

# Thinking in time: Henri Bergson (an interdisciplinary conference)



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## Introduction

“A ‘return to Bergson’,” Gilles Deleuze wrote in 1988, “does not only mean a renewed admiration for a great philosopher but a renewal or an extension of his project today, in relation to the transformations of life and society, in parallel with the transformations of science.”<sup>1</sup>

The vigorous renewal of interest in Bergson’s thought today is in large part due to Deleuze who championed the work of Bergson when Bergson remained, as Deleuze put it, an “object of so many hatreds.”<sup>2</sup> For this interest in Bergson to open onto something new today, however, it is essential to turn *back* to Bergson, in order to delimit the thought of Bergson from that of Deleuze—it is essential to read Bergson’s texts.

This double gesture—one that looks back to Bergson’s texts and forward toward a “renewal and extension of Bergson’s project today”—is what I have attempted to perform with a book, *Thinking in Time: An Introduction to Henri Bergson* (Cornell UP, 2006), that painstakingly traces the philosopher’s arguments in two of his major works (*Time and Free Will* and *Matter and Memory*) and a conference held at the University of California at Berkeley last spring: “Thinking in time: Henri Bergson (an interdisciplinary conference).”<sup>3</sup>

If the papers collected here appear disparate, it is because they were solicited for the conference at Berkeley in order to take up Deleuze’s challenge concerning the extension and renewal of Bergson’s thought “in relation to the transformations of life and

society, in parallel with the transformations of science.” The conference was intended to explore the interdisciplinary reach of Bergson’s thought today.<sup>4</sup> The goal of the conference was to introduce Bergson’s thought into intellectual discussions at Berkeley (and beyond) from which it was conspicuously absent, and to which it has so much to contribute. The aim of the conference was to explore the potential that the interdisciplinary richness of Bergson’s thought might have for re-channeling intellectual discussion, first of all in the humanities (bogged down in old habits) but also across the humanities, the sciences, and the social sciences. Few thinkers have the reach we find in Bergson’s work, which dialogued with contemporary research in physics, biology, the theory of evolution, psychology, and sociology that was cutting edge at the time (and, to a remarkable extent, structured key fields of knowledge in ways that still largely hold today), contributed a modern notion of alienation to thinkers such as Lukàcs and Gramsci, and critically influenced modernist aesthetic movements (in literature and the visual arts) in France, Great Britain, and the United States. .

Upon first reading Bergson’s *Matter and Memory*, William James remarked with admiration upon Bergson’s capacity “simply to break away from old categories, deny old worn-out beliefs, and to restate things *ab initio*, making the lines of division fall into new places!”<sup>5</sup> We feel that Bergson’s thought can still have this impact today.

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Bergson is known as a philosopher of life. In her essay, “The Concept of the Living”, Paola Marrati (The Humanities Center, Johns Hopkins University) focuses on Bergson’s two most celebrated works, *Matter and Memory* and *Creative Evolution*, to elaborate the specific force of Bergson’s concept of the living in an analysis that emphasizes the pragmatic dimension of Bergson’s thought. Through a careful mapping of Bergson’s philosophical project, Marrati distinguishes Bergson’s thought from phenomenology, arguing that for Bergson, “a philosophy of experience does not coincide . . . with a philosophy of subjectivity.” Marrati’s essay underscores the single most important idea in Bergson, namely that, as the philosopher himself put it, “If time does nothing it is nothing;” she explains how in Bergson, “living” means an openness to time, such that the virtual and the real are “different modalities of reality.”

In “The Reality of the Virtual: Bergson and Deleuze”, Keith Ansell Pearson (Department of Philosophy, University of Warwick) focuses

on just this distinction, examining what he calls the “virtual-actual circuit” as it operates in the work of Bergson, on the one hand, and Deleuze on the other. In *Philosophy and the Adventure of the Virtual: Bergson and the Time of Life* (New York & London: Routledge, 2002), Ansell Pearson carefully delineated the thought of Bergson from that of Deleuze. In the present essay, he appeals to Bergson to defend Deleuze against a charge made by Alain Badiou, namely that Deleuze deployed the virtual as an ontological category to signify something like “the Great One.” Ansell Pearson defends Deleuze against Badiou’s charge in two steps. First, through close attention to Bergson’s analyses in *Matter and Memory*, he demonstrates that although the virtual is an autonomous power, for Bergson, it is not an ontological category. He then shows how this is also the case for Deleuze, who, appealing to Bergson’s notion of the “memory of the present,” elaborates the figure of the crystal-image as an image of time. Ansell Pearson argues that, “an encounter with the virtual in Deleuze cannot be carried out independently of appreciating the specific work it is put to in his thinking.” He proceeds to demonstrate this through a meticulous analysis of Deleuze’s treatment of the virtual power of memory in *Proust et les signes*.

One of the goals of this conference was to invite dialogue concerning Bergson’s ideas with those who are not Bergson specialists. In this spirit each panel had a respondent, although frequently time pressures limited their participation. I have chosen to include here the comments of my colleague Pheng Cheah (Department of Rhetoric, UC Berkeley), “Living Time: A Response to Worms and Ansell Pearson,”<sup>6</sup> Cheah confronts Bergson with the challenge of post-structuralist thought, and the thinking of Derrida in particular. Readers will find that certain of the questions Cheah raised early in the conference come up again, in various ways, in some of the essays collected here. To pursue the question about how non-organic life might be considered in relation to Bergson’s thought, which emphasizes a concept of the living, readers might turn to Paul-Antoine Miquel’s discussion of how Bergson attributed duration to matter in *Matter and Memory* before extending it to life in general in *Creative Evolution*, or Mark B. N. Hansen’s attempt to reconfigure Bergson’s concept of duration in relation to issues of technics. To pursue Cheah’s suggestion that Bergson might be guilty of a form of the finalism he critiques in *Creative Evolution*, readers can attend to the distinction drawn out in a few essays between the categories of the possible and the virtual in Bergson. Finally, Cheah asks whether

Bergson's "temporalization of time" does not "presuppose and efface a prior gift of time." The dialogue between Bergson's philosophy of time and the thinking of Derrida has not yet taken place. It has perhaps been impeded by the Deleuze factor. Cheah's remarks remind us of the importance of exploring the differences as well as the proximities between Bergson and Derrida. If an exchange between the two thinkers is to be opened up, the texts of Bergson will have to receive the care and attention that has been devoted to the texts of Derrida.

With the papers of Frédéric Keck and David Lapoujade we move to issues of social life at the limit of philosophy and anthropology (or sociology) and to an emphasis on Bergson's last work, *Les Deux sources de la morale et de la religion* (*The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*). In "The Virtual, the Symbolic, and the Actual in Bergsonian Philosophy and Durkheimian Sociology," Frédéric Keck (Philosophy, CNRS) approaches the distinction between the virtual and the real from an anthropological perspective. He draws out from Bergson's thought the outlines of a new concept of the symbolic to replace the structuralist notion (inspired by Durkheim), one situated between the virtual and the actual. Keck reads Bergson's *Les Deux sources de la morale et de la religion* as an extended reply to his classmate Durkheim's *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, published twenty years earlier.

Bergson never intended to be a systematic philosopher; he changes his argumentative strategies, as well as the terms of his argument, depending on the issue at stake and the specific discourses that he undertakes to challenge. In "The Normal and the Pathological in Bergson" (whose title makes a nod to the important work of Georges Canguilhem<sup>7</sup>) David Lapoujade (Philosophy, University of Paris 1, Panthéon-Sorbonne) identifies a crucial turn in *Les Deux sources* and traces it back through Bergson's earlier works by skillfully tracking a crucial displacement from the term "attention to life," which runs through most of Bergson's major works, to the notion of "attachment to life" elaborated in his last work. It is the asymmetry between these two terms that interests Lapoujade, who explores an important conceptual reversal that occurs in the shift between them. Although Bergson has often been mocked as a mystic, Lapoujade's meticulous reading across various works of Bergson's oeuvre reveals both the subtlety of Bergson's argument that opposes mysticism to religion (in analogy with the closed and open society) and its fundamental importance. Lapoujade situates Bergson in proximity to Nietzsche as

he explores Bergson's notion of a leap out of the pathologies of intelligence through a new kind of attachment to life that includes a practice of detachment.

In his essay "Evolution of Consciousness and Evolution of Life", Paul-Antoine Miquel (Philosophy of Science, Université de Nice) also presents a transversal reading across various works of Bergson, from *Time and Free Will* to *Creative Evolution*. His subject is the relation between Bergson's philosophy of evolution and scientific truth. Bergson first introduced the concept of duration as a subjective experience of consciousness. In *Matter and Memory*, he indicated that duration pertained directly to matter itself and in *Creative Evolution* he explicitly extended the notion of duration to life in general, affirming, as Miquel cites at the beginning of his article, that "organic evolution resembles the evolution of consciousness, incommensurable with its antecedents." Miquel examines the plausibility of this analogy in the context of the specific demands of scientific investigation in biology and the life sciences. He concludes that Bergson has made a "creative mistake," maintaining that, "in the case of the world, internal experience does not come first." If it did, he argues, this would "prohibit all scientific developments in life sciences" to the extent that "scientific progress [would] be *a priori* controlled by philosophy or metaphysics." But why was this a creative mistake? Because it inspired scientists (Ilya Prigogine, Stuart Kauffman, and Henri Atlan) to scientifically validate the general view of evolution propounded by Bergson's philosophy.<sup>8</sup>

The question of the respective authority of philosophy and science is precisely the subject of the contribution of Jimena Canales (History of Science, Harvard University), "Einstein, Bergson and the Experiment That Failed: Intellectual Cooperation at the League of Nations." The essay analyses the Einstein-Bergson debate over the nature of time in relation to a concurrent political Einstein-Bergson debate that concerned the International Commission for Intellectual Cooperation within the League of Nations. Canales explores the ways in which these two debates affected the "boundaries between nature, science and politics." She not only clarifies the substance of the misunderstanding between the two most powerful intellectual figures of Europe—Bergson and Einstein—she also investigates who, and what, was not heard as the debate played out. She traces the various cultural forces that ended up endowing Einstein with the authority of a philosopher (even as he maintained that there was no meaningful

way for a philosopher to speak about time after the truth of physics had been revealed) while the philosopher became reduced to a (mere) writer, receiving the Nobel Prize for literature in 1927.

Deleuze's two books on cinema,<sup>9</sup> which present commentaries on key Bergsonian concepts elaborated in *Matter and Memory* (duration, memory, attention and recognition) had a major impact on the contemporary renewal of interest in Bergson, introducing his thought beyond the field of philosophy into the areas of film and new media studies, and cultural studies more broadly.

Two papers published here consider Bergson in this context. In "Moving in Time: Chantal Ackerman's *Toute une Nuit*," Darlene Pursley (French, UC Berkeley) does not so much apply Deleuzian film theory to a work by Chantal Ackerman as use Ackerman's film to challenge certain features of Deleuze's film theory, and to prompt a return to Bergson's texts. Her essay represents a turning point to the extent that it opens up direct channels to the texts of Bergson (instead of finding them filtered through Deleuze) and in so doing, displaces fundamental questions in film studies.

In "Movement and Memory: Intuition as Virtualization in GPS Art," Mark B. N. Hansen (English and New Media Studies, University of Chicago) presents a rigorous analysis of GPS art with specific reference to the work of the artist Laura Kurgan, whose recent exhibitions essentially show the mapping capacity of global positioning systems, calling into question our conceptions of space and time. Hansen's essay (a development of the line of inquiry he launched in *New Philosophy for New Media* [Boston: MIT Press, 2004]) thus directly takes up Deleuze's challenge to "renew or extend" Bergson's project today "in relation to the transformations of life and society, in parallel with the transformations of science." Pursuing this Deleuzian imperative here, however, entails a critique of Deleuze's analysis of Bergsonian duration as a movement of differentiation, and a reinterpretation of it as a movement of composition.

Hansen's essay sets up the problem that is addressed by Frédéric Worms in broader terms. Worms (Philosophy, Université de Lille III), the distinguished Bergson scholar, opened the conference at Berkeley, but has the last word here. In "Time Thinking: Bergson's Double Philosophy of Mind," he demonstrates that Bergson's philosophy is not only a philosophy of time but also a philosophy of mind and that the two go hand in hand: "One has to be able to think mind to think time." The subtlety of his analysis lies in the insistence that the thinking of Bergson, having exposed the gap between time and

thinking, both reconciles the duality between the two and retains the contradiction between them. This is the powerful sense of the doubleness at stake here. It is from this double perspective that Worms can open out Bergson's thought onto issues of history and of writing.

The virtue of placing Worms' essay at the end of a series of diverse and fascinating essays, is that it invites us to reread all of them, casting them in a new light that leaves them intact but deepens our understanding of what was already at stake in each of them. Most of all, perhaps, it informs Jimena Canales' analysis of the profound misunderstanding that occurred, with immense social repercussions, between Bergson and Einstein. How could Bergson have agreed with Einstein concerning the physics of relativity and yet insist that physics did not give the last word on time? Worms suggests an answer when he writes that, according to Bergson, "We are double because we are finite, although at the same time infinite, and this is also why *we live in absolute reality and have to think in absolute relativity*" (original emphasis). Worms' analysis informs the double gesture that was so poorly understood by those who insisted on a hierarchy of knowing over the challenges of being.

As Canales has shown, the final blow to the authority of the philosopher was to be awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature, given that, as Canales affirmed, "Bergson did not—ever—write literature." Nevertheless, as Worms' analysis reveals, Bergson's "most accurate description of thinking culminates . . . in a definition of the art of writing itself." Perhaps the notion of "literature" might not be so trivial after all, since it appears to be situated, in Bergson, right at the crux of relations between thinking and time, at the articulation of a philosophy of reality and a philosophy of mind.

Worm's reading suggests to me that Bergson's account of the relations between writing, thinking, and time might usefully be considered along with those of Heidegger and Derrida. Surely the Nobel Peace Prize Committee did not have this in mind when it awarded the Nobel Prize in literature to Henri Bergson in 1927. Nevertheless, Bergson's discussion of the "whole art of writing," approached from the perspective Frédéric Worms presents here, might serve as a point of departure for an exploration of the relations between Bergson and Derrida which Pheng Cheah has invited us to address.

## NOTES

- 1 Gilles Deleuze, *Bergsonism* (New York: Zone Books, 1988 and 1991), translated by Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam from *Le Bergsonisme* (Paris: PUF, 1966).
- 2 Deleuze, *Dialogues*, with Claire Parnet, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (London: The Athlone Press, 1987) 14–15; cited in the introduction to *Bergsonism* 8.
- 3 This conference was generously supported by the Berkeley community. I would like to thank the Pajus Endowment in French Studies at UC Berkeley as well as the Townsend Center for the Humanities, The Office for the Study of Science and Technology, the French Studies Program, the Office of the Dean of the Arts and Humanities, the Office of the Dean of the Social Sciences, and the Departments of Philosophy, English, and Comparative Literature at UC Berkeley for their support of this conference. I would also like to thank Richard Macksey for his interest in publishing the papers from this conference and Kate Khatib for her much valued patience and editorial help.
- 4 We are publishing here selected papers from the conference, which also benefited from the participation of members of the physics department at Berkeley (Petr Horava and Ori Ganor), as well as from the participation of a specialist in robot design, Stan Rosenschein, CEO of Quindi (a software company), as well as Stephen Robbins and Deborah Hauptmann. One contribution we were unable to publish, because it has already appeared in print, is Alia Al-Saji's "The Memory of Another Past: Bergson, Deleuze and a New Theory of Time" (*The Continental Philosophy Review* 3.7 [2004]: 203–239).
- 5 Cited in A.E. Pilkington, *Bergson and His Influences: A Reassessment* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1976) 217.
- 6 The paper Pearson gave at the conference (which concerned the importance of evolutionary thinking in both Bergson and Nietzsche) differs from the piece published here; Cheah's response, however, remains as relevant to the issues taken up by these papers as ever.
- 7 Georges Canguilhem's *Le Normal et le pathologique* (Paris: PUF 2005), written in 1943.
- 8 Ilya Prigogine was the Nobel Laureate in chemistry in 1977, specializing in work on nonequilibrium thermodynamics and the theory of dissipative structures. He is the author, among many other works, of *Order out of Chaos* (New York: Bantam Books, 1983) and *The End of Certainty: Time, Chaos and the New Laws of Nature* (New York: Free Press, 1997), both written with Isabelle Stengers. Stuart Kauffman is a theoretical biologist, the author of *At Home in the Universe: The Search for the Laws of Self Organization and Complexity* (London: Oxford UP, 1995) and *The Origins of Order: Self Organization and Selection in Evolution* (London: Oxford, 1993). Henri Atlan is a biologist and biophysicist, the author of, among other works, *L'Organisation biologique et la théorie de l'information* (Paris: Hermann, 1972 and 1992).
- 9 Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement Image* (Minneapolis: U Minnesota P, 1986), and *Cinema 2: the Time Image* (Minneapolis: U Minnesota P, 1989).