Henri Bergson

“Bergson” redirects here. For other uses, see Bergson (disambiguation).

Henri-Louis Bergson (French: [bewson]; 18 October 1859 – 4 January 1941) was a major French philosopher, influential especially in the first half of the 20th century. Bergson convinced many thinkers that the processes of immediate experience and intuition are more significant than abstract rationalism and science for understanding reality.

He was awarded the 1927 Nobel Prize in Literature “in recognition of his rich and vitalizing ideas and the brilliant skill with which they have been presented”. In 1930 France awarded him its highest honour, the Grand-Croix de la Legion d’honneur.

1 Biography

1.1 Overview

Bergson was born in the Rue Lamartine in Paris, not far from the Palais Garnier (the old Paris opera house) in 1859. His father, the pianist Michał Bergson, was of a Polish Jewish background (originally bearing the name Berekson). His great-grandmother, Temerl Bergson, was a well-known patroness and benefactor of Polish Jewry, especially those associated with the Hasidic movement. His mother, Katherine Levison, daughter of a Yorkshire doctor, was from an English and Irish Jewish background. The Bereksohns were a famous Jewish entrepreneurial family of Polish descent. Henri Bergson’s great-great-grandfather, Szmul Jakubowicz Sonnenberg, called Zbytkower, was a prominent banker and a protégé of Stanisław August Poniatowski, King of Poland from 1764 to 1795.

Henri Bergson’s family lived in London for a few years after his birth, and he obtained an early familiarity with the English language from his mother. Before he was nine, his parents settled in France, Henri becoming a naturalized French citizen.

Henri Bergson married Louise Neuberger, a cousin of Marcel Proust (1871–1922), in 1891. (The novelist served as best man at Bergson’s wedding.) Henri and Louise Bergson had a daughter, Jeanne, born deaf in 1896. Bergson’s sister, Mina Bergson (also known as Moina Mathers), married the English occult author Samuel Liddell MacGregor Mathers, a founder of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, and the couple later relocated to Paris as well.

Bergson lived the quiet life of a French professor, marked by the publication of his four principal works:

1. in 1889, Time and Free Will (Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience)
2. in 1896, Matter and Memory (Matière et mémoire)
3. in 1907, Creative Evolution (L’Évolution créatrice)
4. in 1932, The Two Sources of Morality and Religion (Les deux sources de la morale et de la religion)

In 1900 the College of France selected Bergson to a Chair of Greek and Latin Philosophy, which he held until 1904. He then replaced Gabriel Tarde in the Chair of Modern Philosophy, which he held until 1920. The public attended his open courses in large numbers.

1.2 Education and career

Bergson attended the Lycée Fontanes (known as the Lycée Condorcet 1870–1874 and 1883–present) in Paris from 1868 to 1878. He had previously received a Jewish religious education. Between 14 and 16, however, he lost his faith. According to Hude (1990), this moral crisis is tied to his discovery of the theory of evolution, according to which humanity shares common ancestry with modern primates, a process generally construed as not needing a creative deity.

While at the lycée Bergson won a prize for his scientific work and another, in 1877 when he was eighteen, for the solution of a mathematical problem. His solution was published the following year in Annales de Mathématiques. It was his first published work. After some hesitation as to whether his career should lie in the sphere of the sciences or that of the humanities, he decided in favour of the latter, to the dismay of his teachers.

When he was nineteen, he entered the famous École Normale Supérieure. During this period, he read Herbert Spencer. He obtained there the degree of licence ès lettres, and this was followed by that of agrégation de philosophie in 1881.

The same year he received a teaching appointment at the lycée in Angers, the ancient capital of Anjou. Two years later he settled at the Lycée Blaise-Pascal (Clermont-Ferrand) in Clermont-Ferrand, capital of the Puy-de-Dôme département.
The year after his arrival at Clermont-Ferrand Bergson displayed his ability in the humanities by the publication of an edition of extracts from Lucretius, with a critical study of the text and of the materialist cosmology of the poet (1884), a work whose repeated editions give sufficient evidence of its useful place in the promotion of classical study among the youth of France. While teaching and lecturing in this part of his country (the Auvergne region), Bergson found time for private study and original work. He crafted his dissertation *Time and Free Will*, which was submitted, along with a short Latin thesis on Aristotle (*Quid Aristoteles de loco senserit*, "On the Concept of Place in Aristotle"), for his doctoral degree which was awarded by the University of Paris in 1889. The work was published in the same year by Félix Alcan. He also gave courses in Clermont-Ferrand on the Pre-Socratics, in particular on Heraclitus.\(^{[10]}\)

Bergson dedicated *Time and Free Will* to Jules Lachélier (1832–1918), then public education minister, a disciple of Félix Ravaissin (1813–1900) and the author of a philosophical work *On the Founding of Induction* (*Du fondement de l'induction*, 1871). Lachélier endeavoured “to substitute everywhere force for inertia, life for death, and liberty for fatalism”. (Bergson owed much to both of these teachers of the École Normale Supérieure. Compare his memorial address on Ravaissin, who died in 1900.)

In 1896 he published his second major work, entitled *Matter and Memory*. This rather difficult work investigates the function of the brain and undertakes an analysis of perception and memory, leading up to a careful consideration of the problems of the relation of body and mind. Bergson had spent years of research in preparation for each of his three large works. This is especially obvious in *Matter and Memory*, where he showed a thorough acquaintance with the extensive pathological investigations which had been carried out during the period.

In 1898 Bergson became maître de conférences at his alma mater, École Normale Supérieure, and later in the same year received promotion to a Professorship. The year 1900 saw him installed as Professor at the Collège
de France, where he accepted the Chair of Greek and Latin Philosophy in succession to Charles L'Eveque.

At the first International Congress of Philosophy, held in Paris during the first five days of August, 1900, Bergson read a short, but important, paper, “Psychological Origins of the Belief in the Law of Causality” (*Sur les origines psychologiques de notre croyance à la loi de causalité*). In 1900 Felix Alcan published a work which had previously appeared in the *Revue de Paris*, entitled *Laughter* (*Le rire*), one of the most important of Bergson’s minor productions. This essay on the meaning of comedy stemmed from a lecture which he had given in his early days in the Auvergne. The study of it is essential to an understanding of Bergson’s views of life, and its passages dealing with the place of the artistic in life are valuable. The main thesis of the work is that laughter is a corrective evolved to make social life possible for human beings. We laugh at people who fail to adapt to the demands of society, if it seems their failure is akin to an inflexible mechanism. Comic authors have exploited this human tendency to laugh in various ways, and what is common to them is the idea that the comic consists in there being “something mechanical encrusted on the living”.[12][13]

In 1901 the Académie des sciences morales et politiques elected Bergson as a member, and he became a member of the Institute. In 1903 he contributed to the *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* a very important essay entitled *Introduction to Metaphysics* (*Introduction à la métaphysique*), which is useful as a preface to the study of his three large books. He detailed in this essay his philosophical program, realized in the *Creative Evolution*.[10]

On the death of Gabriel Tarde, the sociologist and philosopher, in 1904, Bergson succeeded him in the Chair of Modern Philosophy. From 4 to 8 September of that year he visited Geneva, attending the Second International Congress of Philosophy, where he lectured on *The Mind and Thought: A Philosophical Illusion* (*Le cerveau et la pensée: une illusion philosophique*). An illness prevented his visiting Germany to attend the Third Congress held at Heidelberg.

His third major work, *Creative Evolution*, the most widely known and most discussed of his books, appeared in 1907. Pierre Imbert de la Tour remarked that *Creative Evolution* was a milestone of new direction in thought. By 1918, Alcan, the publisher, had issued twenty-one editions, making an average of two editions per annum for ten years. Following the appearance of this book, Bergson’s popularity increased enormously, not only in academic circles, but among the general reading public.

At that time, Bergson had already made an extensive study of biology, knowing of the theory of fecundation (as shown by the first chapter of the *Creative Evolution*), which had only recently emerged, ca. 1885 — no small feat for a philosopher specializing in the history of philosophy, in particular of Greek and Latin philosophy.[10] He also most certainly had read, apart from Darwin, Haeckel, from whom he retained his idea of a unity of life and of the ecological solidarity between all living beings,[10] as well as Hugo de Vries, from whom he quoted his mutation theory of evolution (which he opposed, preferring Darwin’s gradualism).[10] He also quoted Charles-Édouard Brown-Séquard, the successor of Claude Bernard at the Chair of Experimental Medicine in the Collège de France, etc.

Bergson served as a juror with Florence Meyer Blumenthal in awarding the Prix Blumenthal, a grant given between 1919–1954 to painters, sculptors, decorators, engravers, writers, and musicians.[14]

### 1.3 Relationship with James and Pragmatism

Bergson travelled to London in 1908 and met there with William James, the Harvard philosopher who was Bergson’s senior by seventeen years, and who was instrumental in calling the attention of the Anglo-American public to the work of the French professor. The two became great friends. James’s impression of Bergson is given in his Letters under date of 4 October 1908:

> “So modest and unpretending a man but such a genius intellectually! I have the strongest suspicions that the tendency which he has brought to a focus, will end by prevailing, and that the present epoch will be a sort of turning point in the history of philosophy.”

As early as 1880, James had contributed an article in French to the periodical *La Critique philosophique*, of Renouvier and Pillon, entitled *Le Sentiment de l’Effort*. Four years later, a couple of articles by him appeared in the journal *Mind*: “What is an Emotion?” and “On some Omissions of Introspective Psychology”. Bergson quoted the first two of these articles in his 1889 work, *Time and Free Will*. In the following years 1890–91 appeared the two volumes of James’s monumental work, *The Principles of Psychology*, in which he refers to a pathological phenomenon observed by Bergson. Some writers, taking merely these dates into consideration and overlooking the fact that James’s investigations had been proceeding since 1870 (registered from time to time by various articles which culminated in “The Principles”), have mistakenly dated Bergson’s ideas as earlier than James’s.

It has been suggested that Bergson owes the root ideas of his first book to the 1884 article by James, “On Some Omissions of Introspective Psychology,” which he neither refers to nor quotes. This article deals with the conception of thought as a stream of consciousness, which intellect distorts by framing into concepts. Bergson replied to this insinuation by denying that he had any knowledge of the article by James when he wrote *Les données immédiates de la conscience*. The two thinkers appear to have developed independently until almost the close of the century.
They are further apart in their intellectual position than is frequently supposed. Both have succeeded in appealing to audiences far beyond the purely academic sphere, but only in their mutual rejection of “intellectualism” as final is there real unanimity. Although James was slightly ahead in the development and enunciation of his ideas, he confessed that he was baffled by many of Bergson’s notions. James certainly neglected many of the deeper metaphysical aspects of Bergson’s thought, which did not harmonize with his own, and are even in direct contradiction. In addition to this, Bergson can hardly be considered a pragmatist. For him, “utility,” far from being a test of truth, was in fact the reverse: a synonym for error.

Nevertheless, William James hailed Bergson as an ally. In 1903, he wrote:

I have been re-reading Bergson’s books, and nothing that I have read since years has so excited and stimulated my thoughts. I am sure that that philosophy has a great future, it breaks through old cadres and brings things into a solution from which new crystals can be got.\(^{[15]}\)

The most noteworthy tributes James paid to Bergson come in the Hibbert Lectures (A Pluralistic Universe), which James gave at Manchester College, Oxford, shortly after meeting Bergson in London. He remarks on the encouragement he has received from Bergson’s thought, and refers to the confidence he has in being “able to lean on Bergson’s authority.” (Also see James’s reservations about Bergson below.)

The influence of Bergson had led James “to renounce the intellectualist method and the current notion that logic is an adequate measure of what can or cannot be”. It had induced him, he continued, “to give up logic, squarely and irrevocably” as a method, for he found that “reality, life, experience, concreteness, immediacy, use what word you will, exceeds our logic, overflows, and surrounds it”.

These remarks, which appeared in James’s book A Pluralistic Universe in 1909, impelled many English and American readers to an investigation of Bergson’s philosophy for themselves, but no English translations of Bergson’s major work had yet appeared. James, however, encouraged and assisted Dr. Arthur Mitchell in his preparation of the English translation of Creative Evolution. In August 1910, James died. It was his intention, had he lived to see the completion of the translation, to introduce it to the English reading public by a prefatory note of appreciation. In the following year the translation was completed and still greater interest in Bergson and his work was the result. By coincidence, in that same year (1911), Bergson penned a preface of sixteen pages entitled Truth and Reality for the French translation of James’s book, Pragmatism. In it he expressed sympathetic appreciation of James’s work, coupled with certain important reservations.

From April 5 to 11, Bergson attended the Fourth International Congress of Philosophy held at Bologna, in Italy, where he gave an address on “Philosophical Intuition”. In response to invitations he visited England in May of that year, and on several subsequent occasions. These visits were well received. His speeches offered new perspectives and elucidated many passages in his three major works: Time and Free Will, Matter and Memory, and Creative Evolution. Although necessarily brief statements, they developed and enriched the ideas in his books and clarified for English audiences the fundamental principles of his philosophy.

1.4 Lectures on change

In May 1911 Bergson gave two lectures entitled The Perception of Change (La perception du changement) at the University of Oxford. The Clarendon Press published these in French in the same year.\(^{[16]}\) His talks were concise and lucid, leading students and the general reader to his other longer writings. Oxford later conferred on him the degree of Doctor of Science.

Two days later he delivered the Huxley Lecture at the University of Birmingham, taking for his subject Life and Consciousness. This subsequently appeared in The Hibbert Journal (October, 1911), and since revised, forms the first essay in the collected volume Mind-Energy (L’Énergie spirituelle). In October he again travelled to England, where he had an enthusiastic reception, and delivered at University College London four lectures on La Nature de l’Âme [The nature of the soul].

In 1913 Bergson visited the United States of America at the invitation of Columbia University, New York, and lectured in several American cities, where very large audiences welcomed him. In February, at Columbia University, he lectured both in French and English, taking as his subjects: Spirituality and Freedom and The Method of Philosophy. Being again in England in May of the same year, he accepted the Presidency of the British Society for Psychical Research, and delivered to the Society an impressive address: Phantoms of Life and Psychic Research (Fantômes des vivants et recherche psychique).

Meanwhile, his popularity increased, and translations of his works began to appear in a number of languages: English, German, Italian, Danish, Swedish, Hungarian, Polish and Russian. In 1914 Bergson’s fellow-countrymen honoured him by his election as a member of the Académie française. He was also made President of the Académie des Sciences morales et politiques, and in addition he became Officier de la Légion d’honneur, and Officier de l’Instruction publique.

Bergson found disciples of many varied types, and in France movements such as neo-Catholicism or Modernism on the one hand and syndicalism on the other, endeavoured to absorb and to appropriate for their own immediate use and propaganda some of the central ideas.
of his teaching. The continental organ of socialist and syndicalist theory, *Le Mouvement socialiste,*[17] portrayed the realism of Karl Marx and Pierre-Joseph Proudhon as hostile to all forms of intellectualism, and that, therefore, supporters of Marxist socialism should welcome a philosophy such as that of Bergson. Other writers, in their eagerness, asserted the collaboration of the Chair of Philosophy at the Collège de France with the aims of the *Confédération Générale du Travail* and the *Industrial Workers of the World.* It was claimed that there is harmony between the flute of personal philosophical meditation and the trumpet of social revolution.

While social revolutionaries endeavoured to make the most out of Bergson, many leaders of religious thought, particularly the more liberal-minded theologians of all creeds, e.g., the Modernists and Neo-Catholic Party in his own country, showed a keen interest in his writings, and many of them endeavoured to find encouragement and stimulus in his work. The Roman Catholic Church however took the step of banning Bergson's three books, accused of pantheism (that is, of conceiving of God as immanent to his Creation and of being himself created in the process of the Creation)[10] by placing them upon the Index of prohibited books (Decree of 1 June 1914).

### 1.5 Later years

In 1914 the Scottish universities arranged for Bergson to give the famous *Gifford Lectures,* planning one course for the spring and another for the autumn. Bergson delivered the first course, consisting of eleven lectures, under the title of *The Problem of Personality,* at the *University of Edinburgh* in the spring of that year. The course of lectures planned for the autumn months had to be abandoned because of the outbreak of war. Bergson was not, however, silent during the conflict, and he gave some inspiring addresses. As early as 4 November 1914, he wrote an article entitled *Wearing and Nonwearing forces* (*La force qui s’use et celle qui ne s’use pas*), which appeared in that unique and interesting periodical of the *actualités* ([Decree of 1 June 1914](#)).

As many of Bergson's contributions to French periodicals remained relatively inaccessible, he agreed to the request of his friends to have such works collected and published in two volumes. The first of these was being planned when war broke out. The conclusion of strife was marked in the appearance of a delayed volume in 1919. It bears the title *Spiritual Energy: Essays and Lectures* (reprinted as *Mind-Energy – L’Énergie spirituelle: essais et conférences*). The advocate of Bergson's philosophy in England, Dr. *Wildon Carr,* prepared an English translation under the title *Mind-Energy.* The volume opens with the Huxley Memorial Lecture of 1911, "Life and Consciousness", in a revised and developed form under the title “Consciousness and Life”. Signs of Bergson's growing interest in social ethics and in the idea of a future life of personal survival are manifested. The lecture before the Society for Psychical Research is included, as is also the one given in France, *L’Âme et le Corps,* which contains the substance of the four London lectures on the Soul. The seventh and last article is a reprint of Bergson's famous lecture to the Congress of Philosophy at Geneva in 1904, *The Psycho-Physiological Paralogism* (*Le paralogisme psycho-physiologique*), which now appears as *Le cerveau et la pensée: une illusion philosophique.* Other articles are on the False Recognition, on Dreams, and Intellectual Effort. The volume is a most welcome production and serves to bring together what Bergson wrote on the concept of mental force, and on his view of “tension” and “detension” as applied to the relation of matter and mind.

In June 1920, the *University of Cambridge* honoured him with the degree of Doctor of Letters. In order that he might devote his full-time to the great new work he was preparing on ethics, religion, and sociology, the Collège de France relieved Bergson of the duties attached to the Chair of Modern Philosophy there. He retained the chair, but no longer delivered lectures, his place being taken by his disciple, the mathematician and philosopher *Édouard Le Roy,* who supported a conventionalist stance on the foundations of mathematics, which was adopted by Bergson.[10] *Le Roy,* who also succeeded to Bergson at the *Académie française* and was a fervent Catholic, extended to revealed truth his conventionalism, leading him to privilege faith, heart and sentiment to dogmas, speculative theology and abstract reasoning. Like Bergson's,
his writings were placed on the Index by the Vatican.

1.6 Debate with Albert Einstein

Bergson published *Duration and Simultaneity: Bergson and the Einsteinan Universe* (*Durée et simultanéité*), a book on physics, which he followed with a polemical conversation with Albert Einstein at the French Society of Philosophy.[20] The latter book has been often considered as one of his worst, many alleging that his knowledge of physics was insufficient, and that the book did not follow up contemporary developments on physics.[10] It was not published in the 1951 *Edition du Centenaire* in French, which contained all of his other works, and was only published later in a work gathering different essays, titled *Mélanges*. *Duration and simultaneity* took advantage of Bergson’s experience at the League of Nations, where he presided starting in 1920 the International Commission on Intellectual Cooperation (the ancestor of the UNESCO, which included Einstein, Marie Curie, etc.).[21]

Living with his wife and daughter in a modest house in a quiet street near the Porte d’Auteuil in Paris, Bergson won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1927 for having written *The Creative Evolution*. Because of serious rheumatics ailments, he could not travel to Stockholm, and sent instead a text subsequently published in *La Pensée et le mouvant*.[10] He was elected a Foreign Honorary Member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1928.[22]

After his retirement from the Collège, Bergson began to fade into obscurity: he suffered from a degenerative illness (rheumatism, which left him half paralyzed)[10]). He completed his new work, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, which extended his philosophical theories to the realms of morality, religion and art, in 1935. It was respectfully received by the public and the philosophical community, but all by that time realized that Bergson’s days as a philosophical luminary were past. He was, however, able to reiterate his core beliefs near the end of his life, by renouncing all of the posts and honours previously awarded him, rather than accept exemption from the antisemitic laws imposed by the Vichy government.

Bergson inclined to convert to Catholicism, writing in his will on February 8, 1937: *My thinking has always brought me nearer to Catholicism, in which I saw the perfect complement to Judaism.*[23] Though wishing to convert to Catholicism, as stated in his will, he did not convert in view of the travails inflicted on the Jewish people by the rise of Nazism and anti-Semitism in Europe in the 1930s; he did not want to appear to want to leave the persecuted. On 3 January 1941 Bergson died in occupied Paris from bronchitis.[24] A Roman Catholic priest said prayers at his funeral per his request. Bergson is buried in the Cimetière de Garches, Hauts-de-Seine.

2 Philosophy

Bergson rejected what he saw as the overly mechanistic predominant view of causality (as expressed in, say, finalism). He argued that we must allow space for free will to unfold in an autonomous and unpredictable fashion. While Kant saw free will as something beyond time and space and therefore ultimately a matter of faith, Bergson attempted to redefine the modern conceptions of time, space, and causality in his concept of *duration*, making room for a tangible marriage of free will with causality. Seeing *duration* as a mobile and fluid concept, Bergson argued that one cannot understand *duration* through “immobile” analysis, but only through experiential, first-person intuition.

2.1 Creativity

Bergson considers the appearance of novelty as a result of pure undetermined creation, instead of as the predetermined result of mechanistic forces. His philosophy emphasizes pure mobility, unforeseeable novelty, creativity and freedom; thus one can characterize his system as a process philosophy. It touches upon such topics as time and identity, free will, perception, change, memory, consciousness, language, the foundation of mathematics and the limits of reason.[25]

Critical of Kant’s theory of knowledge exposed in the *Critique of Pure Reason* and his conception of truth — which he compares to Plato’s conception of truth as its symmetrical inversion (order of nature/order of thought) — Bergson attempted to redefine the relations between science and metaphysics, intelligence and intuition, and insisted on the necessity of increasing thought’s possibility through the use of intuition, which, according to him, alone approached a knowledge of the absolute and of real life, understood as pure duration. Because of his (relative) criticism of intelligence, he makes a frequent use of images and metaphors in his writings in order to avoid the use of concepts, which (he considers) fail to touch the whole of reality, being only a sort of abstract net thrown on things. For instance, he says in *The Creative Evolution* (chap. III) that thought in itself would never have thought it possible for the human being to swim, as it cannot deduce swimming from walking. For swimming to be possible, man must throw itself in water, and only then can thought consider swimming as possible. Intelligence, for Bergson, is a practical faculty rather than a pure speculative faculty, a product of evolution used by man to survive. If metaphysics is to avoid “false problems”, it should not extend to pure speculation the abstract concepts of intelligence, but rather use intuition.[26]

*The Creative Evolution* in particular attempted to think through the continuous creation of life, and explicitly pitted itself against Herbert Spencer’s evolutionary philosophy. Spencer had attempted to transpose Charles Dar-
2.3 Intuition

See also: Intuition (Bergson)

Duration, as defined by Bergson, then is a unity and a multiplicity, but, being mobile, it cannot be grasped through immobile concepts. Bergson hence argues that one can grasp it only through his method of intuition. Two images from Henri Bergson’s An Introduction to Metaphysics may help one to grasp Bergson’s term intuition, the limits of concepts, and the ability of intuition to grasp the absolute. The first image is that of a city. Analysis, or the creation of concepts through the divisions of points of view, can only ever give us a model of the city through a construction of photographs taken from every possible point of view, yet it can never give us the dimensional value of walking in the city itself. One can only grasp this through intuition; likewise the experience of reading a line of Homer. One may translate the line and pile commentary upon commentary, but this commentary too shall never grasp the simple dimensional value of experiencing the poem in its originality itself. The method of intuition, then, is that of getting back to the things themselves.

2.4 Élan vital

See also: Élan vital

Élan vital ranks as Bergson’s third essential concept, after Duration and intuition. An idea with the goal of explaining evolution, the Élan vital first appeared in 1907’s Creative Evolution. Bergson portrays Élan vital as a kind of vital impetus which explains evolution in a less mechanical and more lively manner, as well as accounting for the creative impulse of mankind. This concept led several authors to characterize Bergson as a supporter of vitalism—although he criticized it explicitly in The Creative Evolution, as he thought, against Driesch and Johannes Reinke (whom he cited) that there is neither “purely internal finality nor clearly cut individuality in nature.”

Hereby lies the stumbling block of vitalist theories (...) It is thus in vain that one pretends to reduce finality to the individuality of the living being. If there is finality in the world of life, it encompasses the whole of life in one indivisible embrace.

2.5 Laughter

In Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic, Bergson develops a theory not of laughter itself but of how laughter can be provoked (see his objection to Delage, published in the 23rd edition of the essay). He describes the process of laughter (refusing to give a concep-
tual definition which would not approach its reality\textsuperscript{[10]}, used in particular by comics and clowns, as the caricature of the mechanism nature of humans (habits, automatic acts, etc.), one of the two tendencies of life (degradation towards inert matter and mechanism, and continual creation of new forms)\textsuperscript{[10]}. However, Bergson warns us that laughter’s criterion of what should be laughed at is not a moral criterion and that it can in fact cause serious damage to a person’s self-esteem.\textsuperscript{[35]} This essay made his opposition to the Cartesian theory of the animal-machine obvious.\textsuperscript{[10]}

3 Reception

From his first publications, Bergson’s philosophy attracted strong criticism from different quarters, although he also became very popular and durably influenced French philosophy. The mathematician Édouard Le Roy became Bergson’s main disciple. Nonetheless, Suzanne Guerlac has argued that his institutional position at the Collège de France, delivering lectures to a general audience, may have retarded the systematic reception of his thought: “Bergson achieved enormous popular success in this context, often due to the emotional appeal of his ideas. But he did not have the equivalent of graduate students who might have become rigorous interpreters of his thought. Thus Bergson’s philosophy—in principle open and nonsystematic—was easily borrowed piecemeal and altered by enthusiastic admirers.”\textsuperscript{[36]}

Alfred North Whitehead acknowledged Bergson’s influence on his process philosophy in his 1929 *Process and Reality*.\textsuperscript{[37]} However, Bertrand Russell, Whitehead’s collaborator on *Principia Mathematica*, was not so entranced by Bergson’s philosophy. Although acknowledging Bergson’s literary skills, Russell saw Bergson’s arguments at best as persuasive or emotive speculation but not at all as any worthwhile example of sound reasoning or philosophical insight.\textsuperscript{[38]} The epistemologist Gaston Bachelard explicitly alluded to him in the last pages of his 1938 book *The Formation of the Scientific Mind*. Others influenced by Bergson include Vladimir Jankélévitch, who wrote a book on him in 1931,\textsuperscript{[39]} Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, and Gilles Deleuze who wrote *Le bergsonisme* in 1966.\textsuperscript{[40]} Bergson also influenced the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Emmanuel Lévinas.\textsuperscript{[41]} although Merleau-Ponty had reservations about Bergson’s philosophy.\textsuperscript{[42]} The Greek author Nikos Kazantzakis studied under Bergson in Paris and his writing and philosophy were profoundly influenced as a result.\textsuperscript{[43]}

Many writers of the early 20th century criticized Bergson’s intuitionism, indeterminism, psychologism and interpretation of the scientific impulse. Those who explicitly criticized Bergson, either in published articles or in letters, included Bertrand Russell\textsuperscript{[44]} George Santayana,\textsuperscript{[45]} G. E. Moore, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Martin Heidegger,\textsuperscript{[46]} Julien Benda,\textsuperscript{[47]} T. S. Eliot, Wyndham Lewis,\textsuperscript{[48]} Paul Valéry, André Gide, Jean Piaget,\textsuperscript{[49]} Marxist philosophers Theodor W. Adorno,\textsuperscript{[50]} Lucio Colletti,\textsuperscript{[51]} Jean-Paul Sartre,\textsuperscript{[52]} and Georges Politzer,\textsuperscript{[53]} as well as Maurice Blanchot.\textsuperscript{[54]} American philosophers such as Irving Babbitt, Arthur Lovejoy, Josiah Royce, The New Realists (Ralph B. Perry, E. B. Holt, and William Pepperell Montague), The Critical Realists (Duran Drake, Roy W. Sellars, C. A. Strong, and A. K. Rogers), Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, Roger Fry (see his letters), Julian Huxley (in *Evolution: The Modern Synthesis*) and Virginia Woolf (for the latter, see Ann Banfield, *The Phantom Table*).

The Vatican accused Bergson of pantheism, while free-thinkers (who formed a large part of the teachers and professors of the French Third Republic) accused him of spiritualism. Still others have characterized his philosophy as a materialist emergentism — Samuel Alexander and C. Lloyd Morgan explicitly claimed Bergson as their forebear.\textsuperscript{[10]} According to Henri Hude (1990, II, p. 142), who supports himself on the whole of Bergson’s works as well as his now published courses, accusing him of pantheism is a “counter-sense”. Hude alleges that a mystical experience, roughly outlined at the end of *Les Deux sources de la morale et de la religion*, is the inner principle of his whole philosophy, although this has been contested by other commentators.

Charles Sanders Peirce took strong exception to those who associated him with Bergson. In response to a letter comparing his work with that of Bergson he wrote, “a man who seeks to further science can hardly commit a greater sin than to use the terms of his science without anxious care to use them with strict accuracy; it is not very gratifying to my feelings to be classed along with a Bergson who seems to be doing his utmost to muddle all distinctions.” William James’s students resisted the assimilation of his work to that of Bergson. See, for example, Horace Kallen’s book on the subject *James and Bergson*. As Jean Wahl described the “ultimate disagreement” between James and Bergson in his *System of Metaphysics*: “for James, the consideration of action is necessary for the definition of truth, according to Bergson, action...must be kept from our mind if we want to see the truth”. Gide even went so far as to say that future historians will overestimate Bergson’s influence on art and philosophy just because he was the self-appointed spokesman for “the spirit of the age”.

As early as the 1890s, Santayana attacked certain key concepts in Bergson’s philosophy, above all his view of the New and the indeterminate:

> the possibility of a new and unaccountable fact appearing at any time,” he writes in his book on Hermann Lotze. “does not practically affect the method of investigation:...the only thing given up is the hope that these hypotheses may ever be adequate to the reality and cover the process of nature without leaving a remain-
According to Santayana and Russell, Bergson projected false claims onto the aspirations of scientific method, claims which Bergson needed to make in order to justify his prior moral commitment to freedom. Russell takes particular exception to Bergson’s understanding of number in chapter two of *Time and Free-will*. According to Russell, Bergson uses an outmoded spatial metaphor (“extended images”) to describe the nature of mathematics as well as logic in general. “Bergson only succeeds in making his theory of number possible by confusing a particular collection with the number of its terms, and this again with number in general”, writes Russell (see *The Philosophy of Bergson* and *A History of Western Philosophy*).

Furthermore, writers such as Russell, Wittgenstein, and James saw *élan vital* as a projection of subjectivity onto the world. The external world, according to certain theories of probability, provides less and less indeterminism with further refinement of scientific method. In brief, one should not confuse the moral, psychological, subjective demand for the new, the underviable and the unexplained with the universe. One’s subjective sense of duration differs the (non-human) world, a difference which, according to the ancient materialist Lucretius should not be characterized as either one of becoming or being, creation or destruction (*De Rerum Natura*).

*Suzanne Guerlac* has argued that the more recent resurgence of scholarly interest in Bergson is related to the growing influence of his follower Deleuze within continental philosophy: “If there is a return to Bergson today, then, it is largely due to Gilles Deleuze whose own work has etched the contours of the New Bergson. This is not only because Deleuze wrote about Bergson; it is also because Deleuze’s own thought is deeply engaged with that of his predecessor, even when Bergson is not explicitly mentioned.”[55] Leonard Lawlor and Valentine Moucard agree with Guerlac that “the recent revitalization of Bergsonism [...] is almost entirely due to Deleuze.” They explain that Bergson’s concept of multiplicity “is at the very heart of Deleuze’s thought, and duration is the model for all of Deleuze’s ‘becomings.’ The other aspect that attracted Deleuze, which is indeed connected to the first, is Bergson’s criticism of the concept of negation in Creative Evolution. [...] Thus Bergson became a resource in the criticism of the Hegelian dialectic, the negative.”[56]

## 5 See also
- Philosophy of biology
- Psychoscopy
- List of Jewish Nobel laureates

## 6 References

years Bergson devoted to teaching Plotinus and the many parallels in their respective philosophies. This influence has been discussed at some length by Bergson’s contemporaries, such as Emile Brehier and Rose-Marie Rossé-Bastide. [...] 


[10] Anne Fagot-Largeau, 21 December 2006 course at the College of France (audio file of the course)


[12] p. 39


[15] Bergson and his philosophy Chapter 1: Life of Bergson


[19] See Chapter III of *The Creative Evolution*


[21] Einstein, Bergson and the Experiment that Failed: Intellectual Cooperation at the League of Nations


[26] Elie During, « Fantômes de problèmes », published by the *Centre International d’Études de la Philosophie Française Contemporaine* (short version first published in *Le magazine littéraire*, n°386, April 2000) (issue dedicated to Bergson)

[27] *The Creative Mind: An Introduction to Metaphysics*, pages 11 to 14


[29] *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* “‘Time and Free Will’ has to be seen as an attack on Kant, for whom freedom belongs to a realm outside of space and time.”


[31] The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy For Bergson — and perhaps this is his greatest insight — freedom is mobility.


L'Évolution créatrice, pp. 42–43

Henri Bergson’s theory of laughter

Deleuze, Gilles

L'Évolution créatrice, pp. 42–43

Cf. Ronny Desmet and Wyndham Lewis, Suzanne Guerlac, James, William

Henri Bergson's theory of laughter

Deleuze, Gilles

Bianco, Giuseppe

Peter Bien, Three Generations of Greek Writers, published by Efstathiadis Group, Athens, 1983


see his study on the author in “Winds of Doctrine”

see Being and Time, esp. sections 5, 10, and 82.

see his two books on the subject


see his book Insights and Illusions of Philosophy 1972

see “Against Epistemology”

see “Hegel and Marxism”

see his early book Imagination — although Sartre also appropriated himself Bergsonian thesis on novelty as pure creation – see Situations I Gallimard 1947, p. 314

see the latter’s two books on the subject: Le Bergsonisme, une Mystification Philosophique and La fin d’une parade philosophique: le Bergsonisme both of which had a tremendous effect on French existential phenomenology

see Bergson and Symbolism


7 Further reading


8 External links

• Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy entry

• Henri Bergson – Entry in Philosophical Library. European Graduate School

• Henri Bergson’s theory of laughter. A brief summary.

• « ‘A History of Problems’ : Bergson and the French Epistemological Tradition », by Elie During

• M. C. Sanchez Rey « The Bergsonian Philosophy of the Intelligence » translation

8.1 Works online

• Works by Henri Bergson at Project Gutenberg

• Works by or about Henri Bergson at Internet Archive

• Works by Henri Bergson at LibriVox (public domain audiobooks)

• Works by Henri Bergson at Open Library

• Works by Henri Bergson in French at “La Philosophie”

• Complete works in French on the “Classiques des sciences sociales” website

• *L’Évolution créatrice* (in the original French, 1907)

  • 1911 English translation at the Wayback Machine (archived April 23, 2006) of *Creative Evolution* (html)

• 1910 English translation of *Time and Free Will* at the Wayback Machine (archived April 24, 2006) (HTML)

• 1911 English translation of *Matter and Memory* at the Wayback Machine (archived April 24, 2006) (HTML)
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