

CBC WEDNESDAY NIGHT
“HENRI BERGSON: ARCHITECTS OF”
MODERN THOUGHT”
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In 1889 Henri Bergson – thirty years old and Paris-born of a Jewish father and English mother – published his doctoral thesis, called *Time and Free Will*. The book was an immediate success and so was Bergson as a lecturer. In the 1890s there was no avoiding his name or his doctrines in the intellectual world of Paris. His lectures at the Collège de France were crowded to the doors. Some said that Bergson’s philosophy would supersede all other philosophy. He was said to have brought something new into the world and perhaps would not die of hemlock for it. Word spread more widely. In the United States William James had prepared a way before him. “Open Bergson,” he had said in his Hibbert Lectures of 1909, “and new horizons loom on every page you read. It is like the breath of the morning and the song of birds. It tells of reality itself, instead of merely reiterating what dusty-minded professors have written about what professors have thought.” Bergson visited Columbia University in 1912 and was received with acclamation. Even in Oxford, where foreign comets are sometimes mistaken for meteorites, Bergson’s light shone even more brightly for a time than Benedetto Croce’s. And in 1914 Bergson was elected to the Academy.

Bergson’s popularity had been at spring-flood for twenty-five years, or more, when the tide turned. Perhaps it was the delayed disillusionment of the First World War; perhaps the philosophers had recovered their mundane senses. His half-dozen major works, which had been promptly translated and had run through many editions, stopped being read. After the war he had turned to cultural work for the League of Nations and in 1927 was awarded the Nobel Prize. His last major book, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, long delayed by ill health, appeared in 1935. It was received with respect, even in some quarters with gratitude; for it broadened the scope of his work without renouncing the earlier basis for his thought. But it caused little stir. Bergson died in Paris in January, 1941. In recent years his work, I should guess, has more often

been used as tooth-sharpener or punching-bag for undergraduates than as matter for grave and attentive regard.

What are we to make of this fantastic popular success – and of this spectacular decline? Was it no more than a vulgar triumph? Was he no more than a meretricious and spellbinding lecturer, an egregious snake-charmer? If we take account of his influence, the answer is emphatically no. William James, John Dewey, Jacques Maritain, Alfred North Whitehead, were all deeply influenced by him and handsomely acknowledged their debt and their admiration. T.E. Hulme, friend of Jacob Epstein, T.S. Eliot, and Ezra Pound, was an ardent proponent of Bergson and translated his *Introduction to Metaphysics*. Poets and novelists are said to have been affected too: Proust, the Symbolistes, and Virginia Woolf are the ones usually mentioned, and T.S. Eliot's name is sometimes included. Certainly, the first quarter of the century was “the generation of Bergson” – wherever you look in that period you find Bergson more or less accurately defined. Yeats's *Second Coming* (early 1919) may perhaps be taken for an ironic comment on creative evolution. In 1921 Shaw proclaimed himself the historiographer of the new religion of creative evolution in *Back to Methuselah*. In 1927 Wyndham Lewis wrote a piece proving that the popularity of Charlie Chaplin was caused by the spread of Bergson's philosophy. But André Gide, in 1924, observed that Bergson's “influence on our epoch will be thought to be seen everywhere – simply because he himself belongs to the epoch and constantly yields to the trend.” And yet, until we grasp the dilemma that Bergson sought to resolve, and appreciate the sense of release that his work brought, we can scarcely understand his impact on his own generation.

T.E. Hulme gives as vivid an account as anybody of the sensation of reading *Time and Free Will*. “I felt the exhilaration that comes with the sudden change from a cramped and contracted to a free and expanded state of the same thing. It was an almost physical sense of exhilaration, a kind of mental explosion. It gave one the sense of giddiness that comes with a sudden lifting up to a great height.... I had been released from a nightmare which had long troubled my mind.” I wonder how often a dominant philosophy is the wish-fulfilment of contemporary society. Certainly Hulme was not alone with his nightmare; T.H. Huxley had already said: “The progress of science means the extension of the province of what we call matter and causation, and the gradual banishment of what... we call spirit and spontaneity. The

consciousness of this great truth weighs like a nightmare upon many of the best minds, the advancing tide of matter threatens to drown their souls, the tightening grasp of law impedes their freedom.”

Lord Balfour put the matter much more sombrely. “Man will go down into the pit and all his thoughts perish.... ‘Imperishable monuments’ and ‘immortal deeds,’ death itself and love stronger than death will be as though they had never been. Nor will anything that is better or worse for all that the labour, genius, devotion, and suffering of man have striven through countless generations to effect.” The terror by night was the view of the whole universe as a blind mechanism; the dilemma was the choice between belief in such a view of the world, and belief in the reality and conservation of spiritual values. Bergson offered a way through by insisting upon vitality, on the will to live, by regarding the world as creative evolution.

Bergson expounded his position copiously, with great wealth of illustrative analogy and metaphor, and not a little rhetorical force. This makes him difficult to summarize faithfully. Nevertheless it is worth insisting that, in intention, he is neither anti-rationalist nor anti-scientific. He is vigorously opposed to “dry rationalism,” to “vicious verbalism,” to “scientism” – was he the first to use that word? Trained as a scientist he has a fervent desire for precision – even if he seldom achieves it. He conducts his philosophical inquiry in close relation to scientific data, aligning his ideas with the received facts of the non-mathematical sciences of biology, neurology, and psychology.

Evolution, for Bergson, is a fact – but a fact to be regarded from a fresh angle of vision. Everything is in flux; there is no being, only becoming; there are no things, only actions and incipient actions; nothing is discrete, determinate, with distinguishable bounds. The world, far from being a remorseless mechanism, is a continuous growth in creation, always producing novelty; ripening, fashioning, inventing, discovering – literally creating. He wanted to describe the facts of evolution as if an immense current of consciousness had traversed matter, trying to organize this matter so that it could introduce freedom. Evolution – like an artist – is truly creative, working without any prior knowledge of the precise outcome of its activity.

At first sight Bergson's world would seem to be unified in terms either of flux or of action. Actually it is a dualistic world, divided between matter and life. Matter, obeying the second law of thermodynamics, moves downward, its permanence being illusory; life moves upward. This upward movement he calls the vital impulse – *élan vital*. We see it in man as the desire, the need, the will not merely to live but to live better.

According to Bergson, man's primary need is not for knowledge, but for action. In order to satisfy the need for action, man has specialized his central faculties in the practical direction. By evolutionary process, man has developed intellect above all other mental functions; because through the analytical and logical procedures of intellect we can understand more and more fully how the world of matter works, and so make things into manageable instruments for human action. The way the intellect does this, Bergson says, is to present everything to us as a scheme of static "things," disposed in space, and causally related. But, he says, reality is not like this: reality is in fact a flux in which all the elements interpenetrate. Intellect distorts reality by arresting its movement; intellect represents real change as a diagram of stable objects or positions disposed in space; intellect even modifies our scope of vision by eliminating whatever we don't *need* to see.

Bergson came on this view of the intellect at the beginning of his career and quite properly never abandoned it. He had set himself to rectify some of the "vague generalities" in Herbert Spencer's *Principles* and so was led to consider the idea of *time*. Here a surprise was waiting for him. "I was," he said, "very much struck to see how real time, which plays the leading part in any philosophy of evolution, eludes mathematical treatment. Its essence being to flow, not one of its parts is still there when another part comes along." Real time – or duration, as Bergson calls it – not only flows, but also varies. Bergson therefore distinguishes sharply between time as a mathematical abstraction and duration as actual experience of change. And he explains the difference by saying that the intellect, incapable as it is of grasping real change, represents change by converting movement into a static linear arrangement which can then be subdivided into convenient units of measurement. But, he says, real change – real movement – is not, as the physicists represent it, a succession of points of rest. Even though a moving body – an arrow, say, or an aircraft – may be thought of as passing through a sequence of plotted points, the

points do not explain motion, for the points are themselves at rest. Even if the number of plotted points be infinite they do not tell us anything about movement itself, nor about the state of the moving object while moving: they tell us only about the hypothetical positions where it might have been if, instead of moving, it had not been moving. This is pretty vertiginous stuff; and I'm not even sure that it's very good logic. But Bergson's point is that the intellect, in representing change as a linear sequence of static points, renders real change by *denying* change. Yet change is one of the few things that from experience we can be absolutely certain of. An even more serious consideration is this. If the abstract mathematical conception of time is extended to life – to human life – it will render life and human events merely as the juxtaposition of dead things. Also, this mathematical notion of time implies that every moment of time, once gone, has vanished altogether into nothingness. Now this we know is not the case for actual human experience either. And this is where *memory* becomes a dominant term for Bergson.

Duration varies not only in experienced length, but also in intensity of feeling; sometimes it is crammed with responsive feeling, sometimes it seems perfectly empty. The accumulated but varying weight of memory is constantly modifying our grasp of the present and shaping the future. Bergson goes farther than this. For him duration is “unceasing creation, the uninterrupted upsurge of novelty”; duration is continuity, being identical with the living and changing flow of our consciousness. And the substantiality of change is nowhere so palpable as in the inner life: “There is simply the continuous melody of our inner life – a melody which is going on and will go on, from the beginning to the end of our conscious existence. Our personality is precisely that.” Duration is identical with life. But it is in memory that duration exhibits itself most clearly, memory being “just the intersection of mind and matter” – or, perhaps, of life and death. “Memory must be, in principle, a power absolutely independent of matter. If the spirit is a reality, it is here, in the phenomena of memory, that we may come into touch with it experimentally.” “Must we,” Bergson cries, “give up fathoming the depths of life? Must we keep to that mechanistic idea of it which the understanding will always give us?” His answer, of course, is no: his answer is *intuition*.

Intuition, he tells us, is the action of grasping the flux of real duration, the substance of the inner life, in all its vitality, complexity, and inter-relatedness. “Intuition is to do with the

spirit, with duration, with pure change. Its proper realm being the spirit, it seeks to grasp in things – even in matter – their participation in spirituality.” Bergson sometimes speaks of intuition as a mode of apprehension – it is “the direct vision of the mind by the mind”; sometimes as a mode of identification, a getting inside the stream of life, an “immediate consciousness – a vision which is scarcely distinguishable from the object seen, a knowledge which is contact and even coincidence.” Intuition is intermittent, shy to obey the will, an arduous pursuit. Yet Bergson hoped that it could be carried beyond the range of self-knowledge to a steadier and more comprehensive scrutiny of the mind, of life, of reality. For intuition is “instinct that has become disinterested, self-conscious, capable of reflecting upon its object and of enlarging it indefinitely.” Metaphysics, with intuition as its central activity, becomes “the science of the spirit and of life.” And so, for Bergson, *theory of knowledge* and *theory of life* are inseparable. Metaphysics, as the science of spirit and of life, must renounce the dead abstractions of intellect and conceptual analysis. The method of metaphysics is not the method of science; but both “touch the bottom of reality” and “find their meeting-place in experience.” Yet he wanted metaphysics to be as rigorous and empirical as science. “A true empiricism,” he said, “is that which proposes to get as near to the original itself as possible, to search deeply into its life, and so, by a kind of *intellectual auscultation*, to feel the throbbings of its soul; and this true empiricism is true metaphysics.”

It is impossible in small compass to convey the persuasiveness of Bergson’s manner, for as a writer he was an accomplished master of prose and as a speaker he was eloquent, charming, and modest. Impossible too to convey the effect of his deft and suggestive metaphors and analogies. It may be Bergson’s illustrative method that has made metaphor in modern philosophy a sign of intellectual unchastity. Even so, William James hailed him as “Bergson, my magician.” And magician he was, both in writing and in speaking; you could not choose but hear. He saw philosophy as “the turning of the mind homeward, the coincidence of human consciousness with the living principle whence it emanates, a contact with the creative force... true evolutionism and consequently the true continuation of science.” He outfaced mechanism by asserting the inventive creativity of the life-force: life, he said, is a sheaf; life is like a shell bursting into fragments each of which is again a shell; life is a wave beating at the obstacles of matter until a breach is forced into freedom, into pure novelty.

Afterwards, when the voice is silent, when the nightmare has grown more companionable, our doubts begin to gnaw. As early as 1912 Bertrand Russell had made a relentless attack on Bergson on grounds of logical inconsistency. "In the main," he remarked in the middle of his withering criticism, "intellect is the misfortune of man, while instinct is seen at its best in ants, bees, and Bergson." Russell, aligned with the new scholasticism that Bergson had hoped to outmode, is prepared to concede to Bergson only an "imaginative picture of the world." And it is Bergson's account of human and mental process that has passed into other modes of thought and found a new life there, though the original be changed and submerged. It is to be seen in the pragmatism of James and Dewey and in Whitehead's philosophy of organism. Bergson's psychology of the levels of memory has been carried farther than he ever dreamed by Jung. And some existentialists using much that is in Bergson – though the debt is seldom direct – have shifted the centre of emphasis from vital impulse to personal value, thereby imparting warmth and purpose to an impetuous optimism in which there was little place for value.

If, after the first period of enchantment, philosophers handled Bergson roughly by open attack or by neglect, it may be thought that Bergson spoke most clearly to artists. But here the signs are even more confused. Proust, we know, was distantly related to Bergson, admired him and appreciated his early kindness, and refused to accept his doctor's proposition that Bergson was "a confused and narrow mind." It might be supposed that Proust, with all his memories in his arms, was a Bergsonian. We know that Proust read and admired *Time and Free Will* but hesitated to read *Creative Evolution* because he felt that "the parabola of his thought is already sufficiently discernible after only a single generation." "[My writings,]" Proust said, "[are] not Bergsonian novels ... for there has never been, insofar as I am aware, any direct influence." As for Virginia Woolf, it is difficult to persuade oneself on the evidence of her diary that she needed Bergson to tell her what she knew about the form and colour of memory. The connection with the Symbolistes is even more tenuous: their gods were earlier and other. T.E. Hulme, in his first enthusiasm, drew up notes entitled *Bergson's Theory of Art*; but much of what he wrote there is not to be found in Bergson, though these notes were, I suspect, largely responsible for whatever currency Bergson has had in aesthetics and criticism.

He has, it's true, some suggestive things to say about the artist. His lectures on *Laughter*, though not published until 1910, were early work, painfully methodical and exhaustive; they say more about social reaction to some kinds of art than about art itself. Elsewhere Bergson recognizes that the artist's function is to *see* and to make others see. He noticed that an unusual detachment from life will sometimes induce "a virginal way of seeing, hearing, thinking, because the mind is free of practicality"; and that if the detachment were complete, this would be "the soul of an artist such as the world has never seen." Bergson's later account of mysticism in *The Two Sources* provided Toynbee with support for his doctrine of withdrawal-and-return. But as far as the understanding of the ways of the artist is concerned, there are disquieting signs. For Bergson music was the primal art because of its power to release memory. Yet painting, he said, showed most clearly the nature of art because it came the closest to "imitation." About language he was profoundly suspicious. Words, he said, are symbols, and symbols are – almost beyond redemption – mathematical signs, marks of intellect; language is so contaminated by the uses of intellect and practicality that only at a long stretch can it serve the needs of intuition. Contemplation he calls dreaming, and stigmatizes it as enervating, intellectual, static, a venal negation of the vital principle. And then there is no adequate account of the relation between feeling and memory, between memory and perception; there is much talk of images but none of imagination; there is nothing to show how art can be necessary – anything but accidental, an evolutionary freak. And in the end Bergson saw art as inferior to metaphysics. "Philosophic intuition, after proceeding in the same direction as artistic intuition, goes much farther: it grasps life *before* it is scattered into images, whereas art is simply to do with images." His constant emphasis upon *becoming* at the expense of *being* prevents him from understanding the self-enclosed universe of a work of art. And in *The Two Sources* his failure to unify his two worlds of natural and spiritual morality seems to turn largely upon his failure to grasp the physical nature of art, to recognize the creative possibilities presented by the sheer intractability of the material an artist works in, to understand that the artist may find the eternal and the infinite, not by turning away from actuality, but by burrowing into it.

The success story of Henri Bergson has a melancholy conclusion. His philosophical following, though for a time wide and some of it distinguished, has almost completely vanished; his dialect has not perpetuated itself – his putative literary descendants disown him. Evolution –

as a quarrel over the validity of *Genesis I* – is no longer a fashionable issue; even the historical conception of evolution is under attack. We may have grown accustomed to the nightmare of mechanism. But when we read him backwards, starting with *The Two Sources*, we find he has to some extent filled the ethical vacuum left in his earlier books. Here he draws a sharp contrast between the closed and the open society, and between the morality proper to each – the closed morality being an instinctual natural drive, the open morality a reasonable appeal beyond intellect. The terms “closed” and “open society” have passed into the language. But they have not carried with them other Bergsonian convictions from the same book. Here he holds that “creative energy is to be defined as love”; that men, as created by God, “were destined to love and be loved.” One is reminded that Bergson wrote this book in the face of continuous illness, in the light of his own public service, and in the shadow of a past war and a war to come. When the Second World War found him old, distinguished, and ill – in the Paris of his birth now occupied by an invader – he refused to compromise with Vichy or to accept any mitigation of the rules enjoined upon Jews; and in the end, though strongly attracted to Roman Catholicism, he died in the Jewish faith.

It may be that Bergson was born out of time; that the need for an optimistic view confused his vision of life; that the accident of time bound him too closely to sciences that were already shedding their skins. Altogether time has been unkind to this modest, eloquent, persuasive man. His recognition of two entirely different ways of mind, though not wholly new, is important and permanent. His emphasis upon memory is also important, and Jung has said that “we ought to be particularly grateful to Bergson for having broken a lance in defence of the irrational.” At the end of his last book he wrote: “Mankind lies groaning, half-crushed beneath the weight of its own progress. Men do not sufficiently realize that their future is in their own hands.... Theirs the responsibility, then, for deciding if they want merely to live, or intend to fulfil the essential function of the universe, which is a machine for the making of gods.” His turn of phrase may offend our palates. It is difficult since Auschwitz and Hiroshima and certain other events since Bergson’s death to think too complacently of the universe as a machine for the making of gods. But Bergson set out to castigate scientism, to discipline and define the limits of the technical mind, to extend the scope and precision of knowledge, to sharpen the power of intuition. His philosophy was an attempt to refashion the world by reconstituting man in the eyes

of man, by redirecting human impulse. Most philosophers are content to assume a more modest role. And in a world that is now a macabre mixture of what Bergson dreaded and what he advocated, it is more comfortable to neglect his work than to reread him with an open mind.