

Bergson's Challenge to Phenomenology, Ontology and Ethics

The Challenge of Bergsonism

By Leonard Lawlor

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Review by James McLachlan

At the opening of the Twentieth century Bergson was considered the greatest philosopher of his time. William James called Bergsonism a second Copernican revolution in philosophy. Painters, writers, poets considered Bergsonism a saving alternative from the positivism of the 19th century. The theory of duration found its way into cubism, futurism, symbolism, and the stream of consciousness novel. Proust, Joyce, and Faulkner all were influenced by him in one way or another. Bergson's lectures at the College de France were events filled to overcapacity by the Parisian society as well the intellectuals. Yet by the 1920s Bergsonism was dying and though its founder received the Nobel Prize in literature in 1928 philosophy had left him behind. His last great work *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* was greeted with a collective yawn and it seemed through the rest of the century that Bergson, like Herbert Spenser who both inspired him and from whom he strongly diverged, would become a curiosity in the history of philosophy, the object mainly of intellectual historians discussing movements in 20th century thought.

Heidegger's reference to Bergson in a footnote in *Being and Time* claims that Bergson's emphasis on time merely reverses Platonism (*Being and Time*, SUNY 416-417). Many of the English language homages to Bergson like Leszek Kolakowski's contribution to Oxford's Past Masters series (1985) or more recently Richard Bilsker's *On Bergson* in Wordsworth's Philosophers Series see Bergson as great teacher but as such a idiosyncratic thinker that his influence could not outlive him. But as interest in James and Royce survived in the United States after analytic philosophy invaded American universities to be reborn the last twenty years there has been a small but steady stream of books and articles on Bergson in France throughout the ages of phenomenology, existentialism, structuralism and post structuralism, which include such classics as Vladimir Jankalevich's *Henri Bergson* and

Gilles Deleuze's *Bergsonism*.

In the anglo-American philosophical universe the well was poisoned by Russell's mis-characterizations of Bergsonian intuition as only working for bees and Bergson. But Bergson lived on in anglo-American thought in Process Philosophy as a forerunner of Whitehead and Hartshorne and in philosophy of science in Milek Capec's *Bergson and Contemporary Physics* (1971) and P.A. Y Gunter's bibliographic work and collection, *Bergson and the Evolution of Physics* (1969). Intellectual histories of Bergson's influence have continued with milestones like A. E. Pilkington's *Bergson and His Influence* (Cambridge, 1976) and more recently, Mark Antliff's fine *Inventing Bergson* (Princeton, 1993). But now at the beginning of a new century Bergsonism is making a comeback on both sides of the channel.

Two giants of contemporary French thought, Gilles Deleuze and Emmanuel Levinas were so heavily influenced by Bergsonian and ready to admit it that it has spawned a resurgence of interest in Bergson in France that has included the publication of Bergson's *Cours* in three volumes by Presses Universitaires de France and Fredic Worms new biography of Bergson, and his commentary on *Matter and Memory*. This interest has managed to cross both the channel and the Atlantic ocean. Kieth Ansell-Pearson has presented a Deleuzian Bergson in *Philosophy and the Adventure of the Virtual* (Routledge, 2002). F.C.T. Moore has Bergson in dialogue with analytic philosophy in *Bergson: Thinking Backwards* (Cambridge, 1996). John Mullarky's *Bergson and Philosophy* (Notre Dame, 2000) is an excellent Bergsonism introduction to Bergson, and his *The New Bergson* (Manchester, 1999) is an important set of essays reintroducing Bergsonism to philosophical debate. Now Leonard Lawlor, Dunavant Distinguished Professor of Philosophy at the University of Memphis, adds his *The Challenge of Bergsonism*.

Lawlor's book is the clearest and most concise of all the new books to appear on Bergson in English. Lawlor presents a Bergson who has inspired contemporary French thought of both the ultimate philosopher of immanence, Deleuze, and the ultimate philosopher of transcendence, Levinas. But he does more than to present Bergson as a forerunner of Deleuze or Levinas. In the three main chapters of *the Challenge of Bergsonism*, Lawlor presents a philosophy that fundamentally challenges three trends in continental philosophy: Phenomenology, Ontology, and Ethics. He focuses on the primary Bergsonian innovation, Duration.

While Bergson defines duration in many waysBmost basically, this book

concerns itself with the concept of duration. It can be summarized in the following formula: duration equals memory plus the absolutely new. (Preface, ix)

This formula implies that Bergsonism is a 'primacy of memory.' Lawlor claims that this primacy of memory is a challenge to phenomenology which is a 'primacy of perception.' Bergson prioritizes memory over any form of imaging, including perception. "In fact, for Bergson, the priority of memory is so extreme that we must say that being is memory" (ix). Even presence is derivative from memory. This is why Bergsonism is also a challenge to ontology. Heidegger is wrong in seeing Bergsonism as a mere reversal of Platonism. Lawlor claims that Bergson "twists free" of the tradition. "He twists free because memory in Bergson is ontological; it gives us a new sense of being; being in terms of the past not in terms of the present, being as the unconscious instead of consciousness" (ix-x). In coming to this conclusion Lawlor says that he has relied heavily on Jean Hyppolite's "*Aspects divers de la memoire chez Bergson*," and he includes it as an appendix in this work. He adds to this another appendix, his own essay, "The Point Where Memory Turns Back into Life: An Investigation of Bergson's *Two Sources of Morality and Religion*."

Lawlor claims that Bergson's thought is not totalizing. In fact he says that the slogan for this book could be "the whole is not given," which Deleuze gives Bergson. Levinas also notes the importance of Bergson for his ideas on alterity. When Bergson attacks the eleatic tradition he criticizes the entire logic of the same and the other (x).

The Bergsonian Challenge to phenomenology comes in the form of Bergson's concept of the image. Matter is images. The first characteristic of the image is that it has extension, objectivity. External things have an order that does not depend on our perceptions. The order of our perceptions depend on extension. For Bergson a thing can be without being perceived (MM 185/35). In this way the image differs from affection which is internal and the lowest degree of subjectivity (MM 205/57, 364/234). But the image also differs from the thing. Bergson writes, "The truth is that there is one, and only one, method of refuting materialism: it is to show that matter is precisely what it appears to be." Bergson calls this a concession to idealism (5). The image is "presence." But contra Derrida this notion of presence is not idealism. Presence for Bergson means only that the image appears to be (5). Lawlor says that we have thus two characteristics of the Bergsonian

image: extension and presence. Bergson avoids both idealism and realism; the image is more than what the idealist calls a representation and less than what the realist calls a thing (9). The image is connected continuously with other images in the whole (10). At this point the body inserts itself as something new in the universe. In my body I discover that constraint does not eliminate choice (11). Bergson says, "Yet there is one image that contrasts with all the others in that I know it not only from the outside by perceptions, but also from the inside by affections: it is my body" (MM169/17). It is known from the inside as affection and the outside as object/thing. Known from the outside it is not radically distinct from the rest of matter which is a continuity of images.

The challenge to ontology consists in the Bergsonian primacy of memory. It is not primarily a philosophy of consciousness but a philosophy of the unconscious, of memory. It is here Lawlor claims that Bergson succeeds not merely in reversing Plato as Heidegger maintained but in twisting free of Platonism. But more than this Lawlor claims that Bergson twists free of ontology (28-9). For Bergson the central difference between perception and memory is that perceptual images are present, actual, and extended while memory images are past, virtual, and unextended (39). The difference between matter and memory is a difference of degree (42).

Bergson first shows the difference between matter and memory, breaking the "synonymy" between consciousness and existence which would have defined all differences as differences of degree of consciousness (43), but then he de-emphasizes the difference by discussing the relation between matter and memory. To explain this Lawlor turns to a discussion of Bergson's famous Cone Image, and it is here that Lawlor claim best illustrates Bergson's "twisting free" of Platonism. It is also a very fine and clear discussion of one of the most difficult passages in *Matter and Memory*. Unlike Plato, Bergson sees more in the mutable than in the immutable. It is precisely when Platonism views the immutable as the real merely because we can talk about it that it becomes false to the world. But so far, like Nietzsche, Bergson has only reversed Platonism. He twists free when he claims that the past exists in itself and not in something else. It is not conserved in the brain which is an image in the whole of images and not the container itself (45). If we must speak of a content and a container the past is the container and the present moment of consciousness is the content (46). What the brain provides is an interval between cause and effect that makes freedom and thinking possible (53). I can evoke and select and insert a memory image into the interval. Thus for Bergson, being is the past: ". . . in truth, every perception is already

memory. *We perceive, practically only the past*, the pure present being the ungraspable progress of the past gnawing into the ‘future’” (MM291/150). When Bergson uses the images of the cone/telscope to describe memory we are not just getting a subjectivism that replaces Platonic objectivism. The memory remembers multiplicities and singulars not universals and identities. In this respect Lawlor claims Bergson has twisted free of Platonism and offered a challenge to ontology (x).

In his final chapter Lawlor moves from *Matter and Memory* to the most neglected of Bergson’s major works, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*. This is an interesting move because *The Two Sources* is usually connected with *Creative Evolution*, and the ideas of habit and creativity in the former are seen as the sources closed and open in the latter. In the final chapter Lawlor moves toward completing a trinity of Bergsonian challenges with a challenge to Levinasian ethics because the Levinasian experience of the face is bound to a sort of linguistic immediacy, “the trace” (61). Thus Levinas, like Derrida, prioritizes language over intuition. For Bergson any philosophy that bases itself in language is relative and mediate because language is social and societies are established to satisfy needs of adaptation. Only intuition can give us “the immediate data of consciousness.” Lawlor thinks this brings Bergson closer to Deleuze who has no discourse of alterity (62). Prioritizing language over intuition leads to a philosophy of transcendence; prioritizing intuition over language leads to a philosophy of immanence.

But having said this he backs off the idea of a Bergsonian challenge to ethics saying this opposition is only a suspicion because of the “immense influence” of Bergson over Levinas (62), i.e. Bergson’s enormous presence in *Time and the Other* and Levinas’ use of *élan vital* as fecundity. He thinks that we can reach Levinas’ philosophy from Bergson by interpreting duration on the basis of the love Bergson describes in the two sources. So unlike Deleuze who sees Bergson as a philosopher of immanence, precisely because he focuses on *Matter and Memory*, Lawlor thinks that finally we may have to see Bergson as a philosopher of transcendence rather than a philosopher of immanence, and this is one of the most interesting claims in the book and the significance of connecting *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* with *Matter and Memory* rather than *Creative Evolution*. *The Two Sources* pushes us to rethink the relation of transcendence and immanence.

Lawlor proceeds to a discussion of Bergsonian intuition, and, for an Anglo-American audience still poisoned by Bertand Russell mangling of Bergsonian intuition, Lawlor’s concise discussion is the proper antidote. Intuition is not instinct, and it is not feeling, which comes too easy. Bergson

repudiated facility. Intuition for Bergson required intelligence and effort which is why Bergson calls it a method: All intellectual activity begins with intuition (64). Bergson contrasted intuition with the socialization of truth which, as for Nietzsche, is associated with survival and the social. This socialization is what gives us closed morality and religion but also Platonism. Thus Bergson would in this sense agree with Nietzsche's famous dictum that "Christianity is Platonism for the masses" (70).

Lawlor argues that the right word to characterize duration is immanence (82). I think there is a problem here as there is in his claim that Bergson is ultimately a monist. Lawlor recognizes as much when he admits that Bergson may be a philosopher of transcendence. For though Lawlor is certainly right that duration is the ownmost basis of everything in Bergsonism. Bergson also reminds us that time if it is anything at all is creation, and it is creation of difference. Thus despite Lawlor's Deleuzian bias in his interpretation of Bergson, it is apparent why interest in Bergson has reawakened through the interest in Deleuze the philosopher of immanence and Levinas the philosopher of transcendence. Bergson is also a process thinker.

In a recent essay Roland Faber ("De-Ontologizing God: Whitehead, Deleuze, and Levinas," in Katherine Keller and Anne Daniell, eds. *Process and Difference: Between Cosmological and Poststructuralist Postmodernism*, SUNY, 2002) has characterized Whitehead as an eschatological thinker who unites certain elements of Deleuze and Levinas. Faber notes that God does not exist for Whitehead but "insists" eschatologically on the fringe of the relation of the transcendent and immanent. The paradox of creativity and created immanence can only be solved eschatologically as beyond their difference. Faber calls this "expressive in/difference." This is not a third reality but the expression of the in/difference of the difference between the two worlds and their ultimates. God does not "exist" but rather "insists" in the need for reintegration that figures eschatologically beyond presence. One might say the same of Bergson. Lawlor intimates this in his discussion at the beginning of his chapter on the Bergsonian challenge to ethics by hesitating in his interpretation of Levinas' relation to Bergson, to say that Bergsonism would challenge Levinasian ethics but rather that it is suspicious of a pure transcendence. I think that this is correct, and this certainly would relate to a Bergsonian suspicion of Levinas' affirmation of ex nihilo creation. For Bergson, as Lawlor points to in his evaluation of Bergsonism as a philosophy of immanence, change in duration is both quantitative and qualitative. The other is not simply other.