

## The Possible in the Life and Work of Henri Bergson

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### ABSTRACT

Henri Bergson (1859-1941) contributed major philosophical works on time, consciousness, evolution and morality. His thinking remains central to debates on fundamental issues within philosophy and social science, particular around 'process ontology'. Bergson's work was of enormous influence to early twentieth century social science, and seen a resurgence in the twenty first century. This is in part due to the reception of Gilles Deleuze's work, which engaged extensively with Bergson. In this entry, we focus on Bergson's treatment of the relationship between 'the possible' and 'the real'. Bergson inverts the Platonic organization of these terms, where the real is constituted by the selection of ideal forms of possible. Bergson argues that this makes it impossible to understand how 'unforseeable novelty' might emerge in the world. The possible is instead a 'mirage' retrospectively posited as prior to the real. This treatment is part of a broader project of overcoming metaphysical mistakes which consist in seeing one philosophical terms as adding fullness and positivity to another. In its place, Bergson offers an account of life as dynamic, autopoietic emergence. In the final part of the entry we describe how an engagement with Bergson can afford social science approaches to memory, imagination and lived experience as emergent patternings of life responding to life.

### INTRODUCTION

Henri Bergson (1859-1941) was arguably the pre-eminent French philosopher of the early twentieth century. Beginning with *Time and Free Will* (1889[2001]), Bergson worked extensively on a philosophical treatment of time that sought to decouple it from a confused notion of spatiality. This project led Bergson towards important contributions in rethinking fundamental questions of consciousness, perception and representation. For example, *Matter and Memory* (1896[1991]) offers a bold account of experience from the perspective of duration – Bergson's non-spatial conception of time. Here the notion that consciousness presides over and elaborates representations of reality is demonstrated to be an illusion that masks the dynamic way in which experience is an emergent property of a distributed network of components that includes brains,

bodies and worldly materials. By *Creative Evolution* (1907[1998]), Bergson had firmly placed psychological questions within a broader ontology centred around the *élan vital*, the creative unfolding of life through its myriad actualised forms. His final work *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* (1935[1977]) provided a long-promised contribution to moral philosophy which linked the development of human relations to a broader process ontology of intersecting open and closed systems.

The breadth and significance of his work was widely acknowledged within his lifetime. William James engaged deeply with his work, and the reciprocal influences between these two thinkers of 'radical empiricism' are clear (see James, 1909; Bergson 1992; 2002). From 1900, Bergson held the prestigious Chair in Ancient Philosophy at the Collège de France, before transferring to the Chair of Modern Philosophy in 1904. His public lectures at the Collège were 'must-see' events for both intellectuals and fashionable high society (see Lundy, 2018: 2). When Bergson visited the University of Oxford in 1911 and Columbia University, New York in 1913 there was widely reported talk of a 'Bergson craze' and 'the Bergson Cult' (McGrath, 2013). Given this, it is not surprising that Bergson's influence is to be found not only within philosophy, but also upon the majority of the major thinkers in psychology and other social sciences of the time. Jean Piaget, for instance, experienced reading Bergson as a 'profound revelation' that knowledge and morality were immanent to life itself (Vidal, 1994). Although politically and institutionally often opposed, Émile Durkheim's work shares many of Bergson's concerns to overcome the imprecision of conceptual analysis and with placing epistemological questions within an immanent account of the emergence of sociality (Lefebvre & White, 2010). Famously, Maurice Halbwachs' (1980; 1992) groundbreaking work on collective memory was an attempt to navigate a course between the intellectual poles of Bergsonism and Durkheimian sociology.

Yet Bergson's influence was to wane. By the middle of the century, Bergson's work had fallen out of favour, with his actual works often dismissed by drawing upon the caricatured ideas of popularised Bergsonism (Lundy, 2018). In part, this is because many of Bergson's claims – such as the idea of 'retroactive possibility' – are highly obscure when considered outside of the complex weave of his thinking. This has led to the unfortunate situation where those of Bergson's contemporaries and successors whose ideas were in dialogue with his own have become similarly misunderstood. For example, Mary Douglas' introduction to the English version of Halbwachs' *La Mémoire collective* (1950[1980]) claims that the work is entirely in opposition to Bergson despite Halbwachs' account

of experience as a resonance between group members whose intelligibility relies substantively on Bergsonian notions of multiplicity and overlapping durations (see Middleton & Brown, 2005).

The late twentieth century was marked with a surprising resurgence of interest in Bergson. This was largely driven by the work of Gilles Deleuze, who wrote and thought extensively with Bergson, principally in the monograph *Bergsonism* (1966[1991]) and the two volumes of *Cinema* (1983[1986]; 1985[1989]). More broadly, several of the most significant concepts and themes in Deleuze's philosophy can be traced back to his engagement with Bergson, including the virtual/actual and multiplicity (Lundy 2018), which has in turn compelled scholars working on and with Deleuze to rediscover Bergson. While it is common for Bergsonians to remark that Deleuze's reading of Bergson is unorthodox if not unfaithful (see Gunter 2009), there is no denying that this conduit has led to a renaissance of engagement with Bergson's philosophy. In so doing, Bergson has come to be recognised as occupying a pivotal place within what can be loosely called 'process thought' – a category that typically includes thinkers such as Alfred North Whitehead, William James, Gilbert Simondon, Isabelle Stengers and Deleuze himself.

Many of the conceptual challenges of understanding Bergson's unique vision around themes such as possibility, creativity, intuition and memory become far more tractable within a 'process ontology' of emergence, multiplicity and distribution. For example, much of the confusion around Bergson's so-called 'psychologism' arises from confusion around how he uses the term 'intuition'. This is usually understood as a form of knowing that arises within the individual, based on the prior experience rather than formal knowledge. But Bergson neither treats consciousness as synonymous with a self-contained psychological subject, nor restricts experience to a purely psychological or individualistic usage. Intuition is primarily a form of relationality within duration itself, rather than between clearly defined subjects and objects. Similarly, Bergson's notion of memory cannot be apportioned between the terms 'individual' or 'collective' but is better understood in process terms as the dynamic re-invention of the past in present action that momentarily actualises or recreates relations between 'subjects' and 'objects' in the course of its emergence.

### **BERGSON ON 'THE POSSIBLE' AND 'THE REAL'**

To understand Bergson's treatment of the possible, it is first necessary to engage with the broader metaphysical arguments at work in his philosophy, in particular the relationship between 'the possible' and 'the real'. The notion of the possible plays an enormously important role in shaping

experience. It is used by conscious actors on a regular basis to navigate and make sense of reality, from the mundane planning of daily activities to our more grandiose reflections on the future and the past, both personal and collective. But what is the nature of the possible and possibilities, and how does this differ from that which has been 'realised'?

It is commonplace to think of the possible and possibilities in a Platonic fashion, whereby the various possibilities of what could occur (or might have) exist in an 'ideal form', some of which will be (or were) selected. In contrast to this orthodoxy, Henri Bergson claims that the possible is merely "the mirage of the present in the past" (1992: 101). Given that this comment goes against the 'common sense' understanding of the possible, accepting Bergson's position will be immensely challenging; but if he is correct then major implications ensue for how we conceive of life and reality – implications that could impact not only our cosmological understanding but also everyday existence.

In 1920 Bergson delivered a lecture at Oxford titled "The Possible and the Real". As he notes at the beginning of this lecture, Bergson's thoughts on the possible are a by-product of his other investigations on the nature of time, freedom, action and creativity. The shared concern of these other studies is stated by Bergson as follows: "the continuous creation of unforeseeable novelty which seems to be going on in the universe" (1992: 91). Put in simple terms, Bergson is of the view that the future is open and cannot be reduced to what currently exists. Moreover, the movement of reality is one of "global and undivided growth, progressive invention, duration: it resembles a gradually expanding rubber balloon assuming at each moment unexpected forms" (1992: 96).<sup>1</sup> As this image suggests, reality and its experience does not involve charting a path through a multitude of ideal options that are sequentially selected. Instead, reality *unfurls* itself in time and space. When this happens, it is not as if the universe increasingly fills up an absolute vacuum, for there is no void beyond the universe that pre-dates its reality. In the same way, presuming that possibilities pre-date their realisation would involve postulating a metaphysical framework in which 'all is given' and

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<sup>1</sup> See also the opening of *Creative Evolution*, where Bergson says: [T]here is no feeling, no idea, no volition which is not undergoing change every moment: if a mental state ceased to vary, its duration would cease to flow. Let us take the most stable of internal states, the visual perception of a motionless external object. The object may remain the same, I may look at it from the same side, at the same angle, in the same light; nevertheless the vision I now have of it differs from that which I have just had, even if only because the one is an instant older than the other. My memory is there, which conveys something of the past into the present. My mental state, as it advances on the road of time, is continually swelling with the duration which it accumulates: it goes on increasing—rolling upon itself, as a snowball on the snow. [. . .] The truth is that we change without ceasing, and that the state itself is nothing but change. (1998: 1-2)

time does nothing, since the future on such a schema essentially becomes nothing more than a complicated combination of what currently exists. An epistemology that assumes the pre-existence of ideal possibilities is thus incompatible with a metaphysics that allows for genuine change and the emergence of the new.

To flesh out this point Bergson recounts a conversation in which he was asked to predict the future possible direction of literature. It is mistaken, he says in response, to conceive of future works “as being already stored up in some cupboard reserved for possibles” (1992: 100). Instead, “the work of which you speak is not yet possible. [...] I grant you, at most, that it *will have been possible*”, for it is only once the work of art has been created that it is real, “and by that very fact it becomes retrospectively or retroactively possible” (1992: 100). Bergson is quick to qualify here that he is not advocating a theory of reverse causality, in which the present ontologically produces the past; it is the possible that is placed in the past, not the real. Possibility, therefore, does not precede reality, if one means by this that the possible exists prior to the real. Rather, something becomes possible only once it is real, but when this occurs the possible is retrospectively posited as being prior to the real, so that the possible “will have preceded [the real] once the reality has appeared” (1992: 101).

We can now start to see how the possible for Bergson is a ‘trick of the mind’, an epistemological illusion derived from a false metaphysics. When something occurs it is natural for the intellect to surmise that it was possible for that thing to occur before it indeed occurred. However, just because the possible is retrospectively posited by the mind as preceding the real does not mean that possibilities *prospectively* pre-exist a reality that will come to be (or not). When something occurs, we know for a fact that it was possible to occur. But it does not follow from this that we can know what might possibly occur in the future. Between these two configurations are two different senses or kinds of possibility. In the first case, ‘possible’ is said in the sense that “there was no insurmountable obstacle to its realisation” – i.e. it was not impossible – and “this non-impossibility of a thing is the condition of its realisation” (1992: 102). This ‘negative’ sense of possibility, however, is quite distinct from the more ‘positive’ sense in which the form of possibilities are ideally pre-existent: “If you close the gate you know no one will cross the road; it does not follow that you can predict who will cross when you open it” (1992: 102).

As this quote indicates, Bergson’s critique of the possible is more exactly a critique of the ‘positive’ sense of the possible that is commonly employed, whereby one imagines various ideal forms of

reality before they become reality (or fail to). His claim is that such images are reflections of the real, of the reality that already exists, just as the image of a person in the mirror is a reflection of a real person, not a possible one lacking reality. The 'positive' notion of the possible supposes that there are various distinct options laid out before us, like hollowed outlines, one or some of which will "become reality by the addition of something, by some transfusion of blood or life" (1992: 101). But this manner of thinking is wrongheaded – or to be more precise, it involves a confusion of the 'more' with the 'less'. Contrary to the suggestion that the real is the possible with existence or being added to it, Bergson contends that there is more in the possible than in the real. In his words:

[T]he possible implies the corresponding reality with, moreover, something added, since the possible is the combined effect of reality once it has appeared and of a condition which throws it back in time. The idea immanent in most philosophies and natural to the human mind, of possibles which would be realised by an acquisition of existence, is therefore pure illusion. One might as well claim that the man in flesh and blood comes from the materialization of his image seen in the mirror, because in that real man is everything found in this virtual image with, in addition, the solidity which makes it possible to touch it. But the truth is that more is needed here to obtain the virtual than is necessary for the real, more for the image of the man than for the man himself, for the image of the man will not be portrayed if the man is not first produced, and in addition one has to have the mirror. (1992: 101-102)

The confusion of the more and the less, as it turns out, lies at the heart of several other metaphysical mistakes identified by Bergson. It would appear obvious to many that there is *less* in nothing than something, *less* in disorder than order, but Bergson argues that the converse is the case: "there is more intellectual content in the ideas of disorder and nothingness when they represent something than in those of order and existence, because they imply several orders, several existences and, in addition, a play of wit which unconsciously juggles with them" (1992: 99). If it is often assumed that there is more in something than nothing – more in order than disorder, and more in the real than the possible – it is because we have a tendency to start in the wrong place. If one starts with nothing, or with nonbeing, then it would seem self-evident that a thing or being is more than nothing or nonbeing. A simple glance at these words written down on paper, however, alerts us to Bergson's point: the word 'nonbeing' is based on the word 'being', it is 'being' with three letters tacked on the front, just as 'nothing' is 'thing' + 'no'. What this indicates is that nothingness and nonbeing, as with

disorder and the possible, are all predicated on something, some being, order or reality. There is thus more in nonbeing than being, more in nothingness than existence, and more in the possible than the real, for in each case the former relies on the latter, along with the idea of negation and the mind that abstractly posits it. The real, in short, comes first, and if there is such a thing as possibility, “it is the real which makes itself possible, and not the possible which becomes real” (1992: 104).

### **A BERGSONIAN SOCIAL SCIENCE OF THE POSSIBLE?**

In the televised dramatization of M.R James’ short ghost story *Whistle and I’ll come to you, my lad* by Jonathan Miller, the central character, Parkin, a Cambridge Professor vacationing at a seaside guest house, is challenged by another guest to apply his philosophy to explain the supernatural with the rhetorical statement ‘But there are more things in heaven and earth than in your philosophy’. With some amusement, Parkin replies ‘I would prefer to put it a different way - there are more things in philosophy than are dreamt of in heaven and earth’. Parkin might be seen as a caricature of a philosopher such as Bergson who develops a complex and convoluted metaphysics to explain the nature of existence. But this belies the extent to which Bergson is, above all else, a philosopher who is attuned to ‘lived experience’. For Bergson, philosophy must follow the contours of life in its emergence. We must not be forced to make the choice into which Parkin is lured between the focusing on either the actions we take as part of worldly engagements or the philosophical discourse in which they are to be understood. Rather philosophy must be cut from the cloth of living, lest its concepts become akin to a ‘pile’ of ‘ready-made garments’ which are placed on life (Bergson, 1992: 175). Bergson’s account of possibility is a systematic attempt to understand lived experience as an emerging, self-organizing pattern which is not determined by pre-existing possibilities, but rather articulates the conditions of its own emergence retroactively in the process of constituting itself. But in so doing, we intuit that the pattern of our unfolding lived experience is accompanied by a virtual image that shows that there are other potential patterns, that the actuality of living creates its own sense of the possible.

The challenge of Bergson’s thinking is to develop an account of social action and psychological life in these terms as emergent patterns rather than the reproduction or realisation of pre-existing possibilities. A major obstacle to this is the deeply ingrained tendency within social science to begin with a ‘substance’ account of particular matters in hand. For instance, much social theory remains committed to the idea that there is something like a ‘generative mechanism’ that underpins both

social structures and individual agents, which is ultimately responsible for the particular forms that they take. Similarly, psychological theorising typically relies upon a notion of the subject or self that becomes progressively realised through its actions. But for Bergson, there is no mechanism or 'thing' that presides over actions other than the self-generating forms that express the dynamic of the *élan vital*. As he puts it we must grasp that 'there is *more* in a movement than in the successive positions attributed to the moving object' (1998: 316) and treat lived experience as rooted in a reality which 'no longer appears as finite or infinite, but simply as indefinite. It flows without our being able to say whether it is in a single direction, or even whether it is always and throughout the same river flowing' (1992: 211).

Clearly this raises significant challenges to forms of social science which treat identity and continuity over time as grounded in a substance ontology. The psychology of memory, for example, classically views past and future from the perspective of a present that consists of the automatic storing of present moments into organized memories, which in turn informs the anticipation of future presents which are in the process of being realised (see Middleton & Brown, 2005). Whilst the field has moved on considerably from the 'storehouse' model which Bergson so thoroughly critiqued in *Matter and Memory*, it still relies upon some notion of there being an agent, in the form of a set of bounded processes that ultimately map onto patterns of neural activation, which underpin experience. This is yet another instantiation of the idea that life gains its fullness in the present moment, which is harvested from an admixture of realised past possibilities and vague futures hitherto lacking in content. Only the present moment is truly 'real'. Whilst the approach seems to overcome the apparent vagueness of the notion of the real as akin to a river which is neither 'finite nor indefinite' and never identical to itself, it substitutes for it endless conceptual puzzles, such as the difficulty of defining the limits of the present moment, the point at which the past has been successfully restored (i.e. when memory is recollected) and the future properly arrives (i.e. when imagination becomes reality).

The alternative which Bergson offers is to begin analysis by thinking in terms of time rather than space. Duration, or time as it is lived, is fundamentally indivisible. It is not possible to clearly distinguish the present from the future into which life is becoming, nor the past from which it emerges, in the same way that the listener of a piece of music is not fixated on a particular note or sound, but instead caught up in the passage of the music unfolding. The river example is only confusing when it is thought in terms of defined spatial categories – this section and that section –

whereas from the perspective of time, the reality of the river as flowing in ways that are neither entirely determined nor undetermined is clear. Identity comes from the particular manner of its flowing, rather than a homology between different spatially organised parts. The alternative which Bergson provides is to affirm that memory and imagination – the two terms essential to thinking the real and the possible – are fundamentally temporal categories which require treatment as such rather than being confused with space. For instance, it is possible to conceive of variations of speed and rhythm in relation to memory, recollections that emerge slowly or those that appear almost instantaneously, those that routinely punctuate our daily lives versus those that arise only irregularly (Brown & Reavey, 2015). Similarly, imagination could be considered in terms akin to the ‘varieties’ of experience to which William James referred, where some forms of imagination overlap with or interrupt one another, whilst others diverge.

Thinking in time overcomes some of the tendencies to bind experience to a particular spatially defined ‘thing’ (e.g. agent, structure, person, other). The timing of lived experience is never entirely determined by the ‘subject’ of that experience, it is intertwined with and shaped by a multitude of timings. For example, human lived experience is composed of an array of rhythms and cycles including biological (e.g. circadian, nutritive, respiratory), psychological (e.g. perceptual, affective, attentional) and social (e.g. clock-time, the working day, age markers) which interact with one another to create complex and often conflicting patterns of temporal flow. Indeed, it is precisely in order to manage these tensions within living time, Bergson argues, that we have learned to objectify time as space. Breaking experience into distinct segments – a process Bergson refers to as the ‘cinematographic mechanism of thought’ – allows for a form of practical mastery over the world. The objectification of nutritive cycles into distinct ‘meal-times’ allows them to be managed in a way not unrelated to the way that the organization of the working day allows for maximum value-extraction from labour. Frederic Worms (2017) argues that Bergson’s work demonstrates a tension between the ‘critical’ (the establishing of limits and distinctions) and the ‘vital’ (the emergent patterning of life). Life is not unconstrained, but is always responding to variations formed within and between the actions of living organisms – ‘life responds to life’ (see Brown & Reavey, 2019). An analysis of memory and imagination needs to grasp the ways in which lived experience becomes objectified within its emergence.

Middleton & Brown’s (2005) work develops a social psychological approach to remembering in this way by inverting the problem of memory. They argue that from the perspective of Bergsonian

duration, the retention of memories is a non-problem. If duration is indivisible, then the past is never disconnected from the present, it does not 'go anywhere'. What instead requires analysis is the ways in which the entirety of the past does not weigh at every moment on current actions. In other words, it is the setting aside or provisional 'forgetting' of the past that needs to be understood. Whilst Middleton & Brown's analysis draws extensively on the Bergson's account of needs as guiding this selection of memories, they turn to Halbwachs for concepts to describe the 'projecting', 'collecting' and 'objectifying' of experience in material forms. In a similar fashion, Stenner's (2018) work on imagination and fabulation draws heavily upon Bergson's account in *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*. The problem, for Stenner is to understand how liminal experiences, the moments 'betwixt and between' distinct phases of psychosocial life, are managed during the process of their transition. To undergo such transition is to find oneself between a past that is in the process of withdrawing and a future that has not yet properly arrived. Transitions are always risky, a potential threat to psychological wellbeing and social cohesion. Stenner describes how Bergson deals with this issue by splitting the category of imagination into two distinct processes. One is that of 'myth-making' or 'fabulation', which involves the creation of 'false images' that have such apparent solidity that they create a bridge across the liminal phase. The other is a form of creative 'mysticism' that invent new and dynamic images that transform the nature of the division between past and future. This creates a contrast between an active or open form of imagination, and a more passive or closed form. Whilst this enables Stenner to point towards different modes of engaging with liminality, he turns towards Whitehead for a conceptual vocabulary to clarify the ways in which experience is objectified in the dynamic relationship between these two forms of imagination. The outcome of both of these approaches is that when developing social science applications of 'thinking in time', Bergson's work is usefully augmented by turning toward other thinkers.

To conclude, the key elements of building upon Bergson's account of the possible and the real are as follows. Analysis needs to be closely fitted to the forms of lived experience that require understanding. The method to achieve this outcome is thinking from the perspective of time rather than spatiality, and correspondingly, the process of creation rather than what is created. Possibility is treated as retroactively constituted in the process of action rather than the conditions upon which it is realised. There is always 'more' in the virtual image than in the actuality which it reflects. Past and future are not divided from present, but are aspects of its emergence, and as such are no less real, although they do not have a causal relationship to current actions. Imagination and memory are two descriptions of the process of intuiting the emergent patterning of lived experience. Whilst

lived experience is continuously objectified as part its emergence, this does not halt or divide the process. Rather, experience is itself the perpetual process of creative emergence and self-objectifying as life responds to life.

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