

# Review: Craig Lundy, *Deleuze's Bergsonism*

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## Abstract

A century ago Henri Bergson was a world-wide celebrity. However, after the world wars his philosophy had already fallen into disfavor, disdain and oblivion. Prominent molecular biologists claimed to have hammered the final nail in the coffin of vitalism. Francis Crick himself, with prophetic hubris, called any future vitalist a crank. Things were not much different amongst analytic philosophers who, more concerned with clarity than precision, saw in Bergson's works hardly more than poetry and mysticism. In fact, 'vitalism' became a one-word argument against itself (just utter it and it would count as disproved). And yet, ironically, vitalism refused to die. Half a century ago, Gilles Deleuze wrote a seminal interpretation of Bergson's philosophy. After providing a concrete articulation of Bergson's method of intuition, Deleuze studied the progression of Bergson's concepts of duration, memory, and the *élan*, and paired them with his own concepts of multiplicity, the virtual and differentiation. Now, in a lucid and crisp book, Craig Lundy unpacks (for the first time) Deleuze's Bergsonism. Not only does the book afford a better grasp of Bergson's genius, but it also allows us to trace the origin of some key notions in Deleuze's philosophy. Moreover, Lundy's effort is particularly opportune in the context of the current revival of Bergson's thought. In a time when it is becoming increasingly strenuous to cash the promissory notes of scientific materialism, reductionism and mechanicism, Lundy's *Deleuze's Bergsonism* represents an invaluable opportunity to better understand the philosopher of time and life par excellence.

## Keywords

Bergsonism, differentiation, duration, *élan vital*, intuition, multiplicity, virtual

Craig Lundy

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At the turn of the 20th century, the French philosopher Henri Bergson (1859–1941) was a world-wide star. His 1907 book *L'Évolution Créatrice* became an international success. His lectures filled theaters, apparently causing Broadway's first traffic jam. In 1927 he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature. However, by then, his notoriety and influence had waned. Virtually unknown today, the few scientists who have actually read his work often express disdain. A similar situation is found amongst many professional philosophers. And yet, having been moribund for decades, Bergsonism refuses to die.

Lundy's *Deleuze's Bergsonism* is a crisp restatement of Bergson's philosophy through the lens of Gilles Deleuze (1925–1995). It is a concise, profound and enjoyable book. The goal in *Bergsonism* is to determine the relationship and progress between the three major stages in Bergson's philosophy, namely, *duration* (*Time and Free Will*, 1889), *memory* (*Matter and Memory*, 1896), and the *élan vital* (*Creative Evolution*, 1907). Following Deleuze, Lundy organizes the book precisely around these concepts and their unfolding in Bergson's thought. Duration, memory, and the *élan* are respectively matched to Deleuze's notions of multiplicity, the virtual and differentiation. But, in order to address them, one must first speak of intuition as a method.

Deleuze articulates the Bergsonian method of intuition in three rules: (1) Apply the test of true and false to problems themselves (either non-existent or badly stated), in order to avoid them. For instance *disorder* is the order we do not expect, the *possible* is the real thrown back to the past after it has occurred, and *nothingness* is something plus the mental act of making it disappear. (2) Rediscover the true differences in kind, separating the composites of experience into pure tendencies. A canonical example is the difference between perception and memory. Bergson's dualism then leads to a new monism. (3) State and solve problems in terms of time rather than of space, by means of thinking in terms of duration.

As the cover of the book illustrates, one must wait until the sugar cube dissolves. Mathematical time is alien to one's impatience. There is no nature at an instant, and so 'spatialized time' is not real time. If one had to summarize Bergson's philosophy in a tweet, it would be 'time is not space'. Duration is a condition of experience. It cannot be divided without changing in kind. Such is the hallmark of what is qualitative and subjective. Duration is actually what gives the rule of division, which brings us to a Deleuzian key to understand duration: the theory of multiplicities. By thinking in time we access internal difference.

Lundy then discusses Bergson's notion of memory and Deleuze's virtual ontology of the past. The quest to localize memories in the brain is at the heart of the mind-body problem. The question already betrays a paradigmatic badly analyzed composite (back to rule (1)). As Lundy puts it, 'To look for recollections in the brain is therefore to look for the subjective on the objective line – a search that unsurprisingly ends in

failure, for at best you will find an objective manifestation of the subjective, but never the subjective in itself" (p. 71).

The past and the present differ in kind (rule (2) again). The past is being and the present is becoming. Paradoxically, the present was while the past will always be. Bergson's theory of memory is not exclusively psychological. The past is ontological. Deleuze casts a virtual ontology of the past. The *virtual* is a central concept in Bergsonism. The present does not come after a past that ceased to be. Both co-exist. The present is actual, while the past is virtual; one is active, the other inactive but informative on action. The present is two-fold at every moment. The formation of memory and perception is contemporaneous.

So, how are memories preserved? The short answer is that they preserve themselves. Where are memories preserved? Nowhere (or, simply, in the past). As in a kind of psychedelic experience where 'the whole of our past is present at any given moment, in all its varying degrees of contraction' (p. 88), each section of the so-called cone of memory contains the entirety of the past (see rule (3)). The image of the Heraclitean river is updated to the Bergsonian snowball.

Before addressing the *élan vital*, both Deleuze and Lundy pause to dwell in the accusation of Bergson's philosophy as dualistic. Indeed, Bergson's work is filled with sharp distinctions (space versus time, matter versus memory, intellect versus intuition, closed versus open morality). However, his dualism is not one of abstract contraries. Difference is not conceived via negation. In a very Deleuzian attitude, one must refrain from reducing difference to identity. One must seek to grasp the internal difference of each thing, rather than the difference between things.

In other words, it seems that Bergson can have it both ways: his dualism, being a moment of his philosophy, gives rise to a new monism; one that, in turn, provides a new dualism that is mastered (not pure, nor balanced). This insight is essential to get Bergsonism right. Quantity is opposed to quality and yet quality is also contracted quantity. Bergsonism plays both with dualistic and monistic tendencies. At times Bergson provides a new monism that surpasses dualism, at other times a new dualism as a split monism. The reconciliation takes place via coexistence in the virtual, whose great significance for Deleuze becomes patent. Moving from the actual to the virtual, we start with an impure composite that we then decompose into differences in kind. In the opposite direction of movement, the simple virtual whole is differentiated into a dualism. This new dualism is the process of differentiation, whose movement is the *élan vital*.

Bergson's infamous *élan vital* is his means of putting life back to life. The *élan* is the nature of the movement of life. It is duration that differentiates itself. The *élan* actualizes the virtual along the lines of differentiation, whereby evolution is creative. Importantly, the virtual is

already real; it does not need to be realized. The opposite of the real is the possible, not the virtual. The virtual is opposed to the actual. And actualization, contrary to realization, does not take place through resemblance, limitation or elimination, but via differentiation. Since the virtual diverges along different lines, evolution is not a recombination of actualities but a dissociation of the *élan*. Life is precisely the tendency to diverge. In fact, life acts on matter in order to insert on its necessity the largest possible amount of indetermination. For Bergson, humanity is capable of bootstrapping its own condition.

Despite the fact that Lundy's stated (and successfully achieved) purpose in the book is primarily to explicate the topics covered by Deleuze in Bergsonism, some important points remain timidly addressed (if not deliberately underplayed). First, Deleuze's articulation of the method of intuition eludes Bergson's exhortation to get inside the things themselves. Bergson reminds us that it is a simple act and yet, after Deleuze's conceptualization, intuition still sounds impossible. Second, while the subtle relation between the past and the present is addressed, hardly anything is said about the future. Does it exist? What is its link with creativity? Third, it is remarkable how little does Bergson's last book (*The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, 1932) play a role in Deleuze's Bergsonism. In contrast, other great commentators of Bergson, such as Vladimir Jankélévitch or David Lapoujade, have carved out an interpretation of his thought that highlights existential dimensions such as emotion, belief, love, wonder and joy. The evolutionary arc of humanity goes through the metaphysician and the scientist but points to the hero, the mystic and the saint.

Let us go back to why Bergson fell into disfavor. By the end of the 19th century, an anti-mechanistic understanding of nature and society was in the air, of which Bergson was an excellent exponent. The world wars killed those hopes. At odds with the patent tragic dimension of human existence, Bergson's optimism did not fit the reigning emotional tone. And when it did, the great popular appeal for his views contributed to trivializing them. Moreover, his insistence on human freedom was too much for determinists and the church (his writings were indexed, although he asked for Catholic prayers at his funeral). In a sense, it was not clear what to do with his philosophy.

Despite great praise from William James and Alfred North Whitehead, Bergson had monumental opponents. Bertrand Russell's critique decimated a great deal of his reputation. So did his clash with Albert Einstein. Bergson's lack of a strong school of thought did not help either. Being a radical metaphysical empiricist, his ideas were ridiculed, rejected as irrational, and even deemed too feminine. His choice of the term intuition was perhaps unfortunate, as it evoked gut feeling or lack of reasoning. Moreover, he was often mischaracterized as a substance vitalist. Many thinkers, beset with clarity, missed Bergson's

emphasis on precision. In fact, the challenge was not philosophical erudition but the ability (or willingness) to embrace his position.

Logical positivism took off. Bergson was declared a traitor of philosophy. By mid-century, analytic philosophy (essentially anti-Bergsonian) dominated. Not only was he too metaphysic for the analytics, but also too scientific for some continentals. Accused of biologism and psychologism by philosophers, Bergson's insights on life and mind did not enjoy a better reception amongst those biologists and neuroscientists seduced by mechanistic reductionism (arguably the majority). Evolution had collapsed into neo-Darwinian accounts. With the rise of cybernetics, experience and meaning were abstracted away. Memory could be nothing but neural grooves. Free will had to be an illusion. And consciousness simply an anecdotal epiphenomenal phosphorescence.

Furthermore, from the outset, Bergson's position went against the trend that would dominate the rest of the century, namely, the strongly emergent reductionist view of existence with a totally materialistic focus on developing the means of controlling and exploiting both people and nature for the sake of power and economic growth. In a word, the zeitgeist of the last hundred years has been precisely the opposite of Bergson's worldview.

However, a Bergsonian renaissance took place, considerably thanks to Deleuze. He rediscovered Bergson while studying *Matter and Memory* for his *agrégation*. In 1954 he presented, at the Société des amis de Bergson, his first paper on Bergson. His book *Bergsonism* was published in 1966 and, by the 1980s, when Deleuze's reputation was high, it spurred a revival of Bergson's ideas. Deleuze valued writers who seemed to belong to the history of philosophy while escaping from it. Bergson was one of them. According to Deleuze, Bergson's concept of coexistent multiplicities made him somewhat unassimilable. Deleuze vehemently protested against the repressive role of the history of philosophy on philosophy itself. Amongst those thinkers who challenged the rationalist tradition, he found Bergson again. By turning Bergson's philosophy into Bergsonism, by making him say things he would say but had not, Deleuze managed to cope with such frustrations and forged his own thinking bearing the stamp of Bergson's genius.

And so, why read Lundy if one can read Deleuze or Bergson? In essence, the book revitalizes Bergsonism. Lundy unzips Deleuze's difficult writings, while providing an integral view of Bergson's core ideas. The text can be used as an introduction to both, facilitating the work of the unfamiliar reader, perhaps attracting new audiences to Bergson. It also enables us to seize the whole of Bergsonism as Deleuze sees it, which is particularly interesting in order to appreciate the development of Deleuze's ideas (especially because it was written at the beginning of his career). Lundy's book is also a deterrent to those who cherry-pick bits of their philosophies, distorting or forgetting to acknowledge them.

I believe it will spur a renewed discussion of the limitations, challenges and opportunities of today's Bergsonism.

In sum, the book is a timely contribution to the current renaissance of Bergson's thought. It allows Bergsonians a renewed grasp of Bergson's philosophy, it provides Deleuzians with a deeper perspective on Deleuze's Bergsonian roots and, finally, it offers die-hard analytic philosophers another chance to appreciate Bergson's insights.

Philosophy defeats its purpose if it posits a world without trees. We are invited to lay hold of everything in its own terms, to craft a tailor-made suit on reality, to aim at knowledge of the concrete without misplacing it with abstractions. The job of the philosopher thus requires a renewed effort every time.

**Alex Gomez-Marin** is a theoretical physicist turned neuroscientist. He has a PhD in physics and a Masters in biophysics. For more than a decade he has been working in the field of behavioral neuroscience. He is currently a Ramón y Cajal Fellow and the Principal Investigator of the Behavior of Organisms Laboratory at the Instituto de Neurociencias in Alicante, Spain. Combining theory, computational data analyses and biophilosophy, his research aims to establish shared organizational principles of animal behavior across species.