

Henri Bergson

Henri Bergson (born Oct. 18, 1859, Paris, France—died Jan. 4, 1941, Paris) was a French philosopher, the first to elaborate what came to be called a process philosophy, which rejected static values in favour of values of motion, change, and evolution. He was also a master literary stylist, of both academic and popular appeal, and was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1927.

Early years

Through his father, a talented musician, Bergson was descended from a rich Polish Jewish family—the sons of Berek, or Berek-son, from which the name Bergson is derived. His mother came from an English Jewish family. Bergson's upbringing, training, and interests were typically French, and his professional career, as indeed all of his life, was spent in France, most of it in Paris.

He received his early education at the Lycée Condorcet in Paris, where he showed equally great gifts in the sciences and the humanities. From 1878 to 1881 he studied at the École Normale Supérieure in Paris, the institution responsible for training university teachers. The general culture that he received there made him equally at home in reading the Greek and Latin classics, in obtaining what he wanted and needed from the science of his day, and in acquiring a beginning in the career of philosophy, to which he turned upon graduation.

His teaching career began in various lycées outside of Paris, first at Angers (1881–83) and then for the next five years at Clermont-Ferrand. While at the latter place, he had the intuition that provided both the basis and inspiration for his first philosophical books. As he later wrote to the eminent American Pragmatist William James:

I had remained up to that time wholly imbued with mechanistic theories, to which I had been led at an early date by the reading of Herbert Spencer. . . . It was the analysis of the notion of time, as that enters into mechanics and physics, which overturned all my ideas. I saw, to my great astonishment, that scientific time does not endure. . . that positive science consists essentially in the elimination of duration. This was the point of departure of a series of reflections which brought me, by gradual steps, to reject almost all of what I had hitherto accepted and to change my point of view completely.

The first result of this change was his *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience* (1889; *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*), for which he received the doctorate the same year. This work was primarily an attempt to establish the notion of duration, or lived time, as opposed to what Bergson viewed as the spatialized conception of time, measured by a clock, that is employed by science. He proceeded by analyzing the awareness that man has of his inner self to show that psychological facts are qualitatively different from any other, charging psychologists in particular with falsifying the facts by trying to quantify and number them. Fechner's Law, claiming to establish a calculable relation between the intensity of the stimulus and that of the corresponding sensation, was especially criticized. Once the confusions were cleared away that confounded duration with extension, succession with simultaneity, and quality with quantity, he maintained that the objections to human liberty made in the name of scientific determinism could be seen to be baseless.

Philosophical triumphs

The publication of the *Essai* found Bergson returned to Paris, teaching at the Lycée Henri IV. In 1891 he married Louise Neuburger, a cousin of the French novelist Marcel Proust. Meanwhile, he had undertaken the study of the relation between mind and body. The prevailing doctrine was that of the so-called psychophysiological parallelism, which held that for every psychological fact there is a corresponding physiological fact that strictly determines it. Though he was convinced that he had refuted the argument for determinism, his own work, in the doctoral dissertation, had not attempted to explain how mind and body are related. The findings of his research into this problem were published in 1896 under the title *Matière et mémoire: essai sur la relation du corps à l'esprit* (Matter and Memory).

This is the most difficult and perhaps also the most perfect of his books. The approach that he took in it is typical of his method of doing philosophy. He did not proceed by general speculation and was not concerned with elaborating a great speculative system. He began in this, as in each of his books, with a particular problem, which he analyzed by first determining the empirical (observed) facts that are known about it according to the best and most up-to-date scientific opinion. Thus, for *Matière et mémoire* he devoted five years to studying all of the literature available on memory and especially the psychological phenomenon of aphasia, or loss of the ability to use language. According to the theory of psychophysiological parallelism, a lesion in the brain should also affect the very basis of a psychological power. The occurrence of aphasia, Bergson argued, showed that this is not the case. The person so affected understands what others have to say, knows what he himself wants to say, suffers no paralysis of the speech organs, and yet is unable to speak. This fact shows, he argued, that it is not memory that is lost but, rather, the bodily mechanism that is needed to express it. From this observation Bergson concluded that memory, and so mind, or soul, is independent of body and makes use of it to carry out its own purposes.

The *Essai* had been widely reviewed in the professional journals, but *Matière et mémoire* attracted the attention of a wider audience and marked the first step along the way that led to Bergson's becoming one of the most popular and influential lecturers and writers of the day. In 1897 he returned as professor of philosophy to the *École Normale Supérieure*, which he had first entered as a student at the age of 19. Then, in 1900, he was called to the *Collège de France*, the academic institution of highest prestige in all of France, where he enjoyed immense success as a lecturer. From then until the outbreak of World War I, there was a veritable vogue of Bergsonism. William James was an enthusiastic reader of his works, and the two men became warm friends. Expositions and commentaries on the Bergsonian philosophy were to be found everywhere. It was held by many that a new day in philosophy had dawned that brought with it light to many other activities such as literature, music, painting, politics, and religion.

L'Évolution créatrice (1907; *Creative Evolution*), the greatest work of these years and Bergson's most famous book, reveals him most clearly as a philosopher of process at the same time that it shows the influence of biology upon his thought. In examining the idea of life, Bergson accepted evolution as a scientifically established fact. He criticized, however, the philosophical interpretations that had been given of it for failing to see the importance of duration and hence missing the very uniqueness of life. He proposed that the whole evolutionary process should be seen as the endurance of an *élan vital* ("vital impulse") that is continually developing and generating new forms. Evolution, in short, is creative, not mechanistic. (See creative evolution.)

In this developing process, he traced two main lines: one through instinct, leading to the life of insects; the other through the evolution of intelligence, resulting in man; both of which, however, are seen as the work of one vital impulse that is at work everywhere in the world. The final chapter of the book, entitled

“The Cinematographical Mechanism of Thought and the Mechanistic Illusion,” presents a review of the whole history of philosophical thought with the aim of showing that it everywhere failed to appreciate the nature and importance of becoming, falsifying thereby the nature of reality by the imposition of static and discrete concepts.

Among Bergson’s minor works are *Le Rire: essai sur la signification du comique* (1900; *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*) and, *Introduction à la métaphysique* (1903; *An Introduction to Metaphysics*). The latter provides perhaps the best introduction to his philosophy by offering the clearest account of his method. There are two profoundly different ways of knowing, he claimed. The one, which reaches its furthest development in science, is analytic, spatializing, and conceptualizing, tending to see things as solid and discontinuous. The other is an intuition that is global, immediate, reaching into the heart of a thing by sympathy. The first is useful for getting things done, for acting on the world, but it fails to reach the essential reality of things precisely because it leaves out duration and its perpetual flux, which is inexpressible and to be grasped only by intuition. Bergson’s entire work may be considered as an extended exploration of the meaning and implications of his intuition of duration as constituting the innermost reality of everything.

Later years of Henri Bergson

In 1914 Bergson retired from all active duties at the Collège de France, although he did not formally retire from the chair until 1921. Having received the highest honours that France could offer him, including membership, since 1915, among the “40 immortals” of the Académie Française, he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1927.

After *L’Évolution créatrice*, 25 years elapsed before he published another major work. In 1932 he published *Les Deux Sources de la morale et de la religion* (*The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*). As in the earlier works, he claimed that the polar opposition of the static and the dynamic provides the basic insight. Thus, in the moral, social, and religious life of men he saw, on the one side, the work of the closed society, expressed in conformity to codified laws and customs, and, on the other side, the open society, best represented by the dynamic aspirations of heroes and mystical saints reaching out beyond and even breaking the strictures of the groups in which they live. There are, thus, two moralities, or, rather, two sources: the one having its roots in intelligence, which leads also to science and its static, mechanistic ideal; the other based on intuition, and finding its expression not only in the free creativity of art and philosophy but also in the mystical experience of the saints.

Bergson in *Les Deux Sources* had come much closer to the orthodox religious notion of God than he had in the vital impulse of *L’Évolution créatrice*. He acknowledged in his will of 1937, “My reflections have led me closer and closer to Catholicism, in which I see the complete fulfillment of Judaism.” Yet, although declaring his “moral adherence to Catholicism,” he never went beyond that. In explanation, he wrote: “I would have become a convert, had I not foreseen for years a formidable wave of anti-Semitism about to break upon the world. I wanted to remain among those who tomorrow were to be persecuted.” To confirm this conviction, only a few weeks before his death, he arose from his sickbed and stood in line in order to register as a Jew, in accord with the law just imposed by the Vichy government and from which he refused the exemption that had been offered him.

Influence

Although it did not give rise to a Bergsonian school of philosophy, Bergson's influence has been considerable. His influence among philosophers has been greatest in France, but it has also been felt in the United States and Great Britain, especially in the work of William James; George Santayana; and Alfred North Whitehead, the other great process metaphysician of the 20th century.