ordinarily understood is infinitely divisible, the search for such atomic sounds will be endless, and will reduce the experience of music to a "dust" of instants in which neither melody nor duration can be found.

Ideas about duration and the stream of consciousness as irreducible to the spatial categories of thought were in the air before 1888, but in developing them Bergson presents an original conception of personal identity and human freedom. The self is not a fixed substance that persists unchanged through time (as René Descartes thought); it is not a fiction of the imagination collated after the sequential facts of empirical experience (David Hume); and nor is it an unknowable *noumenal* principle that stands outside psychological experience in order to make it possible (Immanuel Kant). Instead, on Bergson's account, the profound self is nothing but the flow and enduring process of my past melting into my present open to my future. Consequently, Bergson can challenge the parameters of traditional metaphysical debate concerning free will: the free act, which he takes to occur only in the most solemn circumstances, only when clear and isolated motives for the act cannot be discovered prior to the act, is as little absolutely determined by a supposed causal chain of previous states of consciousness as it is an absolutely undetermined, extra-empirical "liberty of indifference". The free act is rather an expression of, and gives shape to, the entire past history of this profound, durational self. The French

existentialists, half a century later, would have nothing to teach Bergson on this score.

Insofar as it discussed the past history of the self, *Time and Free Will* already presupposed an idea of memory, which was the theme of Bergson's next, longer book, *Matière et mémoire* (1896; *Matter and Memory*). Here the primary, implicit memory that is duration is contrasted with episodic memory. Bergson develops the work (he refers to it in a journal article earlier in the year) of the English neurologist Hughlings Jackson, who denied that recent research justified the thesis that episodic memories are grounded on neurological traces. Of course, the brain, and particularly the left-side of the frontal lobe, is necessary for remembering, but the brain-trace hypothesis, as Bergson shows, results from the seventeenth-century philosophical thesis of psycho-physical parallelism (of a one-to-one correspondence between mind-state and brain-state) rather than from empirical findings. Over a century of well-funded research into the physiological basis of memory, it is important to note, has failed to prove Jackson and Bergson wrong. In order to account for episodic memory, Bergson posited an essentially spiritual "pure memory" or "pure past", which, though "virtual" rather than "actual", continuously returns into the present in making sense of perceptual experience. In this way, Bergson's reflection on memory leads into a philosophy of perception that challenges traditional idealist and realist theories.

Bergson's first two works were not enough to open doors at the Sorbonne, where he was rejected twice for a lectureship. Instead, in 1900 he was nominated to a chair at the *Collège de France*, which, though prestigious, is a slightly marginal institution in French academic life. It is without degree-awarding powers and thus Bergson was unable to have his own students, but it did allow him to attract a general public to his lectures, which were remarkably limpid even though they were delivered without notes (the recently published notes are the work of professional stenographers commissioned by Charles Péguy).

1907 saw Bergson's third major work, *L'Évolution créatrice* (*Creative Evolution*), which immediately made him famous. Written at a time later characterized by Julian Huxley as the "eclipse of Darwinism", Bergson extended his ideas about the psychological experience of time to biological life in its evolution. In arguing that the driving, developmental force of biological life as a whole, the "*élan vital*", involves duration and is essentially psychological, Bergson criticized the mechanism in the neo-Darwinism of his time. In denying that life advances towards a consciously apprehended goal, he also qualified biological finalism; life advances more like the fine artist than the artisan (or the "divine watchmaker") with a blueprint of the work to be realized. Biological life, on Bergson's Romantic account, is not an "engineering problem", as contemporary Darwinists like to intone, but akin to genius as the impetus in fine art. In criticizing finalism, Bergson accommodates, in fact,

Darwin's idea of the tree of life – of branching after branching on the basis of a single trunk – but with an array of pyrotechnic metaphors: life advances like an explosion, firework or bomb, in the form of a sheath or bouquet.

In extending real duration to life beyond the human mind, *Creative Evolution* decisively rejected the apparent dualism of *Time and Free Will*, according to which duration characterized mind in opposition to material things, which are without duration in space. *Creative Evolution* developed, in fact, the still hesitant conclusions of *Matter and Memory* concerning the different degrees or “tensions” of duration existing throughout the world, even in the inorganic realm. Given that duration, as the stretch between any two temporal instants that we isolate within it, is a form of primary memory, and thus mind, this thesis involved a version of a spiritualist, panpsychic metaphysics – a metaphysical position that is increasingly fashionable in contemporary English-language philosophy – according to which degrees of mind are to be found in all that exists, even in apparently inert matter.

Commentators have wondered about the ethical implications of Bergson's metaphysics. To what ethical expression could and should his “vitalist” metaphysics lead? Bergson had seemed to worry that he had nothing concrete to say in this regard, nothing that could match the achievements of his previous books. The whole of the 1920s passed without Bergson, in increasingly frail health, publishing anything on the issue. But in 1932 he finally published *Les Deux sources de la morale et de la religion* (*The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*), which contrasts two sources or modes of morality that are the prior condition of any rational moral rules. *Closed* morality, which is a function of materiality, habit, social pressure and a body politic opposed to others, contrasts with *open* morality, which, as an expansion of the *élan vital*, is an expression of mystical genius and universal love. In the same sense, Bergson contrasts closed religion with an open religion of creative mystical heroes .

In 1940, Bergson's own comportment was extraordinary. He rejected the Vichy government's offer of exceptions from anti-Semitic regulations. Early the next year, he died from a respiratory infection that he contracted while queueing outside in the rain in order to register as a Jew. In his will, Bergson asked for a Catholic priest to say prayers at his funeral. “My reflections”, he wrote, “have brought me closer and closer to Catholicism in which I see the completion of Judaism. I would have converted had I not seen coming for many years the terrible wave of anti-Semitism about to break upon the world. I have preferred to remain with those who tomorrow will be the persecuted.”

Bergson's fame reached its zenith with the awarding of the 1927 Nobel Prize in Literature for his philosophical work, but the rapid decline of his glory in the 1930s was also remarkable. He was criticized by some, including Russell before the war, as an "irrationalist", and the advent of analytic philosophy had much to do with the decline of the "Bergson boom". He was perceived by many to have lost his argument with Albert Einstein in the 1920s concerning the nature of time and the status of his theory of relativity. He was also denounced by influential internationalist and Marxist thinkers for having sanctified the French cause in his war writings – characterizing France as the nation of the *élan vital* in opposition to Germany, which instantiated dead mechanism. To a new generation of French philosophers looking across the Rhine to G. W. F. Hegel, Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger for a "concrete" and, later, "existentialist" philosophy able to account for world-history, nothingness, anxiety and death, Bergson seemed to belong to a different epoch, to the belle-époque. And yet Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit* (1927; *Being and Time*) and French existentialism would have been impossible without Bergson's breakthrough concerning the experience of duration.

Bergson was never wholly forgotten, and after his death Emmanuel Levinas, **Vladimir Jankélévitch** and then **Gilles Deleuze** were influential advocates and interpreters of his ideas. In English, A. N. Whitehead's process philosophy borrowed from Bergson's thinking in several respects. More recently, an intensive new wave of French Bergson scholarship has given rise to a twenty-volume critical edition of his work and to the publication of his Collège de France lecture courses. Slowly, with a century's distance, philosophers writing in English are once again recognizing the significance of his work. Sometime soon, surely, it will no longer be possible for English-language books and anthologies on the philosophy of time to omit any reference to Bergson.

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