

Introduction

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In the years just before the First World War, Henri Bergson (1859–1941) was at the height of his fame. His first two books, *Time and Free Will* (1889) and *Matter and Memory* (1896), had established him as the preeminent philosopher of France. But it was the publication of *Creative Evolution* in 1907 that made him a genuine cultural sensation. Avant-garde artists and writers flocked to his lectures at the Collège de France. As did “high society”: so much so that students, tired of losing their place to those able to send valets hours in advance to reserve seats, circulated an (ultimately unsuccessful) petition to ban the general public.¹ And on the day Bergson was elected to the French Academy, he found his lectern showered with flower petals, leading him to protest, “but . . . I am not a dancer!”²

With this celebrity in mind, we would like to introduce Bergson with a vignette from one of his later essays. In “The Possible and the Real,” he recounts an exchange with a journalist who sought out the famous philosopher’s views on the future of literature. Here is how Bergson sets up the dialogue:

During the Great War certain newspapers and periodicals sometimes turned aside from the terrible worries of the day to think of what would happen later once peace was restored. They were particularly preoccupied with the future of literature. Someone came one day to ask me my ideas on the subject. A little embarrassed, I declared I had none. “Do you not at least perceive,” I was asked, “certain possible directions? Let us grant that one cannot foresee things in detail; you as a philosopher have at least an idea of the whole. How do you conceive, for example, the great dramatic work of tomorrow?” (PM 1339–40/118)

Before citing the substance of Bergson’s reply, let us pause here. A characteristic feature of his thought is already on display. The journalist

¹ Azouvi, *La gloire de Bergson*, 13; Soulez and Worms, *Bergson*, 99.

² Soulez and Worms, *Bergson*, 100.

seems to have taken his initial demurral to pronounce on the future of literature as false modesty. Critical modesty might be a better word for it. Something that greatly annoyed Bergson about intellectuals – philosophers especially – is the liberty they take in giving opinions about anything and everything. In fact, it bothered him so much that he gave a name to it: “homo loquax,” that is, he who talks . . . and only talks (PM 1325/100). Thus, when the journalist tries to encourage him by saying, “you *as a philosopher* at least have an idea of the whole,” it is a conception of philosophy, and of the philosopher, Bergson is keen to refuse.

When asked his opinion about “the great dramatic work of tomorrow,” then, Bergson responds:

I shall always remember my interlocutor’s surprise when I answered, “If I knew what was to be the great dramatic work of the future, I should be writing it.” I saw distinctly that he conceived the future work as being already stored up in some cupboard reserved for possibles; because of my longstanding relations with philosophy I should have been able to obtain from it the key to the storehouse. “But,” I said, “the work of which you speak is not yet possible.” – “But it must be, since it is to take place.” – “No, it is not. I grant you, at most, that it *will have been possible*.” “What do you mean by that?” – “It’s quite simple. Let a man of talent or genius come forth, let him create a work: it will then be real, and by that very fact it becomes retrospectively or retroactively possible. It would not be possible, it would not have been so, if this man had not come upon the scene. That is why I tell you that it will have been possible today, but that it is not yet so.” (PM 1340/118–19)

Bergson says that the idea he expresses here is “quite simple.” If that word is taken to mean “easy to understand,” we disagree. For in these lines we have not only a summary of the main idea of his philosophy, but that very idea – as Bergson insists time and again – also defies easy comprehension because it rubs against the grain of how our intellect, our understanding, works.

Put yourself in the journalist’s shoes, who thinks the way Bergson believes we are naturally inclined to think. From his point of view, the question he asks Bergson is unproblematic. Even though a catastrophic war is raging, it is only a matter of time until another major work of literature is written. The next Gustave Flaubert or Marcel Proust is out there, somewhere. And so, given that the ideas and styles that the next great author will use to craft his or her book are, in some form at least, already in circulation, what is wrong in saying that this work is possible here and now? Why can’t the great Bergson just play along and say what he thinks it will look like?

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To make our way into Bergson's objection to the question, and thus to the heart of his thought, consider a thought experiment coined at exactly this moment in history and still remembered today: the infinite monkey theorem. The idea, proposed by the French mathematician Émile Borel in 1914, is that, given an infinite amount of time, a monkey hitting random keys on a typewriter will reproduce any and all works of literature. With enough time, for example, it is a virtual certainty that a perfect copy of *Madame Bovary* will be typed out.³ Fine. But then, we might wonder, why should the monkey be limited to reproducing existing works of literature? Is it not possible, to use that crucial word, for it to produce what a human being would consider – under conditions of double-blind review, no doubt – the great literary work of the future? Absolutely, if we keep with the perspective of the journalist. The necessary elements are in place: the letters of the alphabet are available and ready to be struck on a keyboard. Granted, it would be very difficult to guess what form *that* particular work would take. Still, and in exactly the same sense of the word, right now the great dramatic work of tomorrow is *possible* for either man or monkey. For all that means is that the elements for it – whether the letters of the alphabet for the monkey, or leading ideas and styles for the human – exist in the present. What needs to happen for that work to spring into being is for these elements to be combined in new and interesting ways.

Obviously, this is not how Bergson sees things. Rather than accept that the next great work of literature *is* possible here and now, he replies in the future perfect tense: fully recognizing that the next great work of literature will appear sooner or later, all we can say or, rather, will be able to say only at that point in the future when it actually does appear, is that it *will have been* possible at the present moment in time. What does this shift in perspective allow us to see? In a word, creativity. Or, as Bergson puts it in the opening sentence of the essay, “the continuous creation of unforeseeable novelty which seems to be going on in the universe” (PM 1331/107).

The basic idea, then, is that if something is genuinely novel – and that can be a book or work of art, but equally a new emotion, or institution, or way of living, or life form, or species, and much else – it is, in principle, unpredictable. Certainly, after the fact of its creation, you can always trace out antecedents for it. Schubert's quartets thus seem as if they were already present – already possible – in Beethoven's late work. But, and here is the point, that is only a retrospective view: the view of the future perfect tense, the “will have been possible.” It is not what Bergson is after. He is the great

³ Borel, *Le Hasard*.

thinker of creativity and difference in the twentieth century because he sought to understand what novelty is, why it defies our existing modes of thinking, and to propose better models and approaches to appreciate it. Indeed, we think it fair to say, and we do so with admiration, that Bergson was a thinker with one big idea.⁴ He named it “duration,” and his entire *oeuvre* is dedicated to the insight that the future is not given in advance, that novelty and creativity is real (and not just an illusion due to our limited predictive powers), and that, to cite a famous line from *Creative Evolution*, “Time is invention or it is nothing at all” (EC 784/218).

This Bergsonian insight guides this volume and the contributions it contains. In the twenty years that have passed since the publication of *The New Bergson*, edited by John Mullarkey, there have been major developments in Bergson studies, spurred, not least of all, by the 2009 sesquicentennial of the author’s birth. These include not only newly available textual material thanks to the 2008 Critical Edition but the exploration of new topics and novel interpretational approaches as well. Taking these “inventions” into account and mindful that collections of Bergson’s work published in English over the past two decades have focused on specific topics, *Interpreting Bergson* aims to provide commentary on the major aspects of his *oeuvre*.

In Chapter 1, Arnaud François takes up the insight about time as creation of the new by focusing on what Bergsonian philosophizing – thinking in duration – implies for a theory of truth. However discreetly Bergson presents it, and consequently no matter how much it has been overlooked, truth is a central notion for Bergson: there can be no philosophy without it. François lays out the principal features of Bergson’s new conception of truth. Agreeing with William James, Bergson rejects the correspondence theory of truth because the world to be described in our propositions is endlessly changing. Accordingly, truth is not discovered in a quest for knowledge: it is produced or, as Bergson has it, *invented*. To counter the charge that such an invented truth is subjective and arbitrary, he, again like James, insists on its *practical* verifiability. But, unlike James, he does not stop there: he seeks to establish *theoretical* criteria as well. This, François explains, has three consequences: an emphasis on the notion of problems in philosophy; a recasting of the theory of general ideas; and the elaboration of Bergson’s well-known theory of intuition. What is true and false in philosophy, for Bergson, is not theses or propositions, not solutions

⁴ As Bergson says in “Philosophical Intuition,” any great thinker has, in all honesty, one or two “infinitely simple” ideas that he or she elaborates over the course of a lifetime (PM 1347/128).

but *problems*. But problems do not exist in some eternal realm; they must be stated or, precisely, invented. Rather than discover preexisting truths, philosophers seek to articulate true problems – and denounce false problems, as Bergson never ceases to do. This is a conceptual labor, and the second consequence is thus a recasting of the notion of general ideas. These are not thought contents; they are parts of reality, separated by what Bergson calls the “articulations of the real.” They are “real genera” that demand new concepts capable of articulating degrees between the singular and the universal. Finding them, and attaining the moving and temporal real, demands a special effort. Hence the third consequence, the elaboration of the notion of philosophical intuition. Using Bergson’s example of literary composition, François brings out three aspects – contemplation, creation, and emotion – that together characterize intuition as a creative act that surveys and expresses the real according to its own articulations and in its temporality. In other words, to create and articulate a true problem is an act of intuition, and the central achievement of Bergson’s theory of truth is to “show us how what is true can be new and how what is new can be true.”

Whereas François presents a thoroughly original approach to Bergson’s philosophy, Giuseppe Bianco (Chapter 2) reminds us, in a rather Bergsonian vein, that things could have been otherwise. In addressing the question of his title, “What was ‘serious philosophy’ for the young Bergson?” he lays out the immediate reasons for Bergson to abandon his plan to earn a medical degree after completing his studies in philosophy at the École normale supérieure and, in the process, shows Bergson’s later accounts of the early stages of his intellectual itinerary to at least be tinged by a retrospective illusion of its own. Although that was what he set out to do, Bergson did not, as he claimed, start out as a psychologist-philosopher to become, via an interest in the philosophy of science, a metaphysician. In a detailed overview of the institutional and intellectual landscape of nineteenth-century France, Bianco shows how the separation of disciplines in independent faculties of the French academy put immense pressure on philosophy to legitimate itself, a pressure that was felt all the more acutely by those who, like the young Bergson, were lacking in economic, symbolic, and cultural capital. The response was to adapt: abandoning the plan to study medicine, Bergson conformed – had no choice but to conform – to the institutional and doctrinal constraints placed on philosophy as it faced the sociopolitics of the Third Republic and the triumph of the empirical sciences, to name but two such constraints. This strategy of adaptation proved to be effective not only in the choice of topics Bergson discussed in

his dissertation, *Time and Free Will*, but in the way he moved toward, appropriated, and recast metaphysics as his career continued.

Bergson's mature philosophy develops at a time when new forms of materialism emerge. As Stéphane Madelrieux argues in Chapter 3, however, Bergson's vitalism constitutes only a pseudo-naturalism that serves as a cover for pursuing a traditional metaphysical project. Bergson seems to work in the same direction as pragmatism in the effort to overcome the entrenched opposition between evolutionist, reductionist, naturalist materialism and exceptionalist, antinaturalist spiritualism. His intermediary position is to underscore the continuity between biological life and human social, moral, and political life, and at the same time to defend the latter's irreducible specificity over against the biological nature of the human species. Yet, as Madelrieux shows, this does not amount to a naturalist position, for two reasons suggested by pragmatist notions. First, with formulations such as a "supraconsciousness," Bergson reasserts the primacy of mind over matter and articulates "a global supernaturalism that fixes the point of departure of nature in supraconsciousness and indicates the point of arrival of culture in the spiritual union of humans through and in the love of God." Bergson's position, on Madelrieux's view, is thus a variant of spiritualism, not an alternative to it – and certainly not a naturalist alternative. Second, an examination of Bergson's method of identifying "differences in kind" as they manifest in dualisms reveals that the way he integrates humanity into the natural evolution of species – via a "triangulation of being, knowledge, and value" – perfectly accords with the foundationalist project of metaphysics to discover a "source," an "antecedent nonhuman reality."

In his essay (Chapter 4), Leonard Lawlor explores the connection Bergson makes between intelligence and invention. Far from dismissing the intellect outright (as many of his readers have tended to believe), Bergson, Lawlor shows, carefully distinguishes between the intellect that understands and the intellect that invents. While the former works with a (retrospective) notion of possibility, the latter, the "true intellect," is best understood by way of virtuality. Centrally important to Bergson's conception of virtuality is the idea of "dynamic schema." Lawlor's chapter focuses on the essay that first introduces this idea, "Intellectual Effort," and articulates the characteristic feature of the inventive intellectual effort in Bergson's terms as "coming and going" between dynamic schema and static image. Lawlor then moves to a detailed description of the dynamic schema, beginning with what it is not: it is not an image, it does not contain images, nor is it a general idea. Rather, it is a singular, unified (but

not uniform), and schematic view of the whole (an intuition) that points in the direction in which the solution to a problem is to be invented. The key aspect is its dynamism, which allows for action and distinguishes the “true” from the “pure” intellect that merely rearranges preexisting images. On the basis of his reading of “Intellectual Effort,” Lawlor then proposes a definition of the virtual as actualized through the effort of the inventive intellect: the virtual is the production of a new invention (that is to say, a creation) thanks to the dynamic schema, the force of a problem demanding to be solved (that is to say, a perception), and the memory-images that come in to embody the schema.

Not unsurprisingly, creation is at the center of Bergson’s philosophy of art, which Mark Sinclair in Chapter 5 presents in the double sense of philosophizing with and about art and an artistic philosophy. More surprising, perhaps, is the way in which Bergson’s philosophical commitment to creation and novelty, which not only influences but shapes his metaphysics, led him to an indefensible voluntarist conception of artistic creation that, Sinclair suggests, prevented Bergson from writing a book of aesthetics. The argument proceeds in three steps. Sinclair begins by examining Bergson’s claim that poetry and the visual arts, because they are not bound by practical necessities, have the capacity to reveal fundamental aspects of reality that conceptual thought and our everyday pragmatic concerns are unable to grasp. Nuancing the charge of naïveté frequently leveled at Bergson, he suggests reading him in the sense that if the object or purpose of art is to reveal reality, then what art can bring to our attention is the horizon of memory constitutive of actual experience, and this revelation of a horizon of meaning is not reducible to the means by which it is revealed. While it therefore cannot be characterized as a naive imitation model of art, there remains in Bergson’s position an evident tension between a notion of truth in art, of revelation, with a notion of artistic creation. Sinclair addresses this tension in the second part of his essay. He shows how Bergson’s idea of creation rests on a broadly Kantian idea of genius as the principle of art production and how this idea is put to work within his metaphysics as a whole, arguing that Bergson tries to stay clear of both finalist and mechanist accounts of biological life by mobilizing an idea of creation drawn from the aesthetic domain. Since every moment of our experience features novelty, living one’s life, on this interpretation, is to be understood as creating one’s life as work of genius. The tension between Bergson’s notions of revelation and creation remains unresolved, however, and in the third and final part of the chapter, Sinclair focuses on the notion of the present’s retroactive effect on the past (here in the form of the

problem of successive canon formation) to point out why: the tension points toward a position that would identify the two, equate “creation” and “revelation,” and amount to a voluntarist conception of genius as a function of the will that threatens to undermine everything Bergson had written in *Matter and Memory* and elsewhere. Ultimately, then, art for Bergson might be “more a solution than a problem in its own right, more an answer than a question.”

In addressing Deleuze’s “New Bergson,” in Chapter 6 Suzanne Guerlac makes a persuasive case for reading Bergson anew, and his ontology of time in particular. Just as the task Deleuze confronted in the 1960s was to rehabilitate Bergson as a rigorous philosopher, to make him “readable” again, so the combined effect of algorithmic abstraction, the large-scale production and capitalization of life, and the possibility that human activity has irreparably damaged the foundations for its own continuation enjoins us to reread – rethink – Bergson with a view to what we need to think today. Guerlac accordingly sets out to give what she calls a somewhat “reckless” reading, one that brings out Bergson’s consistent privileging of concrete experience over abstraction, his thinking of life, in particular in relation to time, and to rectify his image as an anti-philosopher, highlighting how his thought resonates both with the work of earlier philosophers (Schelling and Ravaissin in particular) and the task of thinking today. Rereading *Duration and Simultaneity* against Deleuze’s interpretation, which evacuates consciousness from universal time, Guerlac stresses the central importance of consciousness, along with observation, perception, and lived experience, to Bergson’s philosophical challenge to Einstein. Relativity theory, according to Bergson, substitutes the abstract (a “clock”) for the real (a “flesh-and-blood observer”) and produces a conception of time that, while not wrong, fails to express the whole of reality. Einstein dissolved everything into thought and lost touch of the real. But for there to be time, duration, there must be consciousness. Universal time implies consciousness because it involves something like perception, which, as Bergson shifts from the scale of the individual to that of the universe, involves an interaction, or participation, between inside and outside. In *Duration and Simultaneity*, Guerlac argues, Bergson thus seeks to extend, by analogy, individual memory to an impersonal memory of things, a duration of the universe. On the one hand, she points out, such a hypothesis echoes Schelling’s notion of participation between nature and consciousness; on the other hand, because this extension passes through the body, it takes up Ravaissin’s notion of habit formation as developing a memory of the body and revises Bergson’s earlier strict dualism. By no

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means, then, is Bergson's achievement in the confrontation with Einstein some kind of abstract articulation of the virtual and the actual; rather, it lies in expanding his ontology of time from individual living beings to a universe that lives, spelling it out in terms of what Guerlac calls "a philosophy of livingness."

Similarly, in Chapter 7, Keith Ansell-Pearson sees in Bergson's "thinking beyond the human condition" the key element of Bergson's conception of philosophy as a way of thinking that seeks to make contact with the creativity of life as a whole. In this conception of philosophy as a way of life, the contemplation of metaphysical questions – novelty, invention, process, duration, and so on – in order to cultivate a different kind of attention to and perception of the world is not an intellectual game but, as Ansell-Pearson argues, an endeavor to alter our vision of the world, and ultimately, our action and sense of being in the world. Philosophy as a way of life, Ansell-Pearson writes with reference to Pierre Hadot, is best understood as a set of practices that allow the self to regain the perspective of the whole, to achieve a "conversion of attention." Noting the importance of Bergson's engaging with art in this shifting of perception, Ansell-Pearson then moves to examine what Bergson calls the "true empiricism" that allows us to experience and think change as that which makes up living reality. The empiricism of science (based on spatializing the world) and the convenience and pleasure promised by the modern technologies derived from it, are to be supplemented with philosophy's promise of joy in going beyond the limitations of the human and intuitively grasping the evolving whole of life. As Ansell-Pearson shows in his reading of *Creative Evolution*, this move beyond the human is conceptualized by Bergson in terms of sympathy, a term employed both descriptively, to develop the notion of a sympathetic whole of life in which philosophy as a way of life resituates the self, and prescriptively, as urging us to overcome our estrangement from "the ocean of life" to which we owe our existence. This effort of sympathy takes the form of a spiritual exercise. Not limited to mere contemplation of the world, it transforms the manner in which we perceive the reality of duration and thus opens the path for a different way of living.

The next two chapters take inspiration from Bergson's social and political thought found in his final book, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* (1932). In Chapter 8, Alexandre Lefebvre and Melanie White begin by making the case that Bergson is an under-acknowledged yet first-rate social theorist. To do so, they demonstrate that in *Two Sources* Bergson is in extensive, yet implicit, dialogue with his two great predecessors in the tradition – Émile Durkheim and Auguste Comte – and that his encounter

with them turns on three questions at the heart of sociology as a unique field of inquiry: first, what binds people together in society?, second, what is the origin of society?, and third, what is the nature of social change? By working through Bergson's engagement with these key authors and themes, Lefebvre and White present Bergson's own original theory of society and sociability, which, as with all his work, centers on creativity, but this time in connection with personal and collective transformation.

Richard Vernon's chapter (Chapter 9) explores the rich resonances of Bergson's philosophy in the field of politics and political thought. Despite relative neglect by political theorists and philosophers, Vernon demonstrates how Bergson's later thought provides crucial insights for contemporary problems and debates. Starting from his critique of Durkheim and Renouvier, Vernon shows how Bergson takes up a Rousseauian strand of political theory that exploits the "productive inconsistencies" of the republican tradition. And while Bergson in explaining social obligation does not engage with a certain canon of political theory that aims at norm justification, Vernon situates him within a realist tradition going back to early Christianity (with Pascal as his central reference) that resonates with current realist conceptions of the political. Vernon then moves from such historiographical considerations to ways in which Bergsonian conceptions speak to – and disrupt – debates concerning nationalism and cosmopolitanism in political theory today, and in particular, debates between partilists, cosmopolitans, and dualists. Bergson's views, "agonistic" rather than "dualist," certainly raise questions about nationalism, including its liberal version, but they cannot for all that simply be said to endorse cosmopolitan views in that they argue for the necessity of moral constraints. Highlighting Bergson's personal participation in politics – his support for the League of Nations and other international organizations – Vernon then discusses Bergson's contribution to the thinking of human rights via one of his early readers, the Canadian diplomat John Humphrey. The normative articulation of rights, according to Humphrey, is a manifestation of an evolutionary process, and these rights are correctly referred to as human rights because this process of creative evolution involves the species as a whole. Taking up this notion of process, Vernon concludes with a critical assessment of Bergson's notion of democracy as a work in progress, in which the privileging of fraternity over liberty and equality "can enable the ever-alert closed society to reassert its exclusiveness and its visceral rejection of the intrusive other."