

Duration, Temporality, Self

Prospects for the Future of Bergsonism

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Elena Fell

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Peter Lang

Elena Fell

Introduction

Although Bergson explores a wide range of philosophical problems, one could characterize his philosophy as a philosophy of time, where time is not addressed as an abstract notion but is examined as part of real processes, as real embodied time. Discussing the nature of those processes, Bergson inevitably looks at many other issues, and as a result, his reader is faced with a complex discourse where discussions on time are entwined with discussions of memory, matter, intuition, images etc. Some of Bergson's commentators have attempted to interpret his entire contribution to philosophy, while others have addressed particular issues, but undoubtedly all components of his philosophy form part of the whole and cannot be fully comprehended in isolation from other components.

Amongst those who addressed Bergson's philosophy as a whole, both Kolakowski and I. W. Alexander offer a useful and concise overview. More thorough accounts have been made, for example, by Cunningham, Lacey, F. C. T. Moore and Mullarkey. Cunningham embarks on the work of interpretation by arranging Bergson's theory into several topics, dealing separately with intuition, intelligence, duration and finalism. Organizing Bergson's philosophy is a necessary step towards the better understanding of it, but can only be accepted provisionally, because as Čapek observed about elements of Bergson's theory, '[I]t is almost childish to number each individual feature separately, since all of them are complementary and inseparable aspects of one single, though very complex, dynamic reality.'¹ F. C. T. Moore's enthusiastic discourse offers clarifications of many difficult Bergsonian terms and employs examples taken from elsewhere to effectively illuminate and defend Bergson's position. Lacey's study goes further than a mere exposition and clarification: he approaches Bergson from the analytical standpoint and does not refrain from raising difficult questions. In

1 Milič Čapek, *Bergson and Modern Physics* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1971), 91.

particular, he queries Bergson's concept of pure change, suspicious of his assertion that movement does not require a moving thing – a theme that is important for the Bergsonian interplay of space and time.

Altogether, these authors provide much needed explanations of Bergson's key arguments by systematizing Bergson and elucidating links between parts of Bergson's philosophy. But this is not enough. Deeper analyses of Bergson reveal the need to move beyond what he explicitly states into the realm of principles which are embedded in his work, and which follow from his arguments without, however, being referred to directly. Mullarkey aims at addressing the entire philosophy of Bergson whilst taking this next step. In particular, he treats Bergson's philosophy as dynamic in itself and even refers to it as 'philosophies' of time,² rather than merely one philosophy, thereby offering a view that can accommodate certain inconsistencies in Bergson.

My contribution to Bergsonian studies will consist in extracting Bergson's theory of time from his three main texts, *Time and Free Will* (*TFW*), *Matter and Memory* (*MM*) and *Creative Evolution* (*CE*), with references to his other works, *The Creative Mind* (*CM*), *Duration and Simultaneity* (*DS*), *Mind-Energy* (*ME*), *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* (*TSMR*), *An Introduction to Metaphysics* (*Introduction*). This extraction, as well as offering a concise exposition of this theory, also reveals its incomplete and fragmentary nature, and the remainder of this study consists in an attempt to fill in the gaps and respond to questions which arise along the way. At that stage the debt is owed to those commentators who focus on specific Bergsonian issues. For example, my analysis and further development of heterogeneity was inspired by Čapek,³ and the discussion of discontinuity would not be complete without references to Bachelard.

It is possible to read Bergson in different ways. One can dismiss his philosophy as Russell does⁴ for his refutation of rationality and space; one

2 John Mullarkey, *Bergson and Philosophy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 2.

3 Čapek, *Bergson and Modern Physics*, 83–185.

4 Bertrand Russell, *The Philosophy of Bergson* (Cambridge: Bowes and Bowes, 1914).

can expect Bergsonism to be a complete and finished theory which should be able to resolve all sorts of philosophical questions; or one can take on board the Bergsonian idea that to exist means to change and, whilst analysing what Bergson explicitly said, allow his philosophy to evolve by working out what he would have said, and what else can be said. I take the latter approach, and the main aim of this project is to indicate a possible way in which the theory of duration can develop further.

I find the biggest attraction of Bergson is in his attempt to grasp the nature of time and show a way of treating time as metaphysical reality, overcoming difficulties humbly admitted to by St Augustine.⁵ But Bergson's theory of duration is not a completed, finalized theory. Firstly, it is not put forward in a systematic way and needs to be extrapolated from his more general discourse; secondly, it contains inconsistencies and gaps; and thirdly, it does not address some obvious issues. Moreover, some of Bergson's claims are too strong and need to be examined carefully.

In the expository chapters (Chapters 2, 3, and 4), I examine Bergson's theory of time, which can be called a theory of duration, from his major texts, *Time and Free Will*, *Matter and Memory* and *Creative Evolution*. In each book Bergson introduces duration anew, as if disregarding claims made in previous texts; thus each time duration is given a different, sometimes seemingly opposite, meaning. However, where an unsympathetic critic would see inconsistencies, I see phases of conceptual development of the idea of duration. This being said, Bergson's phases are not linked in a satisfactory way. A key strategy of this study, therefore, will be to fill gaps, raise further questions, and develop new arguments.

I move from duration as a psychological process in *Time and Free Will* to duration as the universal movement in *Creative Evolution*, via the intermediate proposal in *Matter and Memory* that duration is a general principle of being. Duration in Bergson turns out to be an all-embracing concept, itself equivalent to the idea of being. Indeed, can we find in Bergson anything which is not duration? Spatial objects, one may suggest,

5 St Augustine, *Confessions*, transl. R. S. Pine-Coffin (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961), Book XI, 264.

reading *Time and Free Will*. But as readers of *Matter and Memory*, we have to accept duration of matter and duration within matter. In *Creative Evolution* everything non-durational is reduced to an illusion, and from this position we can equate 'duration' and 'being'. The main aspect in which the idea of duration differs from the idea of being is that duration already entails a characteristic of being as moving which, according to Bergson, is its necessary feature. What the term 'duration' achieves is to weld motion onto being and demonstrate that being cannot be regarded in any other way than as being in motion, the being that has history. Also, it emphasizes the omnipresence of motion and change, so that even in those cases when we struggle to find and define substance, such as in music or thought, we still find change and motion.

I take on board Bergson's idea that duration is heterogeneous. The idea of heterogeneity emerges when Bergson analyses psychological continuity. Elements of such continuity (emotions, sensations) are not clear-cut, even though we commonly distinguish one emotion or sensation from another. This division, I agree with Bergson, is artificial and done for convenience, as in reality one state of consciousness flows into another and ultimately there is just the unity of the conscious process corresponding to the life of a concrete person.

But this idea of heterogeneity entails a paradox. Although its elements are inseparable, they are different and diverse, so on the one hand Bergson wants us to accept that we cannot individualize them as if they were autonomous units, but on the other hand he does not allow them to be merged into a homogenized stream. In Chapter 5 I attempt to resolve this paradox by claiming that the identity of elements within duration, not given ostensibly, is nevertheless manifested through their unique effects on the world. Bergson says very little about the structure of heterogeneity, and later in Chapter 5 I analyse its composition on a general metaphysical level.

In Chapter 6 I address time as such and, in particular, Bergson's claim that time must be understood exclusively in qualitative terms. I argue that temporal ordering, pastness and futurity cannot be reduced to qualities, and that time cannot be understood without relations. Also, I dispute Bergson's attempt to consider time in separation from space, as there is no purely temporal reality totally free from spatial features.

Chapter 7 marks a transition from duration as a general metaphysical term to its concrete manifestations. Concrete examples of duration, given by Bergson, include psychological and biological processes, movement of a physical body and, as an all-embracing duration that includes all worldly processes, the universe. I propose the duration of a concrete human being as such an all-embracing duration, because a human self involves all layers of being, from minerals to mind, which can acknowledge any worldly phenomena and account for them in an epistemic process. Of course, if the universe could be said to contain all worldly processes, the self merely represents them.

In Chapter 8 I look at epistemic processes and begin to analyse the perception of one's own selfhood in self-consciousness. According to Bergson, an epistemological act is defined either by its analytical or intuitive component, but I contest his opposition of intuition and intellect and present the epistemological act as a three-fold process of primary (pre-conceptual) intuition, intellectual rationalization and secondary (post-conceptual) intuition. I emphasize that the perception of one's self, acquired in this way, gives a picture of an all-embracing unity of human existence, from various manifestations of matter and life to the complexities of mind.

Bergson presents duration as an uncontroversial and harmonious continuity, but Chapters 7 and 8 demonstrate that, inevitably, duration entails discontinuity in various senses. In Chapter 9 I suggest a view on reality which reinstates its continuity. I suggest that when we observe continuity from the past to the present, in actual fact we remain in the present, retaining knowledge of the consecutive events. This knowledge interferes with our view of the past and prevents us from seeing it as a fresh present with an indefinite future. On the other hand, if we look backwards into the past, we can get a sense of continuity, moving from the latest and more complex to the earlier and less complex, without making different temporal periods overlap and interfere with one another.