

TIME IN HENRI BERGSON'S PHILOSOPHY OF EVOLUTION

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This essay draws together some thoughts following the symposium coinciding with the book-launch of *The Intuitive Way of Knowing: A Tribute to Brian Goodwin* (Lambert *et al.* 2013) at Schumacher College in October 2013, where I was invited to introduce aspects of Henri Bergson's philosophy.

The return to Bergson and 19th/early 20th century philosophy may at first seem somewhat paradoxical in view of the context of the 21st century state-of-the-art in biology presented at this event. However, the interviews with Brian Goodwin by Stephan Harding, published in this same volume, reveal explicit synergies with Bergson's thinking, in particular with regard to *Creative Evolution* (*Evolution Créatrice* 1907), which resonate in key aspects of Goodwin's innovative approaches to biological phenomena. In one of the interviews, for example, Goodwin responds to a conceived mysterious sense of the "deep power in nature that gives rise to the expression of life" with a positive affirmation that "life was something that we could figure out" (Lambert *et al.* : p. 187). Regarding his concern with the emergence of novelty and the creation and transformation of forms, Goodwin refers to his teacher Norman Berrell as being "capable in lectures of giving you a sense of the coming into being of form" as four-dimensional: time as something tangible and real. (p.189)



These aspects are reminiscent of a similar unconventional, open-mindedness that we find in the mathematician and philosopher Henri Bergson (1859-1941), who was hugely influential and still remains timely and relevant in many areas today. His sophisticated philosophical vision contributes in particular to the discussions of complexity, plasticity and emergence in current debates around human cognition, the evolution of life and the dynamic reciprocal relationships between subjects, things and objects.

Bergson wrote his early foundational philosophical works around the outrunning 19th century, which in central Europe was characterised by a particularly dynamic milieu of competing cosmological paradigms and shifting concepts. Originally trained as a mathematician with significant successes at a young age, Bergson became preoccupied with finding new ways for understanding some of these emerging ideas beyond polemical, escapist or dialectical models, which led him to philosophy. Reversely, his philosophical explorations and conclusions were grounded in the close engagement of the state-of-the-art of the contemporary scientific findings — to which he contributed among other things with regard to the distinction of body-memory and its role during perception. His oeuvre and innovative thinking, even during his lifetime, extended the framework of philosophy impacting on a number of disciplines such as mathematics, psychology, physiology, biology, sociology, and anthropology as well as many walks of life.

As a trained scientist he was familiar with the seismic ruptures in the fields of classical physics. The first and second law of thermodynamics, which were built on Newton's law of causal relations and had previously provided a foundation of certainty in classical physics, were questioned from several sides when science moved to consider the subatomic level and at more or less the same time began exploring spectral analysis (Guerlac 2006). Novel theoretical and experimental innovations introduced an irrefutable indeterminism into science despite its continuous resistance, not only with regard to what is measurable but also to what actually may be knowable. Bergson anticipated this with his interventions by proposing a way forward to forestall the gridlock of extreme relativism (or in current terms constructivism) and unreconstructed determinism. His innovative critique of the prevailing dualism of body and mind established a way to regard matter and spirit, along with consciousness and things, as contingent upon one another.

Bergson's innovative heuristic and epistemology were initially exemplified through his study of memory, providing insights into the relationship between matter and spirit with regard to human consciousness, and later in his conception of intuition, which opened an approach to metaphysics that would follow science but implied lived experience. Initially written mainly as a critique of Kant's extreme position of a transcendental philosophy, Bergson proposed a way to think beyond the dichotomy of matter (body) and spirit (mind) by avoiding the pitfalls of establishing a transcendental force or realm, or considering consciousness as an epiphenomenon of the brain. He took an ontological approach to reality instead; to seize lived experience in itself, which he conceived as duration (*durée*), as an ever changing 'becoming' ('being-made') rather than a

mere given or abstracted instant ('already made'). One of his main premises was that internal conscious states are qualitative, interpenetrating multiplicities, enduring in an unquantifiable time quality and intensity. This follows his distinction between time that is quantified and measured in space (thus externalised) and time as duration (*durée*) that lacks any externality; a conception that he developed in his first publication based on his doctoral thesis *Time and Free Will*. (Bergson, 2001: p. 229) describes this inner *durée* as: "... the continuous evolution of a free person", since he regarded freedom as constituted by a constant interpenetrating process of 'becoming', executed in "...the relation of the concrete self to the act which it performs" (p. 219). In his view, one is able to grasp this 'concrete self' by deep introspection (what he later called philosophical or metaphysical 'intuition' (Bergson 1999)), which, according to this observation, usually happens rather rarely since the human mind is mostly concerned with the outwardly focused self, its social representations and actions.

In Bergson's reflections on the evolution of life he recognises that the intellect has played a dominant role in the development of consciousness to gain increasing greater dominion and influence on matter. The intellect, according to Bergson, is able to "think matter" (1998: ix), act upon it and analyse it and one's relationship with it, but it is not able to touch life in its dynamic processes of becoming, to insert itself as part of life's unfolding as it is happening. The intellect supports the external requirements relating to the 'social self', such as in the construction of language, but it is intuition that places the self in time (*durée*) through the experience of becoming (in oneself and other life forms). Since for Bergson *durée* escapes the paradigms of the scientific method and mathematics, he consequently regarded 'metaphysics' (philosophy) as a necessary complementary component *together with* science in order to avoid a reductionism to the external, measurable phenomena in space, and to retain a grasp of the qualitative domains of consciousness as lived, internalised experience. Most importantly, he regarded both, intellect and intuition, as two tendencies of the mind that were complementary to each other:

"There are things that intelligence alone is able to seek; but which, by itself, it will never find. These things instinct alone could find; but it will never seek them." (1998: p. 151)

The intellect, according to Bergson, is concerned with the analytical, external, representation of inert matter; it combines, separates, arranges, disarranges, co-ordinates... but it does not create. Intuition instead leads to the very inwardness of life:

"Then, by the sympathetic communication which it establishes between us and the rest of the living, by the expansion of our consciousness which it brings about, it introduces us into life's own domain, which is reciprocal interpenetration, endlessly continued creation. But, though it thereby transcends intelligence, it is from intelligence that has come the push that has made it rise to the point it has reached. Without intelligence, it would have remained in the form of instinct, riveted to the special object of its practical interest, and turned outwards by it into movements of locomotion." (1998: p. 178)

In this Bergson distinguishes himself from many critical approaches to reductionism in the sciences in that he offers a 'larger picture' and a 'third' or 'middle' way; he traces the benefits of the dominant preference that evolution has given to the intellect and provides a way forward toward a knowledge practice that integrates not only more or multiple perspectives, but one that is in touch with the dynamic becomings of life by entering directly into, what he referred to, the concrete flow of duration. The later following phenomenological and process-oriented approaches that were greatly influenced by his work (e.g. Merleau-Ponty, Gilles Deleuze, and the legacy of contemporary cognate thinkers such as William James or Alfred North Whitehead), appear as recursive aspects of a greater whole in light of the scope and depth of Bergson's enduring innovative vision.

Bergson wrote his early works against the backdrop of a restructuring of temporality in the late 19th century, which manifested in the introduction of the worldwide twenty-four hour time-zones. The unification and rationalisation of measured time stood in contrast to an increasing awareness of the differentiated experience of the subjectivity of psychological time and stimulated the enormous interest in, and popularity of, alternative ideas about time such as competing conceptions of simultaneity, synchronicity and relativity. The at-the-time prevailing mechanical concept of time also informed scientific endeavours in the context of the imperialist colonisation worldwide and the increasing interest in the study of intercultural phenomena in the late 19th century — a period when scientists, philosophers and the emerging disciplines of sociology and anthropology attempted to get some purchase on the

debates concerning the supremacy of culture versus nature, or, in another range of categories, the mind versus the body. The social re-interpretation of Charles Darwin's (1809-1882) biology-based evolutionist theory in the Humanities fitted the 19th century European imperialist politics promoting the supremacy of Western civilisation, which was closely intertwined with the preceding evolutionist approaches in anthropology, such as by Lewis Henry Morgan (1818-1881) or Edward Burnett Tylor (1832-1917). It was used to support the idea that traces of the ancestors of so-called Western society were surviving in indigenous, at the time so-called 'primitive', cultures around the globe. Herbert Spencer (1820-1903) was one of Darwin's proponents and applied his evolutionist theory to the fields of Sociology and Associationist Psychology, drawing on mechanistic determinism and progress of culture, advocating positivist rationalism as the culmination of the evolution of intelligence.

Bergson studied Spencer's theories after his move from mathematics to philosophy, and set out to address some weaknesses he saw in Spencer's work, later commenting that this was the catalyst that drew him into the consideration of a critical reflection on time, particularly with regard to Spencer's assertion that: "... time served no purpose, did nothing" (1992: 93). According to Bergson (1998: 364-365), Spencer:

"... takes reality in its present form; he breaks it to pieces, he scatters it in fragments which he throws to the winds; then he "integrates" these fragments and "dissipates their movement". Having imitated the Whole by a work of mosaic, he imagines he has retraced the design of it, and made the genesis."

Whereas Bergson appreciated in Spencer's work the traits of a philosopher who used precision and facts in a scientific and disciplined way, he took the counter-position that time is in fact *acting*, since it "hinders everything from being given at once" (p. 93). He speculated in the context of the philosophy of evolution how "real time" eludes mathematical treatment: "... this duration which science eliminates, and which is so difficult to conceive and express, is what one feels and lives" (p. 12-13). By shifting the focus on time as it was lived and experienced, Bergson consequently directed his critique against the increasing reduction of internal psychological states and life in general to mechanistic and deterministic laws of classical physics. He radically claimed indeterminism as principle of psychic life and evolution in general. He asserted free will as a profound modus and potentiality of human agency, and an open and dynamic morality as ethics against institutionalised dogmas.

From a contemporary perspective, his position, especially in his treatment of the mind (*l'esprit*) and the issue of consciousness, as developed in *L'Évolution Créatrice*, can therefore be regarded as an intrinsic critique against the uni-linear postulates of evolutionist theory as propagated among others by the discipline of anthropology during the 19th century. Whilst Bergson's own evolutionary theory confirmed Darwin's and Lamarck's theories on the progressive generation of species, he emphasised, however, that the intrinsic impulse that furthered the movement into ever new forms (what he called the *élan vital*) manifested in multiple forms and pathways:

"Even a cursory survey of the evolution of life gives us the feeling that this impulse is a reality. Yet we must not think that it has driven living matter in one single direction, nor that the different species represent so many stages along a single route, nor that the course has been accomplished without obstacle. It is clear that the effort has met with resistance in the matter which it has had to make use of; it has needed to split itself up, to distribute along different lines of evolution the tendencies it bore within it; it has turned aside, it has retrograded; at times it has stopped short." (Bergson 1920: p. 19)

Consequently, Bergson saw the cardinal error in theories on the evolution of life in the view of vegetative, instinctive and rational life as three successive degrees of the development of one and the same tendency, "whereas they are three divergent directions of an activity that has split up as it grew". (1998: p. 135) Life appears to proceed according to division, dissociation and separation in divergent lines of evolution leading to diversity and differentiation. In Bergson's words it tends toward the "utmost possible action" (p. 128) with the slightest possible effort performed in each species. His position was explicitly directed against mechanistic approaches which claimed evolution to occur according to a series of adaptations to circumstances, as well as against ideas of determinism as proceeding according to a pre-formed plan of a whole. At the heart of every instant of a life form, where in the present moment the whole of the experiences of the past are selectively compressed and intensified for the purpose of action, there lies in the oscillating tendency of the mind between intellect (or intelligence more generally) and intuition (*lived* rather than *represented*) the potential to

engage one's entire becoming in an act of free will and choice, tangible as a tendency toward pure duration (*durée*):

“Let us seek, in the depths of our experience, the point where we feel ourselves most intimately within our own life. It is into pure duration that we then plunge back, a duration in which the past, always moving on, is swelling unceasingly with a present that is absolutely new.” (Bergson 1998: p. 199-200)

Life, from this perspective, is understood as constant change and transformational movement, fed by dynamic memory recollections and most intrinsically constituted by “invention, the creation of forms, the continual elaboration of the absolutely new” (1998: p. 11).

*In free action, when we contract our whole being in order to thrust it forward, we have the more or less clear consciousness of motives and of impelling forces, and even, at rare moments, of the becoming by which they are organized into an act: but the pure **willing**, the current that runs through this matter, communicating life to it, is a thing which we hardly feel, which at most we brush lightly as it passes* (Bergson 1998: p. 237).

In this lies one of the aspects for what, today, can be read as an argument against the at the time prevailing linearity of evolutionist determinism and the development of a predominantly materialist anthropology, but in some traits still reverberates in today's tendency toward materialism. Bergson's way of thinking multiplicity anticipated Franz Boas' cultural relativism and still offers a timely model to engage with cultural encounters as well as to rethink historiography in a more sophisticated manner than the common synchronic and diachronic grid. This has particular bearing on the difficulties to address and manage the, often cognitively impenetrable, fact that most diverse evolutionary pathways currently exist simultaneously on earth — not only across species, but also, actually, among one and the same species. Perhaps the least referenced aspect of Bergson's evolutionary theory is his insight that all life forms are driven by the same impulse, which he derives from his analysis of the changes and recurrence of specific forms and features. It offers a method, in connection with his proposed metaphysical intuition (Bergson 1999), to understand the evolved modalities of the mind as a dynamic balance between analytical differentiation and sympathetic, uninterested (self-less) union. In line with Goodwin's remark regarding the perceived mysteries of life, Bergson posited a similar constructive attitude in embracing the fringes of the unknown. Whilst holding firmly to his position that any knowledge practice concerning the evolution of life and the human must keep to ascertained facts and the probabilities suggested by them, he proposed:

“Let us confess our ignorance, but let us not resign ourselves to the belief that we can never know. If there be a beyond for conscious beings, I cannot see why we should not be able to discover the means to explore it.” (1920: 28)

To access lived reality in its processes of constant change and transformation, experience as sensible reality intuited by un-interested, extended awareness, offer ways forward for how to accommodate difference and, arguably, how to address conflict: the intellect views difference as separated and separating, intuition views difference as diverse appearing forms of expression of one and the same life pulse, interdependent and interconnected, ceaselessly driving the creative evolution forward. With his emphasis on the importance of experience as ontological as well as epistemological foundation *of* and *for* knowledge, Bergson finally restored a fuller account of agency in the acting being, which embraces multiplicity and difference by reaching beyond the externalised phenomena of cultural and material manifestations. In this way Bergson's philosophy reverberates in innovative thinkers such as Brian and in its untapped potentiality for understanding the complexities of the human mind appears still today to be timely and visionary.

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