

Bergson: Thinking beyond the Human Condition, by Keith Ansell-Pearson

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FULL TEXT

John Shand welcomes a timely survey of the work of a newly fashionable philosopher

Bergson: Thinking beyond the Human Condition

By Keith Ansell-Pearson

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Few philosophers' fortunes have changed as dramatically as those of Henri Bergson (1859-1941). He was famous in his lifetime and a public intellectual comparable to Bertrand Russell. His fall from favour after his death was mainly owing to the ascendancy of analytical philosophy and existentialism, both unsympathetic to the mode and content of his philosophy.

But fashions change, and Bergson is back, his considerable worth being newly appreciated, chiming with current approaches and concerns. Indeed, William James, who became a great friend of Bergson's, prophetically said: "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."

If thinkers divide into foxes (who know lots of things) and hedgehogs (who know one big thing), then Bergson was a hedgehog: a man with a big idea that may be applied almost everywhere.

In essence, Bergson presents a critique of the attempt to understand the ultimate nature of reality purely intellectually. In this, he opposed scientism and intellectualism, but not science or reason. Science, intellectual understanding, is a useful abstraction, which is fine if that is as far as it goes. But it should not be seen as a means of capturing the ultimate nature of reality, which is what scientism wants us to believe. This is because the intellectual deals in indifferent universals, whereas the intuited world (the world as experienced) is one of non-indifferent particulars. This makes the intellect necessarily unable to capture the lived world of intuitions; they simply slip through the intellectual net unregistered.

The intellect cannot, as Bergson says, follow "the sinuous and mobile contours" of reality. Nor is the intuited world reducible to the intellectual world. Bergson is famous for contrasting the mistaken analogy of time as a spatial progression along a line with "real time" as it is in our intuition of duration, which at any given moment spreads out in all directions, permeated by memory, and is unrepeatable.

The fruits of Keith Ansell-Pearson's years of labour to bring Bergson the philosophical attention he deserves reach an apogee in this book. And the results are brilliant. One can only hope that it will indeed mark a major change in how Bergson is studied in philosophy departments across the world.

A light gaze is directed towards our current ecological concerns, with the argument that Bergson has lessons to teach our over-intellectualised previous selves about a life that is truly sustainable. Certainly, Bergson emphasises our capacity for free, creative, spontaneous thought, and life pushing beyond our human condition of present habits and conventions. But the necessary unknownness of the future supports a modesty about control and predictability, and a warning against the hubris and rational conceit of grand plans.

This book covers all that is important in Bergson's wide and deep thought. After a fine introduction, there are chapters on

the self, memory, time, freedom, ethics, religion, education and life. Along with

Henri -Bergson: Key Writings

(2002), edited by Ansell-Pearson and John Mullarkey, it provides a fine basis for university courses on Bergson.

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DETAILS

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