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Review essay

New Bergsons

John Mullarkey. *Bergson and Philosophy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 206 pp. ISBN 0 7486 0957 1 (paperback), US$20; Keith Ansell Pearson, *Philosophy and the Adventure of the Virtual : Bergson and the Time of Life* (London: Routledge, 2002), 246 pp. ISBN 0 415 23727 0 (cloth), US$90, 0 415 23728 9 (paperback), US$27.95; Leonard Lawlor, *The Challenge of Bergson: Phenomenology, Ontology, Ethics* (New York: Continuum, 2003), 153 pp. ISBN 0 8264 6802 0 (cloth), US$73.50, 0 8264 6803 9 (paperback), US$24.95; John Mullarkey, ed., *The New Bergson* [Angelaki Humanities] (New York: Manchester University Press, 1999), 235 pp. ISBN 0 7190 5380 3 (cloth), US$69.95; 0 7190 5553 9 (paperback), US$29.95; John Mullarkey and Keith Ansell Pearson, eds., *Bergson: Key Writings* [Athlone Contemporary European Thinkers], trans. Melissa McMahon (New York: Continuum, 2002), 402 pp. ISBN 0 8264 5728 2 (cloth), US$99.95, 0 8264 5729 0 (paperback), US$33.95.

A young acquaintance recently suggested to this reviewer a plausible explanation of the marginalization of Bergson by mid and late twentieth-century philosophy. Let us assume there is somewhere a Grand Archive of Philosophy. A visitor going down one of its somber hallways comes to a door marked "Bergson." Under the name there are three words: Intuition, Elan Vital, Mysticism. It is hard to think of three words less welcome in contemporary thought. The visitor, reading them, goes immediately elsewhere, his impression of Bergson now firmly established.

If there is one agreement among all authors reviewed here, it is that the by now typical impression of Bergson's philosophy needs to be replaced by a fresh look and a deeper understanding. If this is the goal, it is clear that, jointly, they have achieved it. Not surprisingly, in doing so they develop differing interpretations. Such differences, which are in any case partial, actually serve to strengthen the underlying thesis. That is, before we presume to understand the French intuitionist, we should not merely take a fresh look: we should understand that there are real grounds for

divergent views of his thought. For those who want a single axiomatized system of truth, this is unfortunate. For others it comes as a breath of fresh air.

There have been many books titled *Bergson's Philosophy*. John Mullarkey's study is titled, by contrast, *Bergson and Philosophy*. The author contends not only that one finds in Bergson a series of differing philosophies but that his thought can be considered a metaphilosophy as well as a philosophy *per se*. On both counts the author is able to provide strong evidence. Bergson often said that each of his studies required not only a new effort on his part but a "forgetting" of previous positions. Mullarkey is able to show that the philosophy found in *Matter and Memory* is significantly different from that found in Bergson's first work, *Time and Free Will*, while the positions taken in his next work, *Creative Evolution*, must not be conflated with the views developed in *Matter and Memory*. The author performs a real service here. Many of the worst mistakes made in interpreting Bergson's thought arise from, for example, reading *Time and Free Will* and then assuming that the views of duration, knowledge, space, and creativity proposed there are the same as those expressed throughout his work. Such an approach is common, particularly since readers are very likely to skip over *Matter and Memory*, his most difficult, yet central, study.

Equally essential to Mullarkey's interpretation is his contention that in Bergson nothing is reduced to anything. Each being (i.e. each particular thing) is exactly what it is without its being superduced into some being "above" it or reduced to entities on a "lower" level. Bergson in this not only appears as an anti-foundational philosopher: he is the arch anti-reductionist. There is in this interpretation more than a hint of the standpoint developed by Thomas Nagel in *The View From Nowhere*, but the analogy is not forced.

Such an interpretation leads to the view that for the author of *Creative Evolution* philosophy must always involve a continual reflection on itself. Hence philosophy must be forever "unstable." Mullarkey, in describing Bergson's thought, concentrates particularly on terms like *durée*, dichotomy, dissociation, and *élan* (while stressing the dualism that pervades all stages in Bergson's thinking). Mullarkey concludes:

> Now we have learnt that not one of these terms is the key. Because this dualism really should be read as a metaphilosophical dualisation: the perpetual reflection of philosophy on itself; a self-reference which must first engender paradox and then, not a fall into relativism or a rejection of metaphysics but a new level of philosophical vocabulary. Philosophy in evolution. Remember that Bergson advises that his own concepts such as *durée* and qualitative multiplicity must eventually be superseded. Such linguistic supersession is not simply a question of avoiding a fall into platitudes

> and rigid associations; rather, he says, it is essential that we continue to create new concepts instead of simply new names for old concepts (185).

Because logical essences mutate, the author insists, philosophy is about creating the right expression. Even where it achieves valid, even profound, insights, the task of philosophy is unending. We thus have an actually living philosophy.

Pearson's *Philosophy and the Adventure of the Virtual* is the sequel to his *Viroid Life* (1997) and *Germinal Life* (1999), both deeply involved with the thought of Gilles Deleuze. Where Mullarkey stresses the plurality essential to Bergson and the metaphilosophical tenor of his thought, Pearson everywhere stresses the centrality of the concept of the virtual. If Bergson makes a persistent use of this slippery concept, Pearson notes, for Deleuze it is, somewhat by contrast, absolutely basic. It is Deleuze's synonym for being. *Philosophy and the Adventure of the Virtual* is an extremely complex study, which is difficult to sum up. For brevity's sake "The Being of Memory and the Time of the Self" (the last chapter) will be examined here. This move has three virtues. This chapter is centered in the ideas of *Matter and Memory*, avoiding any fixation on *Time and Free Will*. It demonstrates beyond question how deeply Deleuze is dependent on Bergson's thought in the shaping of his own. And it both completes and sums up the explorations of the author's preceding chapters.

Pearson's analysis of Bergson's concepts of memory, perception, representation, and matter is both accurate and suggestive. In dealing with Bergson's concept of the virtual, however, the author gradually develops a viewpoint that diverges in significant ways from Bergson's. That is, he imposes Deleuze's "transcendental empiricism" on a Bergsonian foundation. Transcendental arguments, Kantian or other, attempt to show how some phenomenon is possible by detailing its preconditions. In Deleuze's case they are taken as showing that in order for Bergson's empirical psychology to function as it does, there must be fundamental "forms," ontological and not empirical, that structure it. Among these are the pure past (sometimes termed the "past in general"), the transcendental form of time (analogous to "eternity"); the virtual form of memory, and, of course, "virtuality." The virtual, which the author claims unites all of Bergson's thinking, contrasts sharply with the actual and refers to dynamic multiplicity. The transcendental form of time is thinkable as pure temporality, and as virtual, spanning the past and present (and even, in some sense, the future). It always is and, if it somehow were stripped away, there would be no temporality at all.

Pearson shifts from Bergson's "organic" temporality to a "crystal image" of time. The fullness of Bergsonian duration is transformed into an abstract

peculiarly formal temporality, which moves through a transformed philosophical landscape. In this new temporality subjectivity is "no longer ours," is never completely actual, and in the last analysis is forever "out of joint" and even "pathological." Though Pearson insists that Deleuze always sides with Bergson against Sartre, it is hard not to see a close similarity here between the endlessly fragmenting and deforming Sartrean temporality and the out of joint Deleuzean empty form of time. The author ends his study by trying to show how through this standpoint time itself can be redeemed. The reviewer admits to being puzzled as to just how this is done.

Leonard Lawlor's *The Challenge of Bergson*, like Mullarkey's and Pearson's studies, takes Bergson's philosophy as a challenge to contemporary philosophy. In Lawlor's case this challenge is threefold: to phenomenology, to ontology, and to ethics.

The challenge to phenomenology is centered primarily on the views of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, secondarily on those of Edmund Husserl. The study of memory and pure perception demonstrates that where for phenomenology presence is "presence to consciousness" or (Derrida's phrase) "self-proximity in consciousness", for Bergson spirit is primarilty unconsciousness and, also, is "deduced from" matter. (That is, in perception there is no conscious synthesis of the object, but instead a shaping of it to fit our practical needs.)

Lawlor's second chapter deals with ontology and is a response to Martin Heidegger, who proclaims that Bergson's philosophy is merely an inversion of Plato's, and as such can have no satisfactory concept of being. The author shows through a meticulous analysis of Bergson's concept of memory that though Bergson does invert Plato's philosophy, stressing change over timelessness, he also transforms many of Plato's basic concepts. In this inversion he arrives not at subjectivism but realism. Also, Bergsonian "reminiscence" is, unlike Plato's, not the recollection of essences known in a prior existence but the awareness of a past in general. Bergson's notion of "essence" consists in a vision of singularities. The Platonic sun is replaced, so to speak, by a Milky Way. Hence Bergson inverts but, to use Heidegger's phrase, "twists free" of Plato. We can thus find being in Bergson. It is memory.

The third chapter of *The Challenge of Bergson* is an indirect confrontation with Levinas. Levinas (like Derrida) the author protests, prioritizes language over intuition. The result is stress on transcendence and "alterity." Bergson (like Deleuze) stresses immanence and "alteration." The pages here in which Lawlor explores Bergson's philosophy of language are of great value, casting clear light on a subject rarely discussed. The import of this central distinction between Bergson and Levinas emerges in Appendix 1 (pp. 84–111), which is really this study's fourth chapter. Here the author aptly parallels the theses of *Matter and Memory* with those of Bergson's *The Two*

Sources of Morality and Religion, showing how the phenomenon of religion can be construed as a "turning of memory back into life." The basic alteration sought here is the turning of the human war instinct away from war: no minor "alteration."

The author ends his study with a translation by Athena V. Coleman of Jean Hyppolite's "Various Aspects of Memory in Bergson" (1949) to which the author confesses a significant debt. The presentation of previously untranslated Bergsoniana also appears in the two collections to be discussed below.

In his introduction to *The New Bergson* John Mullarkey notes that this collection could as well be titled *The New Bergsons*, since the fertility of Bergson's ideas has even in this anthology spawned numerous contrasting readings. These readings are classified under five different headings: history and method, ontology, mind, life, and art. Cross-classifications are possible. Essays on ecology, on the philosophy of science, on the idea of memory, and translations of works on or by Bergson could also be singled out. The reviewer will pick and choose between various of these.

Mullarkey offers two translations, one of Bergson himself, the other of Gilles Deleuze. A 1911 letter from Bergson to John Dewey (translated and annotated by Ryu Jiseok) shows Bergson's knowledge of John Dewey's thought and of the depth of Dewey's critique of *Matter and Memory.* A 1958 article by Gilles Deleuze, "Bergson's Concept of Difference" (translated by Melissa McMahon) portrays the extent to which Deleuze found Bergson's notions of the virtual, difference, differentiation, and intuition congenial. Here is strong evidence of the extent of Bergson's influence on Deleuze.

Three essays belong to the philosophy of science. Timothy S. Murphy's "Beneath Relativity: Bergson and Bohm on Absolute Time" is a confrontation of Bergson's critique of the relativistic concept of multiple times with recent discoveries concerning "nonlocal" phenomena (Bell's Theorem and its implications). Research by David Bohm and, independently, by Ilya Prigogine and others, reintroduces temporality into physics on the deepest level, making possible the acceptance of Bergson's universal temporality. "Magic," by F.C.T. Moore, finds in *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* an interpretation of magical practices that simultaneously frees us from the concept of a so-called "primitive mentality" and from spurious evolutionary and functionalist explanations. Our experience of ordinary human responses to our world, Moore holds, furnishes us with a basis for understanding the human propensity for magic. It also can ground a fruitful research program. Pearson's "Bergson and Creative Evolution/Involution" is a very accurate and insightful analysis of Bergsonian evolutionary theory, which is closer to many trends in contemporary evolutionary thought (complexity, autopoeisis) than might be thought. In the end he wishes to remake

Bergson's evolutionism, relieving it of any vestiges of "perfectionism" or of "teleology."

If Bergson has not often been thought a serious philosopher of science, his work has typically been thought appropriate to the arts. The essays here focused on his aesthetic theories take quite different approaches. Mark Antliff's "The Rythms of Duration: Bergson and the Art of Matisse" shows the extent of Bergson's influence, particularly on the pre-World War I painting of Matisse and, importantly, how it was possible for Bergson's aesthetics to have this influence. "Bergson and Cinema: Friends or Foes?" by Paul Douglass, comes to grips with the contested congruence between Bergson's philosophy and motion pictures, a possibility brilliantly developed by Deleuze in *Cinema 1*. Bergson's views on cinema, Douglass shows, are many-sided. Cinema, if it expands our reach, may distort our experience, and certainly does not simultaneously expand our grasp. Bergson's problems in dealing adequately with the complexity of cinema are now our own.

While translations of Bergson's major books are readily available in English, there is presently no English language collection of selections from his work. *Bergson: Key Writings*, edited by Mullarkey and Pearson, makes up for this lack. This collection has several virtues. The first is its excellent introduction, which deals in turn with some of the most difficult areas in the interpretation of the French intuitionist's thought: Bertrand Russell's confrontation with Bergson, the place of ontology in his philosophy, life as a virtual multiplicity, relativity physics, intuition and Kantianism. There is also a useful explanation of the translations that end this collection of essays. The editors thus effect a double introduction: an introduction both to Bergson's thought and to the readings in the present collection. These translations (by Melissa McMahon) are, once again, valuable in bringing little-known Bergsoniana into the current of English-speaking thought.

Among the pieces translated here are Bergson's "Good Sense and Classical Studies" (1895) an essay that distinguishes good sense, which deals primarily with people, from common sense, which deals essentially with physical reality. Good sense has a moral function and thus crops up again in *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*. The remainder of this section – with one exception, to be noted below – are letters. Bergson's letters to William James cast a vivid light on their close yet sometimes divergent thought. Sympathetic to James at many points, Bergson nonetheless insists that where James believes in the mutability of truth, he believes in the mutability of reality. Bergson's letters to Harald Höffding, Floris Delattre and Georges Lechalas deal respectively with intuition and its relations to duration, the concept of *élan vital* (only an image), and his notion of perception (which is realist). The final translation is of Bergson's message to the Descartes Congress in 1937. In this message he

celebrates the work and spirit of a philosopher whose ideas he had nonetheless critiqued with great effectiveness. Bergson concludes with a statement that he believes most fully captures the Cartesian spirit: "We must act like a man of thought and think like a man of action."

One inevitably ends a review of this breadth with misgivings. Brief summaries of the fundamental contents and basic arguments are useful. But such a presentation doubly truncates their subject matter. If an author's insights are often richly suggestive, it is not possible to follow out his suggestions, certainly not in detail. Equally frustrating, should an author present novel interpretations of Bergson (or Kant, or Husserl) their sheer multiplicity will forbid even a listing. On the negative side, if the reviewer has reservations, they can only be touched on or suggested. What follows here is an effort, in the abstract, to deal with some of these reservations. The treatment will be selective.

While John Mullarkey is quite (and importantly) correct to insist (1) that .in the course of his thought Bergson takes up new positions, "forgetting his prior standpoints", and (2) that for Bergson nothing is "reduced, whether the part to the whole or the whole to its parts", more than this needs to be said. It is true that Bergson changes his assumptions. But he then proceeds to remember what he had forgotten. In *Time and Free Will* his key notion, duration, as depicted as embodying radical continuity and as having its locus entirely in the present. In *Matter and Memory* he adds the centrality of memory and, through his notion of "rhythms" adds a mode of discontinuity. Bergson is thus is able to deal in a more accurate way with the past and the present, qualifying his earlier univocal stress on continuity. In his next major work, *Creative Evolution*, he enlarges his conceptual base again, adding the entrance to the future (creativity) to his previous stress on past and present. One thus finds a cumulative conceptual process in Bergson, a process that is hardly an accident. The rationalist in Bergson seeks ever more coherent and adequate solutions.

A similar reservation concerns Mullarkey's stress on the importance of plurality (the reality of individuals) in Bergson. One can concur with this stress, yet object that Bergson does not create a monadology. His individuals influence each other and depend on one another. To use Bergson's metaphor from the infinitesimal calculus: given any individual, we can treat it as a whole (taking the qualitative integral) or differentiate to find its still active and living derivative: a real part, not a detached fragment. The whole is real for Bergson, but does not ablate its parts.

Keith Ansell Pearson presents a fascinating account of fundamental concepts in Bergson, concepts that many interpreters have left in darkness. It is a real service to have brought up the virtual, the pure past, pure duration, and

pure memory and to have considered them in themselves. One thus escapes the temptation to understand Bergson simply in terms of empirical psychology. One also accepts a challenge: to be willing to think these concepts and others equally difficult to "pin down." Whether these concepts can be taken as transcendental conditions both of thought and of existence is, however, debatable. In any case, to take them as quasi-Kantian quasi-*a priori* preconditions is to take a step that, however interesting and revelatory, is arguable. As Bergson used the term "virtual", it meant a high level of potentiality. That is, for Bergson the virtual remains virtual. Professor Pearson's (and Gilles Deleuze's) virtual is, by contrast, supremely actual. If the virtual is taken to be synonymous with being, it is hard to see how it can be anything but actual. One result of this move is to turn time into a "crystal." One hopes, at least, that it is a liquid crystal.

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