

A New Philosophy: Henri Bergson

A New Philosophy by Henri Bergson presents a series of essays in which Bergson argues for the primacy of intuition and lived experience over intellectual analysis, offering a dynamic view of time, consciousness, and reality.

Preface

This preface introduces the essence and aims of a book designed to elucidate Henri Bergson's philosophy for the general public. Originating from two articles published in the "Revue des Deux Mondes" in February 1912, the author expands on these initial sketches by adding continuous notes for further clarification on certain points. The text is candid about its purpose: not to present a comprehensive critical analysis of Bergson's work—deemed premature given Bergson's ongoing contributions—but rather to serve as an introductory guide for those new to his ideas.

The book deliberately avoids the complexities of technical jargon and comparisons with other philosophical doctrines to maintain focus on Bergson's unique perspective. The author advocates for understanding Bergson's philosophy as a "living act" rather than dissecting it as one would a static object. Emphasis is placed on the importance of intuitive understanding over analytical dissection, aligning with Bergson's own methodological recommendations.

In doing so, the preface sets the stage for a nuanced exploration of Bergson's philosophy, intending to make his concepts more accessible to readers unfamiliar with his work. The author hopes this simplified exposition will not only encourage a broader audience to engage with Bergson's ideas but also offer insightful perspectives to professional philosophers. This approach underscores the transformative potential of approaching philosophy as a dynamic and intuitive process, reflecting Bergson's own innovative stance.

I. Method.

The critic must understand that philosophical intuition, far from excluding science, presupposes it, and in fact, builds upon it. The difference between metaphysical and aesthetic intuition lies in their goals. The artist seeks to express, to externalize in a sensory form an inner state; the philosopher, although he also translates intuition into images, uses these images as springboards to propel the mind towards a reality that these images can at best only symbolize. The intention in philosophy is to stimulate thought to achieve a certain intellectual tension that allows the contemplation of the intuited reality, despite its inexpressibility.

Philosophy's objective is not the transposition of intuition into the sensory realm, but rather its translation into intellectual insight that encourages a transformation in our understanding of reality. Philosophy seeks to alter how we conceptualize the world and ourselves within it, aiming for a deeper comprehension that underpins our theoretical and practical engagement with life. It involves a dynamic apprehension of becoming, a radical shift from seeing life and reality as static entities to be described and analyzed, to experiencing them as continuous, fluid processes to be lived and intuited.

Bergson's philosophy, therefore, stands at a unique crossroads between poetry and science, invoking the aesthetic to illuminate the scientific, guiding thought beyond the confines of habitual understanding towards a direct, albeit challenging, apprehension of life's flow and the essence of consciousness. His work demands of us a mental agility to move beyond the solidification of experiences into concepts, urging a kind of

intellectual rebirth where we learn to perceive not merely with the mind in its habitual state of analysis and categorization, but with the entirety of our being, attuned to the incessant becoming of the world.

In this way, Bergson rehabilitates philosophy as the art of seeing reality not as it is dissected and categorized by science or represented and evoked by art, but as it is lived and experienced from the inside. This insight does not set Bergson against science or art; rather, it situates his philosophy as a bridge between the two, a sort of meta-discourse that invites a reconsideration of both in light of a more profound, comprehensive vision of reality. Through his metaphors and his rigorous appeal to intuition, Bergson offers a roadmap for navigating the complex terrain of existence, making his philosophy not only a theoretical enterprise but a practice of living more deeply.

VIII. Conclusion.

In the discussed chapter of "A New Philosophy: Henri Bergson," the narrative delves into Bergson's critiques and expansion of the concept of reason, emphasizing two fundamental types of order: geometric and vital. Bergson is portrayed as moving away from a rigid, rationalist understanding of the universe to embrace a more organic, evolutionary perspective. The chapter contrasts the static, predictable pattern of geometric order with the dynamic, creative flux of vital order, arguing that reality fundamentally aligns with the latter, characterized by a continuous, musical flow of moments. This transition is crucial for understanding Bergson's assertion that intuition, rather than analytical reason, connects us to the authentic essence of life and the universe.

Bergson's philosophy is heralded as a renaissance of positive metaphysics, aimed at reconciling the disciplines of psychology, metaphysics, and experience under a unified view of continuous progress and creative evolution. The text further explores Bergsonian metaphysics as an experience-based doctrine that challenges traditional atheistic or monistic interpretations, proposing instead a vision of a creative and free God. This proposition strives to overcome the perceived incompatibilities between Bergson's philosophy and spiritual or moral viewpoints, suggesting that Bergsonian thought not only accommodates but anticipates future religious and moral inquiry.

The final parts of the chapter tackle the criticisms and apprehensions surrounding Bergson's work, particularly focusing on the objections that his philosophy might preclude further spiritual or ethical developments. The narrative counters this by highlighting Bergson's open-ended approach to philosophical inquiry, which remains receptive to new insights and dimensions of thought. Bergson's philosophy is presented as evolving, emphasizing liberty, creation, and the possibility of transcendent futures beyond the confines of present conditions or established orders of life.

As a summary, the chapter articulately encapsulates Bergson's philosophical journey towards a dynamic, integrative view of reality, urging a departure from static interpretations of existence towards a recognition of the vital, creative force inherent in evolution. His work is interpreted as a bridge between empirical study and metaphysical speculation, laying groundwork for addressing moral and spiritual questions within his philosophical framework.

II. Teaching.

It is drawn by the future rather than pushed by the past, achieving progress through both the accumulation of experiences and the intrinsic push for experimentation and novelty inherent to life itself. At the core of this philosophy is the notion that life is fundamentally a creative and forward-moving force. This fundamentally counters any notion of 'non-morality.' Instead, it suggests a universe inherently inclined towards complexity, consciousness, and, perhaps implicitly, towards higher forms of moral reasoning and social organization as

expressions of life's inherent push for creativity and novelty.

The critique labeling this philosophy as "romantic" due to its embrace of intuition, feeling, and creativity similarly misses the mark. While Bergson values these aspects of human experience, he does not elevate them at the expense of rationality or logic. Instead, he proposes a more holistic view wherein intuition and intellect are not opposed but complementary, each playing its role in navigating and understanding life's complexities. This synthesis is not a rejection of morality but a broader framework within which moral principles can be re-examined, reaffirmed, or redefined in alignment with life's creative evolution.

Bergson's philosophy, far from being amorally indifferent, invites a deeper engagement with life, imbued with a sense of responsibility towards the creative potential inherent in existence. It prompts a reconsideration of morality, not from a static set of rules, but as evolving principles that must adapt to the continued unfoldment of life's creative process. This dynamic view of morality is not less rigorous; it is simply more alive, reflective of the complexity and nuance of life itself.

In essence, Bergson suggests that our moral frameworks should evolve in harmony with our deepening understanding of life as a creative, forward-moving force. This implies a morality that is not fixed and dogmatic but fluid and responsive, capable of guiding human action in a universe where creativity, change, and progress are the very fabric of existence. Far from advocating for a moral vacuum, Bergson's work points towards a vision of morality that is deeply rooted in the vitality and creative thrust of life itself.

I. Mr Bergson's Work and the General Directions of Contemporary Thought.

Reflecting on the profound influence of Henri Bergson's philosophy, this chapter emphasizes how Bergson's work signifies a pivotal moment in the course of human thought, particularly with regards to religion and the interpretation of life and reality. Bergson's philosophy, rooted in the concept of creative evolution, is not merely an academic pursuit but a journey that ventures beyond the explicit content of his books, exploring the very essence of consciousness and the latent potential within human intuition and imagination. The narrative suggests that while Bergson himself does not explicitly delve into the realm of religion, the implications of his philosophy naturally invite contemplation on spiritual matters, thus hinting at the profound and uncharted territories his ideas may navigate in the context of human belief systems.

Subsequent sections provide additional explanations, shedding light on Bergson's work in relation to contemporary thought, while emphasizing a shift in philosophical focus towards experience and intuition over analytical reasoning. The critique outlined is intent on transcending mere analysis to explore the dynamic interplay between Bergson's ideas, suggesting that a comprehensive understanding requires engagement with the undercurrents of thought and intuition that animate his philosophy. This involves recognizing the importance of lived experience and the limitations of scientific method in grappling with the complexities of life and consciousness.

The milieu of Bergson's era is characterized by skepticism towards the previous generation's reliance on science and mathematics as the sole paths to knowledge, advocating instead for a philosophy that acknowledges multiple facets of reality and embraces the spiritual and intuitive aspects of understanding. This new philosophy seeks to bridge the divide between the inert and the living, fostering a more holistic approach to knowledge that respects the unique qualities of life and consciousness.

The narrative echoes a broader intellectual movement away from rigid rationalism towards a richer, more nuanced engagement with reality, emphasizing the role of spiritual activity and the quest for a philosophy that encompasses the full spectrum of human experience and insight. Bergson's work is presented as a revolutionary contribution that challenges traditional boundaries between science, philosophy, and spirituality, inviting a reassessment of the very foundations upon which human understanding is built.

II. Immediacy.

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This chapter introduces Henri Bergson's philosophy, centering on the concept of duration as its foundational intuition. Bergson's philosophy is distinguished by its emphasis on action and the intuition of time, challenging the traditional static view of existence. The chapter outlines Bergson's critical approach to understanding and evaluating philosophy, not through isolated propositions but through the holistic experience of duration, illuminating its significance by examining its practical implications.

The text delineates the philosopher's duty to articulate their starting point clearly, emphasizing methodology over summarization. Bergson's philosophy is positioned as an exploration rather than a predefined system, evolving through the critical examination of knowledge itself. Philosophy is characterized as a reflective act, aimed at understanding rather than merely expanding the body of knowledge, contrasting with spontaneous or scientific thought that prioritizes utility and practical outcomes over contemplative accuracy.

The distinction between common sense and good sense is crucial in Bergson's critique of knowledge. Common sense is seen as a practical orientation towards life, guided by utility and the immediate applicability of perceptions. Conversely, good sense represents a more nuanced, reality-sensitive approach, capable of resisting the oversimplifications of logic and anticipating the complexity of life. Bergson argues for a philosophy that transcends utilitarian common sense, seeking a purer engagement with life's immediacy.

Bergson's methodology advocates for a return to immediate, lived experiences as the foundation of philosophical inquiry. This immersiveness in life's flow challenges the demarcation between subject and object, suggesting a more integral experience of reality. His critique extends to the sciences, which, despite their precision, remain anchored in common-sense postulates, thus limiting their capacity to fully emancipate thought from practical constraints.

In essence, Bergson invites a philosophical reorientation towards the immediacy of life, advocating for an intuitive, preconceptual engagement with reality. This approach seeks not just to analyze or describe life in detached terms but to live philosophically, embracing the fluid, continuous experience of duration as the core of existence and knowledge.

III. Theory of Perception.

Henri Bergson's philosophical work, as summarized from the provided chapter, delves into the relativity of perception and the transformative journey from common experience to profound action. Bergson distinguishes between fact and construction, proposing a series where each term can be seen as fact to the following terms and constructed in relation to preceding ones, aiming for a "contact with pure immediacy." This effort signifies a critical journey from complexity to simplicity in understanding experience.

In discussing the theory of perception, Bergson emphasizes the live communion between subject and object in perception, highlighting it as the epitome of knowledge. He critiques the Kantian perspective that transcendent vision is necessary for understanding beyond language, suggesting instead that a direct vision grounded in common experience and intellectual sympathy can achieve true knowledge. According to Bergson, philosophy aims to expand perceptive power to grasp reality's full depth, an endeavor paralleled by artists who detach common sense from utilitarian prejudices to access intuition of reality.

The chapter further explores the distinction in perception, identifying pure perception as a fundamental but abstract aspect of experience that offers a potential starting point for understanding reality. It is argued that

knowledge does not commence with isolated sensations but is a product of complex analysis and synthesis. Bergson identifies the practical utility behind natural perception, where perception serves action and speech rather than disinterested knowledge.

Through critical exploration, Bergson posits that ordinary perception is shaped by practical interests and is often infused with memories that align with our actions in the present. He concludes that common perception's utilitarian nature leads to a selective emphasis on certain impressions, especially those of touch, which are most practical for interaction with reality. This selective emphasis parcels matter into discrete bodies, illustrating the artificiality of our perceptual process. Bergson's work suggests that a deeper immersion into reality, beyond the symbols and theoretical forms that obscure our direct experience, is essential for genuine understanding and interaction with the world around us.

IV. Critique of Language.

Henri Bergson, in "A New Philosophy," presents a complex exploration of perception, matter, and the limitations of conventional thought and language. He delves into the nature of pure perception, which he argues is not merely a subjective experience but rather a direct interaction with reality itself. Bergson suggests that our ordinary perception, limited by our need for practical efficiency, obscures the full depth of reality by favoring a fragmented, simplified view over comprehensive understanding.

Bergson critiques language and conceptual thought as tools that, while necessary for communication and analysis, ultimately distort the true nature of reality by imposing artificial divisions and static categories onto dynamic processes. He introduces the concept of dynamic schemes, which are more about motion and development than static representation. These schemes attempt to capture the essence of creative thought, moving beyond the boundaries of conventional language and analysis to approach a more authentic intuition of reality.

The chapter examines the limitations of analytical thought, which tends to dissect and reassemble reality in a way that misses its intrinsic continuity and flux. Bergson argues for a mode of thinking that embraces the inherent dynamism and complexity of life, rather than reducing it to manageable, but ultimately reductive, conceptual snapshots.

Through a critique of language, Bergson shows how words and concepts, while useful, often encapsulate reality in static forms, hindering our ability to grasp the continuous, evolving nature of things. He proposes that a more genuine understanding requires moving from static concepts to a dynamic engagement with reality, which he likens to navigating through successive planes of thought from the superficiality of linguistic expression to the depths of intuitive insight.

The chapter emphasizes the need to transcend the simplifications inherent in language and conceptual thinking to engage with the dynamic, complex reality directly. Bergson advocates for an effortful, intuitive approach that seeks to apprehend the continuous change and complexity of life, rather than settling for the artificial clarity and simplicity of static thought and language. This approach, he suggests, allows for a deeper, more authentic engagement with the world, moving beyond the limitations of conventional perception and understanding to touch the underlying reality of things.

V. The Problem of Consciousness. Duration and Liberty.

In "A New Philosophy: Henri Bergson," the author delves into Bergson's revolutionary thoughts on consciousness, duration, and liberty. The essence of Bergson's philosophy rests on the critique of the conventional understanding of time and consciousness. He argues against the quantification of psychological

processes, emphasizing instead the qualitative and continuous nature of consciousness. Bergson criticizes the mechanical psychology of associationism, typified by thinkers like Taine and Stuart Mill, for its failure to capture the dynamic and indivisible character of the mind. He introduces the concept of duration as a fundamental element of consciousness, distinct from the spatial and numerical conceptions of time.

Bergson's examination of the inner life suggests that our mental states are not merely juxtaposed but penetrate and influence each other, reflecting our unique personalities. This leads to a conception of duration as a melodic stream of consciousness, where each moment is enriched by the previous and anticipates the next, incompatible with numerical division. Through introspection, Bergson illustrates how consciousness experiences duration, presenting it as a qualitative rather than quantitative phenomenon.

Furthermore, Bergson explores the concept of liberty, distinguishing it from both deterministic and traditional free-will perspectives. He posits freedom as an inherent quality of duration, where true acts of will represent a synthesis of thoughts and feelings, a creative evolution beyond mere spontaneity. This conception of liberty challenges the notion of determinism by emphasizing the indivisible and organic nature of mental life, which cannot be accurately depicted through the mechanistic view of matter.

The relation between mind and body is another focal point of Bergson's philosophy, where he refutes the psycho-physiological parallelism. Bergson argues that our past experiences are preserved within us, constituting our duration and shaping our consciousness. He introduces the innovative idea that memory operates on multiple levels, from pure recollection to actions influenced by past experiences, with the brain playing a crucial role in selecting and simplifying these memories for present use.

"A New Philosophy: Henri Bergson" presents a comprehensive overview of Bergson's philosophical investigations into the nature of consciousness, time, freedom, and the interplay between the mind and body. Through critical analysis and introspection, Bergson challenges established notions and offers a nuanced understanding of the human experience, emphasizing the fluidity of consciousness and the liberty inherent in duration.

VI. The Problem of Evolution: Life and Matter.

The chapter from "A New Philosophy: Henri Bergson" delves into the essentials of perception, the intricacies of consciousness, and the evolutionary philosophy that Bergson proposed. It begins by challenging the traditional notion that perception is housed within the subject, arguing instead for the immediacy of perception as existing within both the subject and object, thereby dismissing the fundamental relativity theses as a mere "trick of speech."

Subsequent sections tackle the problem of evolution, starting from the premise that psychological freedom, or liberty, essentially begins with the very first instances of life. Bergson posits that sensation itself is the beginning of liberty, leading to the need for a comprehensive framework to make sense of our own duration and evolution, suggesting that biology might soon take precedence over mathematics as the guiding science. This notion stems from the observation that ancient knowledge focused on static moments of reality, whereas modern science, with its emphasis on infinitesimal analysis and biological research, embraces a doctrine of evolution.

However, Bergson critiques Spencer's evolution concept for lacking genuine duration and reducing evolution to mechanical processes, devoid of creativity and reduced to materialistic interpretations. He proposes instead a reintegration of "real duration" and creative evolution into our understanding, arguing that life embodies a creative activity beyond mere mechanical interactions, as evidenced by the development of an embryo representing a microcosm of biological evolution.

The chapter culminates in positioning life not just as a process but as genuine creation, evidenced by the progressive and ascendant history of life forms that exhibit initiative, choice, and creative impulse. This creative liberty observed in life contradicts a fatalistic view and aligns with Bergson's wider philosophical doctrine that emphasizes liberty, choice, and creativity as fundamental aspects of life and evolution.

Thus, Bergson's philosophy challenges traditional materialistic and deterministic views by advocating for a dynamic, creative, and evolving understanding of life, underpinning his concept of "Creative Evolution" as a synthesis of immediate experience, the liberty of life, and the continuous, creative unfolding of evolution itself.

VII. The Problem of Knowledge: Analysis and Intuition.

Henri Bergson, in "A New Philosophy," delves into the essence of evolution, knowledge, intuition, and intelligence, arguing against the static depiction of reason as depicted by Kant and advocating for a dynamic understanding of these concepts rooted in life's creative and evolutionary processes. Bergson criticizes the conventional approach to the theory of knowledge, which relies on analyzing the mind's spontaneous works—like perception and science—from a regressive and critical standpoint, a method that inadvertently cages us in a Kantian relativism. This method, according to Bergson, fails to capture the essence of reason as an evolving force, instead presenting it as a fixed, non-temporal essence.

Bergson proposes an alternative view that starts with life itself, asserting that life is inherently a form of consciousness and spiritual activity, which gradually evolves, splitting into divergent paths, one of which leads to intelligence. Intelligence, as Bergson sees it, is but a fraction of thought tailored for practical action and expressed through language. He criticizes intelligence's inclination towards the material and static, noting its struggle with grasping the fluidity and dynamism inherent in life.

Instead, Bergson introduces intuition as a method to overcome the limitations of intelligence by reconnecting with the broader, more fulfilling aspects of thought left by the wayside in evolution. Intuition, thus, enables a comprehensive understanding of life by amalgamating the insights of intelligence with other forms of consciousness developed along divergent evolutionary paths. This philosophical intuition allows for a fleeting yet complete grasp of life's complexity, extending beyond the confines of rational analysis to embrace a form of super-consciousness.

Bergson's critique extends to the conception of reason and intelligence as stagnant entities, advocating instead for a perception of these as evolving functions that can expand to incorporate previously incomprehensible facets of reality. He invites a transformation in the theory of knowledge that acknowledges the entirety of our experiences and capabilities, urging a shift from a limiting analytical viewpoint to a more encompassing, intuitive understanding that aligns with the natural flow of life and evolution. Through this, Bergson seeks to refresh and expand our approach to understanding knowledge, reality, and the essence of human thought, advocating for a method that resonates with the dynamic, creative core of life itself.

Index.

Henri Bergson's work, as summarized in this chapter, emphasizes the exceptional importance and infinite reach of his new philosophy. This novel approach, marked by its uniqueness and potential for misunderstanding, positions itself as the future departure point for speculative philosophy, attracting an increasing number of adherents despite the inevitability of misinterpretations and the potential for its transformation into a new form of scholasticism.

Bergson's philosophy underlines the centrality of intuition over analysis and the dynamic nature of reality and consciousness. It contrasts conceptual analysis with the immediacy and depth of intuitive understanding, seeing life and existence as continual becoming and emphasizing the role of change as fundamental to both being and knowledge. This perspective challenges traditional metaphysical and scientific frameworks, proposing instead that reality is characterized by flux, duration, and a qualitative continuity that eludes static conceptualization.

The chapter outlines a comprehensive critique of existing philosophical and scientific tenets, including determinism, materialism, and mechanism, advocating for an understanding of reality that acknowledges the limitations of language, the pitfalls of rationalism, and the insufficiency of mere analysis to capture the essence of life. Bergson asserts the importance of freedom, the reality of change, and the value of immediate experience, positing intuition as not only a methodological starting point but as a fundamental principle that transcends the boundaries of rational discourse and empirical observation.

Key concepts such as duration, memory, freedom, and the critique of intellectualism are highlighted as central to Bergson's philosophy. He calls into question the adequacy of scientific and rationalist models to fully grasp the nature of reality, arguing for a philosophical approach that prioritizes the fluid, dynamic, and inherently qualitative aspects of life and consciousness. The chapter also touches on the philosophical implications of evolution, the role of intuition in understanding the continuous flow of existence, and the critique of static conceptions of being and knowledge.

In essence, Bergson advocates for a radical reevaluation of the way we understand the world, urging a shift from the analytical and dissective modes of thought that have dominated Western philosophy and science to a more holistic, intuitive, and dynamic perspective. This approach seeks to reconcile the human experience with the underlying realities of life, emphasizing growth, change, and the intrinsic unpredictability and creativity of the natural world.