

An introduction to the philosophy of Bergson

Elizabeth Pask January 2021

Introduction

Bergson was born on October 18th 1859 in Paris and died in Paris on January 4th 1941. He was writing in the 1880's and early 20th c at a time when philosophy in France was positivist in its emphasis. For example the prevailing doctrine was that of so called psychophysiological parallelism, which held that for every psychological fact there is a corresponding physiological fact that strictly determines it. There is no room here for free action and Bergson was to refute this view.

I shall describe Bergson's overall aim within his philosophy and position this against a background of positivism that Bergson recognised was having an overriding influence in peoples thinking.

Instead of thinking time only in terms of homogenous linear time as science does, Bergson wants us to recognise our inner experience of time in flow; time as it exists in its purity as the essence of life, as heteronomous, as ever changing, and as not repeating itself. Bergson must not though be regarded as being anti positivist. Rather he seeks to reform philosophy and to bring it in close rapport with positive science.

Bergson wants us to develop our capacity for intuition, because our intuition brings us into contact with life as we live it, in time, and in process.

Understanding Bergson also requires that we appreciate the significance that he gives to our memory as duration, or time as it is experienced in consciousness, where memory makes the past become alive in the present. Also how mind and matter combine in his dualist account of our nature, that is different from that of Descartes.

The whole has implications for Bergson's creative evolution theory that relies upon an 'élan vital' or life force. I shall offer an account of this.

To begin I describe a visit to a house in France. This sets the scene for consideration of Bergson's central concern, that we develop our capacity for intuition.

A personal and phenomenological account of my encounter with an old house in France.

I became interested in Bergson while reading Proust's novel 'In search of lost time'. The title had resonated with my experience of seeing an old house in France.

My husband and I were visiting our daughter in her home in the midi Pyrenees. She and her partner had bought a hamlet of 5 buildings set in 80 acres of forest on rolling hill sides among mountains. In the hamlet stands an old deserted house built to the design of others in the area. It has thick stone walls and two stories with a connecting stair case that links the ground floor living room to the two bed rooms above. Large bats that hung in the bed rooms flew around our heads as we entered the room. In the bed rooms were two beds, a bed warmer, and heaped in the corner of one room a pile of working shoes and boots. I photographed these and a pencil drawing of the boots and shoes now hangs in my kitchen at home.

Displayed on shelves in the house were neatly arranged memorabilia; religious souvenirs, letters dating back to the 1930's, certificates that recorded baptism and confirmation; the earliest dating 1850. There were books, and among them an exercise book dated 1933, containing carefully hand written completed exercises. Buttons were collated together. In the kitchen there were cupboards left open, there was cutlery, and a carved stone sink that drained through the wall to the earth beneath. In the cellar was a wine press, and on the surrounding hill side vines and chestnut trees grow.

One might say that I experienced a natural sympathy with those who had lived in the house. Bergson has said;

" We define intuition as the sympathy which transports us into the interior of things in order to coincide with what is unique and inexpressible."

(Bergson La Pensee at le mouvant 1934)

Intuition in these terms might be described as the personal experience of unity (Foley 1988:34). I had been a pupil in a convent school and so I recognised a lot of what I saw. I was both fascinated, and intrigued that objects and personal memories belonging to those who had lived there had so trustingly been left behind for others to find. I wondered about life in 19th century rural France, and about the memories of those who had lived through the first and second world wars there.

Artists develop their intuition through their art, and this can enhance our response to what we see; it can help us to see the intensity of what exists. For example I was reminded of Van Gogh's paintings of boots when I saw the heaped boots and shoes in the old house. (Heidegger Appendix 3).

The following poetic prose also resonated with me;

" Memoria is not an anonymous storing place where the past is housed. Memoria is particular, passionate and diverse. Though concealed, it is a special presence...

" Stone is perfectly silent. The stillness and endurance of stone focuses in an intense way the unobtrusive eternity of the earth"

(O'Donohue 2010:158-159)

And (Heidegger)

Forests spread

Brooks plunge

Rocks persist

Mist diffuses.

Meadows wait

Springs well

Winds dwell

Blessing Muses

Our experience is not easily encapsulated in words; it is felt. It can overflow the simple use of conceptual categories, while poets find words that both enhance and resemble our experience.

Relevant here is Bergson's elaboration upon intuition as follows;

" Intuition may help us to grasp when intelligence fails to provide...On the one hand it will use intelligence itself to show how intellectual frameworks cease to be strictly relevant: and on the other, by its own work, it will suggest a vague sense of what must take the place of such frameworks . So intuition may bring

the intellect to recognise that life does not quite fit into categories: that neither mechanical causality nor finality can give a sufficient interpretation of the 'elan vital'. Then by an expansion of consciousness and the sympathetic communication established with the rest of living, it introduces us to life's reciprocal interpenetration and endlessly continuous creation. But though intuition transcends intelligence, it is intelligence that has given the push to make it rise. Without intelligence, it would have remained as instinct, riveted to the special object of its practical interest."

(Bergson L' Evolution creatrice 1907 in Foley 2013)

Elan vital is the name that Bergson gives to a construal of life in terms of impetus; a living force that lies behind the development of intelligence and intuition. Importantly, for Bergson, it is intuition that brings quality to our existence. It is the means by which we know reality itself, since

"it flows in sympathy towards and between what exists within an ocean of changing life of which we are a part" (Ansell-Pearson 2018).

We meanwhile have needs and our human intelligence has a tendency to label, to gather through analysis and the synthesising of perspectives. We do this because we have a tendency to act upon what we see.

My encounter with the old house led me to want to read and investigate about 19th century rural France, and about the French resistance Maquis, who had lived in the surrounding hills during the Second World War (Kedward 1994).

Study of this kind may achieve a general idea of a subject of interest, but it cannot describe my experience as it was lived, as I saw the house for the first time.

The history of modern western philosophy has given emphasis to an analytic and scientific approach to knowledge development. It is an approach that led Kant to conclude, that we cannot know the thing in itself. It is as if we have been left outside reality. For Bergson there is no thing in itself. Everything is in process

(For more commentary with regard to Bergson and Kant see Appendix 1 A).

Bergson wants us to return to a biologically based capacity for intuition. It is insight that we develop through intuition that might lead to the identification of new categories and restore the possibility of absolute knowledge in a world that is not static, but in process.

Bergson's overall aim within his philosophy.

Bergson has been termed a 'philosopher of life', since his aim is to help us to live more fully, and to look more carefully.

In contrast to positivism that seeks the general, Bergson wanted to do justice to contingency, to particularity, to individuality, to spontaneous forces and energies and to the creation of the new. He had undertaken study of the relation between mind and body and he is credited with having been the first French philosopher to elaborate what came to be called a process philosophy. He rejected static values in favour of values of motion, change and evolution (Britannica Online Encyclopaedia)

Bergson believed that living beings, states of consciousness and life processes can only be known through his metaphysical method of intuition. We are not simply creatures of habit and automatism but are also creatures involved in a creative evolution of becoming and the task is to broaden the horizon of our experience of life (Ansell-Pearson 2006:25).

Bergson is concerned that we should not be alienated from this life and our full condition within it.

Bergson's concern for the true nature of time in its purity.

Bergson studied Spencer's account of the emergence and evolution of life as processes that take place in time. He found Spencer's time to be a geometrical dimension analogous to space, that is made up of instants and of the movement of one instant to another. In other words a homogenous time which can be divided into periods of equal length. When we measure time in this way we are treating time as space (See Appendix 4).

In the late 1880s Bergson also witnessed a developing interest in the mapping of time lines. Train time tables were being created and clocks had become widespread. Yet when we regard time as clock time only, we are missing something out.

In contrast to a homogenous view of time, when we introspect upon our internal experience we find a heteronomy there; the flux and flow of our inner conscious world of moving sensations, feelings, passions, and efforts. This is time in its purity.

The subject for Bergson is primarily a subject of action. He put forward an argument for freedom against the determinist thinking of the time. Free or voluntary actions are a contrast to automatic reactions, which are caused according to the laws of nature. Voluntary action requires a suspension or interruption of an ongoing mechanical process in order for something different to happen. In other words, a voluntary response. Without this an ongoing automatic process would occur as if we were automatons (Guerlac 2006:60).

Bergson offers us guidance to enable our voluntary response. He suggests that we ask ourselves what would be the intensity of a representative sensation if we had not projected on to it the idea of cause.

Duration and memory

Duration is time as we experience it in consciousness as flow. Our consciousness in these terms could never be generated from time considered in isolated moments. We experience the world as continuous, as flowing like hearing a melody; not as we would hear when listening to a series of discrete notes. There is multiplicity in succession here, but it is not quantitative. Joy for example is not experienced as a numerical difference. It reveals to us some qualitative change.

In the flow of time the past is involved in the present and the future is yet to be written. In ones' mind past, present and future combine in the flow. We experience a specious present. It has duration.

Duration is the product of accumulated memory. It is real and is forever present within us. Bergson enlarges the concept of duration by distinguishing two sorts of memory by which the past becomes available to us;

Habit memory – consisting of learnt conceptual and behavioural patterns.

And

Involuntary memory, which retains our entire past.

Habit is stored in our nervous system. Hence habit patterns and behavioural potentialities exist in the present and tend to be automatic and unconscious.

Both habit memory and involuntary memory are necessary to us. But while the former is clearly stored in our brain and nervous system, the later Bergson argues is not. Involuntary memory contains our entire past.

The brain holds back a flood of memories. It allows through those that can assist. Memories are therefore coterminous with perception. This explains the feeling that we get of 'deja vue' on occasion. When we do this we are experiencing the formation of memory, at the same time as we are forming a presentation to come.

Word recognition, object recognition and person recognition require a superabundance of concrete memory.

This process requires a 'filtering system'. In aphasia, dementia and brain damage the system fails. (Perception is not trapped and consciousness is not isolated). In pure perception we are outside ourselves in the world (Sartre was influenced by this view in his novel 'Nausea').

The memories we carry are our character; the sum of everything we have willed and felt. As Gunter observes, wide possibilities fund our freedom (Gunter 1999).

It is in his account of duration that Bergson challenges fundamental assumptions of the cognitive sciences, namely that the brain generates representations and stores memories. He asserts that mental events cannot be reduced to the neuro-chemical level (Guerlac 2006:5).

Our duration has the power to disclose other duration and to encompass them infinitum. Bergson gives the example of simultaneity of fluxes in which while sitting on the bank of a river, the water, the flight of a bird, the uninterrupted murmur in depths of our life, can be treated as either three things or a single one. He admits that to conceive of duration of different tensions and rhythms is both difficult and strange to our mind simply because we have acquired the useful habit of substituting for duration an homogenous and independent time (Bergson in Matter and Memory).

Bergson argues that time involves a co-existence of past and present and not simply a continuity of succession. He refers to;

"the continuous progress of the past which gnaws into the future and which swells as it advances" (Bergson in Creative Evolution)

We can see from this statement that Bergson is thinking time as force.

Duration is irreversible since consciousness cannot go through the same state twice. The circumstances may still be the same, but they will no longer act on the same person, since they find him at a new moment in history. We cannot live over and over again a single moment. Duration has the character of a continuous multiplicity, as opposed to one made up of discrete parts or

elements (Creative Evolution 1907). In our experience of time past, present and future cannot be so separated. It becomes impossible for us to know the past because only the present is ever present to experience.

(Wallace Stevens is a poet who was influenced by the philosophy of Bergson. See 'The Solitude of Cataracts' in appendix 2 B)

Mind and Matter; the same in principle.

Guerlac(2006:166) offers us the following description of the relation that exists between mind and matter. She says;

“ What really separates matter from consciousness is space, which acts ‘ like an insurmountable barrier between the two terms. But space is merely an abstraction, merely a symbol or a schema. On the level of immediate experience....consciousness and matter approach one another in continuity. It is only the requirements of action that impose the abstract framework of space, which does not pertain to the real as it is. Space, Bergson summarises, interests the activities of a being that acts on matter, but not the work of a mind that speculates on its essence.’ “

Bergson published his researched findings into how mind and body are related in his 'Matter and Memory' (1911). This work was a product of five years of studying all the literature available on memory and especially the psychological problem of aphasia (Britannica on line 2019: 1). Bergson provides in this work justification for a non-orthodox (non-Cartesian) dualism of matter and mind, in which mind and matter are the same in principle. Bergson thus provides a contrast to Descartes' sharp distinction between the mental and the physical, which rendered the two incommensurable

Bergson's explanation as follows has implications for Kant; (See Appendix 1A)

“ It is not that matter has determined the form of the intellect or that the intellect simply imposes its own form upon matter, or even that there is some curious harmony between the two we can never explain, but rather that the two have, in the course of evolution, progressively adapted themselves one to the other and so attained a common form. Bergson regards this adaptation as coming about naturally.....because it is the same inversion of the same movement which creates at once the intellectuality of mind and material things”

(Bergson Creative Evolution in Ansell-Pearson 2018)

We might translate this to mean that in perceptual consciousness there is indissoluble unity of subject and object. Consciousness is therefore necessarily embodied (Gardner 1998)

(To see a merging in relationship between mind and matter as it is portrayed by the poet Wallace Stevens see ‘ The House was quiet and the world was calm’ appendix 2 A)

Helpful comment is also offered by Ansell-Pearson as follows;

“ Both science and the intellect for Bergson concern themselves with the aspect of repetition. The intellect selects in a given situation whatever is like something already known so as to fit it into a pre-existing schema: in this way it applies its principle that like produces like. It rebels against the idea of original and unforeseeable production of forms.”

“ In the case of organic evolution, Bergson insists that seeing the form in advance is not possible...the particular form of organic life is peculiar to that phase in its history”.

Since mind and matter are similar in principle, we must move from thinking them in overwhelmingly spatial terms as Newton had done. In Newton’s physics he considers simply located mass particles (internally unchanging), that exist in rigid absolute space. He makes reference to abstract absolute time, and linear trajectories. Altogether one finds an accent on the static, the stable, and the atomic (Gunter 1999:176)

Gunter points out that Bergson’s response to Newton is to invert all these features, replacing particles with wave like phenomena, absolute space with changing spatial relationships, and absolute time with pulsation phenomena. Physical nature is thus comprised of;

“ rhythms of duration: matter to be seen as modifications, perturbations, changes of tension or of energy and nothing else” (Bergson in Gunter 1999:176)

We must think about mind and matter as being, or possessing different concrete durations. Both are processes with interrelations, both are intelligible. Rhythms of matter are much briefer than those of human consciousness, and the rhythms of consciousness are extremely varied.

It is pertinent here to recognise how Bergson's early writing pre-empted recognition of uncertainty within the universe. For example in 1927 Heisenberg proclaimed the uncertainty principle. On a subatomic level the very act of observing and measuring matter alters the reality the scientist is trying to observe. Observation requires light. But the activity of photons interferes with particles on this microphysical scale. When the photon hits the electron it moves it. Guerlac (2006) refers to how an overwhelming uncertainty existed during the 1920's and 30's;

"The singular crisis of the sciences provoked by quantum mechanics, forced into discussion a number of philosophical questions (concerning causality, indeterminacy and the limits of knowledge) that Bergson raised philosophically through the notion of duration since the late 1880's. At the same time Bergson felt it necessary to affirm a sharp critical boundary between the realm of science and the realm of philosophy (or what he called metaphysics) even though he subsequently recognised that his thinking duration;

"lay in the direction in which physics would move sooner or later"

(Bergson from Guerlac 2006:38)

Quantum mechanics forced these same questions to the fore within the scientific community during the 1920's and 1930's"

Creative Evolution.

In his publication 'Creative Evolution' (1911) Bergson provides a critique of Darwin and offers his own broadened evolutionary account. Evolution is described as exhibiting purposiveness, not predetermined goals as suggested by Newton (See appendix 5).

Bergson's view does not bear resemblance to mechanism and finalism. Life is creative change. It exhibits creativity towards greater levels of consciousness and freedom.

Gunter observes how the problem that might be posed to Bergson's evolutionary theory is;

"how can minimal mutations be accumulated, in right orders, at the right time so as to reinforce each other."

Explaining the emergence of life is difficult.

Bergson refers to problems of convergent evolution. For example the appearance of like organs on unlike organisms or like organisms at widely separated points in the evolutionary tree.

An example given by Bergson is the human eye and the eye of a mollusc. Both eyes contain corneas, lenses and retinas. He asks can this really be explained by chance via natural selection?

Reflecting upon the organisation that takes the form of parts entirely external to other parts in time and space, Bergson says;

“ We shut our eyes to the unity of the impulse which passing through generations, links individuals with individuals, species with species, and makes of the whole series of the living one single immense wave flowing over matter.”
(Bergson in Creative Evolution 1998:250)

Bergson is referring here to his ‘elan vital’; the living force that flows through all life.

He adds;

“ The reason for this (neglect) lies in the structure of our intellect, which is formed to act on matter from without...”

One might say that this position reflects our instrumental view. Our intelligence proceeds by increasingly effective manipulation of material objects (as exhibited in manufacture). Bergson observes how the end result of this tendency is an atomistic, analytic approach to experience which is most highly developed in modern science.

More about intuition; A temporary holding position.

Intuition is a temporary reversal of the normal working of intelligence. It interrupts our habitual ways of responding and enables us to gain knowledge that is more in tune with the circumstances in which we find ourselves.

In his ‘ Introduction to metaphysics’ Bergson likens intuition to sympathy. We draw upon the effort of our imagination to put our self into the place of the other. We install ourselves within, one ‘enters into’.

The subject who knows becomes its object.

It is in time, it is in process. It is happening. Via this means says Bergson, “I shall possess an absolute”.

I shall seek now to further illustrate Bergson's view by drawing upon my own research experience and method, to show how intuition in Bergson's terms, operated to further understanding of the particular experience of nurses, as they encountered, and described it.

In my own research into nurses' experience in their practice, a phenomenological approach indicative of Bergson's gathering through intuition, promoted me to 'bracket' or put to one side prior sociological accounts of what was going on.

I asked nurses 'open ended' questions so that they might feel free to express their experience in their own words.

I then organised nurses' responses into themes. The concepts that arose had a moral dimension, and these were taken to form chapter headings within the thesis. They became;

Seeing value in the work.

Indicative phrase – *"it is knowing that I have made a difference"*

Courage in the working lives of nurses –

Indicative phrase – *"It wasn't easy to get there every Monday morning at 8 o'clock, with at least 15 people for the round, to be humiliated. Registrars would come up to me and say I wouldn't ask him what you do"*.

Value in moments of interpersonal knowing.

Indicative phrase – *"the patient (whose wound had healed) was beaming and smiling at me."*

The presence in absence of role models.

Indicative phrase – *"I can feel her hand on my shoulder"*

Self sacrifice, Self transcendence and nurses' professional self.

Indicative phrase – *" If I know that something better can be done, I feel passionately obliged to say it*

And *" If I don't do it who is going to do it"*

The title of my thesis became;

“ Foundational requirements for the development of nurses’ knowledge”.

Bergson warns us that we must overcome the natural tendency of the intellect to see only differences in kind.

This happens because the fundamental motivation of the intellect is to implement and orientate action in the world.

As Ansell-Pearson points out;

“ For the purposes of social praxis and communication the intellect needs to order reality in a certain way, making it something calculable, regular and necessary”.

Bergson says that the crucial thing when we are seeking to use our intuition to gather knowledge, is to recognise that it is not things that differ in kind, but rather in tendencies that we are seeking. It is not things (their states and traits) that differ in nature, but the tendency things possess for change and development.

Any composite needs to be divided according to its qualitative tendencies.

Those themes that I identified as being displayed in nurses’ personal accounts, were, I believe, indicative of personal quality tendencies that would enable them to develop knowledge for nursing.

[A summary of how insights from Bergson enhanced my intuitive experience of the old house.](#)

My taking the whole of my experience as one, is explained by Bergson’s account of duration.

Our inclination to fit our body to our environment would explain my disconcerting experience of large bats flying around my head as I entered the bed room.

Being brought to consider time as unity, as heterogeneous and as flowing gives emphasis to a sense of continuum with other lives who lived before us.

Recognition of duration in the ancient landscape was evident to me.

Being unfamiliar with what I experienced might be said to have enabled Bergson’s goal of bringing what exists to ones’ attention.

Critical Comment

By the early years of the First World War, Bergson had become something of a cult figure. However scathing attacks in his philosophy soon followed his immense success. By the 1930's his philosophy was displaced by a growing interest in Hegel and Marx (Guerlac 2006:12). Among his critics Bertrand Russell (1918), a logical-positivist charged Bergson with anti-intellectualism. Yet Bergson had received advanced training as a mathematician and took a keen interest in the advanced and the hard sciences (Guerlac 2006:31). As has been acknowledged here, the attunement of Bergson's thought to the developments in the hard sciences is part of what makes his thought so interesting.

Yet Russell's critique of Bergson demands further attention.

In his 'Mysticism and Logic' Russell refers to instances in the history of philosophy where science and mysticism have been combined. He describes these as being representative of a union and conflict of two very different human impulses;

"the one urging towards mysticism, and the other as urging towards science".

Russell defines mysticism as being in essence;

" little more than a certain intensity and depth of feeling in regard to what is believed about the universe".

He cites Plato and Heraclitus as examples of philosophers who have combined mysticism with science, and then asks; we can assume with Bergson in mind,

- i) Are there two ways of knowing which may be called respectively reason and intuition? And if so is either to be preferred to the other?
- ii) Is all plurality and division illusory? Russell might be understood here as having in mind Bergsons' recognition of an interconnectedness that exists in evolution.
- iii) Is time unreal ?

- iv) And finally, what kind of reality belongs to good and evil ?

Russell adds;

“ insight, untested and unsupported, is an insufficient guarantee of truth”.

Bergson would agree, his worry is that there remains too much contemplation in philosophy. For Bergson philosophy is the domain of action and creation.

(Ansell-Pearson 2018:123)

In response to Russell’s i) ii) and III) I believe that answers to each of these questions are found within this paper;

- i) Bergson recognises that both reason and intuition have their place. However the value of the truth finding potential of intuition is inclined to be overlooked.
- ii) Bergson does not consider all plurality and division illusory. As has been stated here, he is concerned to do justice to particularity, to individuality and to spontaneous forces and energies in the creation of the new.
- iii) Bergson does not think that time is unreal. He considers that ‘ time in its purity ’ is not sufficiently recognised. (see p5)
- iv) This question might be taken to raise a concern with regard to whether Bergson succeeds in preserving moral objectivism. However Bergson has remarked that;

“...the error of intellectualism is that it fails to appreciate the extent to which morality is a ‘ discipline demanded of nature’. (See

Appendix 1).

The above question originates from a logical positivist perspective. However I suggest that since in Bergson's terms morality is a discipline preserved by nature, moral thinking so defined, will incorporate a capacity to distinguish good and evil acts, from a moral perspective, in a real world, practical sense. If we were to join Russell in his logical positivist position we might assume with him, that moral thinking incorporates a moral objectivism as his question implies. However Bergson does not need positivist metaphysics to preserve moral thinking. Nature does it.

Conclusion and the ongoing influence of Bergson.

Today Henri Bergson is credited with being widely recognised as France's greatest philosophy thinker. It has been said of him that he is the most celebrated philosopher of his time with an influence upon intellectual life that extended far beyond the academic world. Today we are witnessing a serious renaissance of interest in Bergson's writing (Ansell-Pearson 2018).

Bergson's view of how time flows inspired Virginia Woolf in her novel writing.

Heidegger benefitted from Bergson's view of time in his 'Being and Time'.

20th century French philosophers who were inspired by Bergson include Paul Ricœur in his interest in our life of action, and our creation of a 'narrative self'.

Simone de Beauvoir, and Jean Paul Sartre in their existentialist view were inspired by Bergson. Though it must be acknowledged that their conviction that existence precedes our essence, does not accord with Bergson in his ethical thinking (See Morality, obligation and the open soul in Henri Bergson. Key Writings and Appendix 1).

Inspired by Bergson, Merleau-Ponty took for granted a kind of metaphysical and epistemological affinity or continuity between ourselves and the world. Merleau-Ponty recognised that without this metaphysical and epistemological affinity, things would be for ever alien and opaque to us (Taylor 2008).

That Bergson seeks to counter the overwhelming influence of positivism seems timely today, since as Geurlac has commented, we are so embedded in ideologies of positivism that we hardly recognise them (Geurlac 2006:2)

Bergson's philosophy has influenced current Interest in emergence or self-organisation in the natural world, that explains how life may develop from inanimate matter, complexity from simplicity, and order from chaos. For

example see J.J. Clarke (2013) who identifies creativity as his key concept, in his description of nature and human life. And Kauffman (2008) who provides a vision of a self-constructed and continuously creative universe which cannot always be predicted.

In the light of the above analysis, I endorse the view put forward by Ansell-Pearson (2018) that,

“ Bergson is the true founder of modern philosophy. His recognition that life is a perpetual contingent movement of differentiation, of growth and change gives momentum to a deepening appreciation of how everything is in process, and everything connected to everything else. Concepts such as unity and process can be the key to such deepening. We must consider life as matter, and learn to experience everyday reality more intensely. Bergson’s crucial message is that we accept this life’s movement, and become part of it. In the end it is all about process and unity”.

“ The real voyage of discovery consisted not in seeing new landscapes but in having new eyes” (Proust)

Life Lessons from Bergson as identified by Foley (2013)

I am indebted to Foley for the following edited account of life lessons that Bergson’s philosophy inspires.

1. Learning to swing with the process.

Foley recommends that we read;

‘Process Metaphysics: an Introduction to Process Philosophy by Nicholas Rescher (State University of New York 1996).

He points out that the act of walking is in fact a complex experience of unity in process, combining seeing, hearing, rumination and flow.

2. Learning to tune in to the melody of duration.

Here Foley recommends that we read 'Time Warped: Unlocking the Mysteries of Time Perception' (Canongate 2012). This draws upon subjective experience of time (Bergson's duration)

And

Adam Frank's About Time (Oneworld 2011) is a cultural history showing how perception of time has changed radically through the ages, culminating in the tyranny of clock time.

3. Learning to heed the whispers of intuition.

Foley points out that the power of intuition has been recognised recently in the following books;

'Blink: the power of thinking without thinking by Malcolm Gladwell' (Penguin 2006)

'The Decisive Moment' by Jonah Lehrer (Canongate 2010)

Foley comments that these books are concerned mainly with instantaneous decision-making, often in areas of specialised expertise.

4. Learning to enhance perception memory and attention.

Foley points out that a crucial skill is the ability to make unfamiliar associations and that this is the function of the brain's right hemisphere, which is responsible for imagination, humour and spirituality. He adds that anything that encourages all three is useful.

He recommends William James dot exercise whereby we are encouraged to find different ways of representing a dot. For example as God's eye view of planet earth, or a full stop at the end of a novel.

References.

Ansell-Pearson K ' Bergson Thinking beyond the human Condition'. Bloomsbury (2018)

Bergson H 'Philosophical Intuition'. Lecture given at the Philosophical Congress in Bologne, April 10th 1911. In Henri Bergson. Key Writings. Ed Keith Ansell-Pearson and John Mullarkey. Bloombury 2002.

Bergson H 'Matter and Memory'. Authorized translation by Nancy Margaret Paul and W.Scott Palmer. George Unwin Ltd 1929 (First published 1911)

<https://www.britanica.com/biography/Henri> Bergson. Britannica online Encyclopedia. Date published 14th October 2019 Access Date November 20th 2019

Clarke J.J. 'The Self Creating Universe. The Making of a Worldview'. Xlibris (2013)

Foley M 'Life Lessons from Bergson. The school of life'. Macmillan (2013)

Gardener Sebastian 1998. Unpublished class notes.

Gardener Sebastian 'Kant and the critique of Pure Reason'. Routledge (1999)

Guerlac S 'Thinking in Time. An Introduction to Henri Bergson'. Cornell Paperbacks. Cornell University Press. (2006)

Gunter Pete A.Y. in 'A Companion to Continental Philosophy'. Edited by Critchley S and Schroeder W.R. Blackwell (1999).

Kauffman S.A. 'Reinventing The Sacred. A new view of science, reason and religion'. Basic Books (2008)

Kedward H R 'In search of the Maquis' Clarendon Press Oxford (1994)

O'Donohue John 'The four elements; Reflections of nature'. Transworld Ireland (2010)

Russell Bertrand 'Mysticism and Logic' (1918) Published Spokesman (2007)

Taylor Carmen 'Merleau-Ponty'. Routledge (2008)

Wallace Stevens. Selected Poems. Faber and Faber (2010)

Recommended Reading. The following publications by Henri Bergson;

An introduction to metaphysics 1903

Creative Evolution 1907

Time and Free Will 1913

The Two Sources of Morality 1932

The Creative Mind 1946

Matter and Memory 1911

The Two Sources of Morality and Religion 1977

Also recommended Henri Bergson. Key Writings. Edited by Keith Ansell-Pearson and John Mullarkey. Bloombury (2002).

Appendix one

Bergson's Ethics. (Adapted from Ansell-Pearson 2018 p32-33)

Bergson, like Nietzsche, challenges all attempts to establish morality on a rational foundation. Ansell-Pearson says;

“ Bergson's contention is that moral philosophers treat society, and the two forces to which it owes its stability and mobility (pressure and aspiration) as established facts. At the same time they take for granted the matter of morality and its form, all it contains and the entire obligation which it is clothed.....Bergson's view is that the error of intellectualism is that it fails to appreciate the extent to which morality is a 'discipline demanded by nature'”.

For Bergson there are essentially two forces acting upon us and to which we respond as duties, namely impulsion and attraction”.....*all morality, be it pressure or aspiration, is in essence biological “.* (Bergson from Ansell-Pearson)

Gunter comments that Bergson begins his 'The two Sources of Morality and Religion' with an analysis of the emergence of religions which sustain, and expresses essentially closed societies. Bergson thinks of human kind in biological and genetic terms. (Gunter 1999)

Bergson believes that though we inhabit mass societies founded on sophisticated technologies, we remain hunter-gathers: creatures of small

groups dependent on group authority insisting on hierarchy and group closure for our security and identity. There is reliance here therefore upon the existence of a contrasting 'out group'.

Bergson believes that there is a movement towards dynamic religion and its natural corollary the open society....The open Society has for Bergson found its fullest development among Christian saints and mystics.

(Gunter 1999:181)

Appendix 1A

Bergson's Critique of Kant.

Kant's project can be viewed as a response to the rise of the Newtonian physics and mechanism in the modern age (see Gardener 1999). Kant accepted the Newtonian picture as an accurate picture of the world and thought that metaphysics had to be reconfigured in the wake of the Newtonian revolution (Ansell-Pearson 2018).

Kant identified sensible intuition as sensible knowledge of phenomena, and intellectual intuition of noemena, or things in themselves (for example soul or God, or phenomena in themselves) of which we cannot have direct knowledge at all. Kant's metaphysics also placed our freedom in a noumenal realm, a realm that is beyond phenomenal appearance, and is outside time.

For Kant time and space are sensible intuitions for us; existing as transcendental forms.

In summary Kant considered only three possibilities for a theory of knowledge;

- i) The mind is determined by external things.
- ii) Things are determined by the mind itself
- iii) Between the mind and things we have to suppose a mysterious agreement or pre-established harmony.

(adapted from Ansell Pearson p13

It was in these terms that Kant came to limit the range and value of our senses and our understanding from the human mind. Bergson considered that matter should have been left where it is seen by common sense. He did not accept two key theses held by Kant.

- 1) The claim that knowledge is relative to our faculties of knowing and
- 2) The claim that metaphysics is impossible on the grounds that there can be no knowledge outside of science (Newtonian mechanism) or that science has correctly determined the bounds of metaphysics.

(Ansell-Pearson 2018)

Bergson would not contest the view that space and time as they are portrayed through science, are indeed intuitions for us; as Kant suggests. He would though draw attention to how this influence is in danger of distorting our thinking on occasion, as has been explained.

Here is what Bergson said of Kant's approach to knowledge;

“ If we now inquire why Kant did not believe that the matter of our knowledge extends beyond its form, this is what we find.

The criticism of our knowledge of nature that was instituted by Kant ascertained what our mind must be and what nature must be if the claims of our science are justified; but of these claims themselves Kant has not made the criticism. I mean that he took for granted the idea of a science that is one, capable of binding with the same force all the parts of what is given, and of coordinating them into a system presenting on all sides an equal solidity. He did not consider.... that science became less and less objective, more and more symbolical, to the extent that it went from the physical to the vital, from the vital to the psychical “.

(Bergson Creative Evolution)

Ansell-Pearson comments that Bergson is contending here that the physical laws of scientific knowledge are, in their mathematical form, artificial constructions foreign to the real movement of nature. (Ansell-Pearson 2018:13)

The two major claims that Bergson makes contra Kant, are as follows;

- 1) The mind cannot be restricted to the intellect since it overflows it.
- 2) Duration has to be granted an absolute existence, which requires thinking on a different plane to space.

We are reading here of a view that holds a fundamental place in Bergson's philosophy. Bergson is claiming a dualism for us; a dualism that is unlike the dualist view held by Descartes, where mind or thinking substance is wholly

distinct from the world of matter. In Bergson's account of mind's relation to matter they are the same, while being of a different kind.

For Bergson the antinomies of modern thinking, for example determinism and freedom, stem in large measure from our imposition of symbolic diagrams upon the movement of the real, which serve to make it something uniform, regular and calculable for us (Ansell-Pearson p 25)

Bergson says;

“let us grasp afresh the external world as it really is, not superficially in the present, but in depth, with the immediate past crowding upon it and imprinting upon it its impetus” (Bergson's 'Elan vital' and his account of memory as duration explains this)

He adds;

“...immediately in our galvanised perception what is taut becomes relaxed, what is dormant awakens what is dead comes to life again. Satisfactions which art will never give save to those favoured by nature and fortune, and only then on rare occasions. Philosophy will offer to all of us at all times, by breathing life once again into the phantoms which surround us and by reviving us. In so doing philosophy will become complimentary to science in practice as well as in speculation. He adds;

“...science gives us the promise of wellbeing, or at most pleasure. But philosophy (as Bergson describes it) could already give us joy”.

(Bergson 'Philosophical Intuition' 1911)

Bergson states with regard to our perception through intuition;

“ anterior perceptions remain bound up with present perceptions and the immediate future itself is outlined in the present. Reality no longer has a static state in its manner of being, it affirms itself dynamically in the continuity and variability of its tendency. What was immobile and frozen in our perception is warmed and set in motion. Everything comes to life around us, and everything is revived in us. A great impulse carries beings and things along. We will ourselves be uplifted and carried along borne along by it we are more fully alive.”(Bergson ' The perception of change' in Henri Bergson. Key Writings)

In keeping with this account it was my intuitive experience in the old house, that led me to want to study Bergson's philosophy, and to learn more about his view.

Appendix two A

In the poem below Wallace Stevens seems to express a relationship that exists between mind and matter in the world.

Wallace Stevens

The House was Quiet and the World was Calm.

The house was quiet and the world was calm.

The reader became the book; and summer night

Was like the conscious being of the book.

The house was quiet and the world was calm.

The words were spoken as if there were no book,

Except that the reader leaned above the page,

Wanted to lean, wanted much most to be

The scholar to whom his book is true, to whom

The summer night is like perfection of thought.

The house was quiet because it had to be.

The quiet was part of the meaning, part of the mind:

The access of perfection to the page.

And the world was calm. The truth in a calm world,

In which there is no other meaning, itself

*Is calm, itself is summer and night, itself
Is the reader leaning late and reading there.*

Appendix two B

Here the poet Wallace Stevens expresses his insight into our lived time of flux and flow;

Wallace Stevens.

This Solitude of Cataracts.

*He never felt twice the same about the flecked river,
Which kept flowing and never the same way twice,
flowing*

*Through many places, as if it stood still in one,
Fixed like a lake on which the wild ducks fluttered,*

*Ruffling its common reflections, thought-like
Monadnocks.*

There seemed to be an apostrophe that was not spoken.

*There was so much that was real that was not real at all.
He wanted to feel the same way over and over.*

He wanted the river to go on flowing the same way,

To keep on flowing. He wanted to walk beside it,

Under the bottonwoods, beneath a moon nailed fast.

He wanted his heart to stop beating and his mind to rest

In a permanent realisation, without any wild ducks

Or mountains that were not mountains, just to know how it would be,

Just to know how it would feel, released from

Destruction,

To be a bronze man breathing under archaic laps.

Without the oscillations of planetary pass-pass,

Breathing his bronze breath at the azury centre of time.

Appendix 3

Heidegger offered the following reflections upon Van Gogh's paintings of peasant's boots;

From the dark opening of the worn insides of the shoes the toilsome tread of the worker stares forth. In the stiffly rugged heaviness of the shoes there is a accumulated tenacity of their slow trudge through the far spreading and ever-uniform furrows of the field swept by a raw wind. On the leather lie the dampness and richness of the soil. Under the shoes vibrates the silent call of the earth, its quiet gift of the ripening grain and its unexplained self-refusal in the fallow desolation of the wintry field. The piece of equipment is pervaded by the uncomplaining anxiety as to the uncertainty of bread, the wordless joy of having once more withstood want, the trembling before the impending child bed and shivering at the surrounding menace of death.

Heidegger from his 'Poetry, Language and Thought'.

Appendix 4

Bergson was particularly concerned to rid us of certain misconceptions about our consciousness in time, misconceptions in our 'common sense' that we have inherited from positivist philosophy. To illustrate this to us, Bergson gives an example of a common misconception in our thinking that stems from a failure to recognise time in terms of flux and flow. He writes;

“ It is usually admitted that states of consciousness, sensations, feelings, passions, efforts, are capable of growth and, or as being capable of lessening (diminution) ; we are even told that a sensation can be said to be twice, thrice, four times as intense as another sensation of the same kind. This later thesis.... does not see any harm in speaking of one sensation as being more intense than another, of one effort as being greater than another, and in thus setting up differences of quantity between purely internal states. (Bergson in Time and Free will 2001:1)

Bergson is drawing our attention to how psychic states do not lend themselves to treatment as magnitudes; though a positivist influence within our common sense thinking inclines us to do this. He wanted us to construe movement in terms of qualitative change, not as change that we measure after the fact and map onto space (Guerlac 2006:1).

Appendix 5

Newton who is recorded as having said;

“ All things are placed in time as to order of succession; and in space as to order of situation...That the primary place of things should be movable, is absurd. There are therefore absolute places, and translations out of these places, are the absolute notions “

Sir Isaac Newton from Guerlac 2006:38.