French philosopher of evolution. He saw existence as a struggle between a person's life-force (élan vital) and the material world: people perceive the material world through the use of intellect, whereas the life-force is perceived through intuition. Bergson received the Nobel Prize in literature in 1927. His works include *Time and Free Will* (1889) and *Creative Evolution* (1907).
The already widespread interest in his work was further augmented in 1907 (1911) with the publication of Creative Evolution [L'Évolution Créatrice], which attracted much admiration as well as criticism. An English translation of Time and Free Will was published in 1910, with translations of Matter and Memory and Creative Evolution following in 1911. In the same year, Bergson gave several lectures in Britain, at the Universities of Oxford, Birmingham, and London, where he established good relations with, among others, Arthur Balfour (former British prime minister and future wartime secretary of state). In 1913, he made a lecture tour of the United States organized by Columbia University (where his first lecture was so popular that it reputedly caused one of the first traffic jams on Broadway). In 1914, he gave the Gifford lectures at the University of Edinburgh.

**Political Activity and Later Life**

As for most Europeans, the outbreak of World War I constituted a major turning point in Bergson's life. From this time, his energy was increasingly diverted away from philosophical research toward public political activity. He wrote articles and gave talks in support of the Allied war effort, including “The Meaning of the War” (1914) and “The Evolution of German Imperialism” (1915). In 1916, he travelled with other French academics to Madrid to encourage Spain to support the Allies. His most significant political activity during the war—both in terms of his own life and his influence on international politics—was the set of missions he undertook in the United States on behalf of the French government.

The French Prime Minister Aristide Briand called on Bergson to make an unofficial visit to the United States and make personal contact with President Woodrow Wilson to negotiate U.S. financial and military support for the Allies. Wilson had made such support contingent on the Allies’ agreeing to the creation of a League of Nations, but was not yet convinced of the commitment of the French government, partly due to its refusal to countenance the entry of Germany to such an organization prior to its defeat and the imposition of reparations. According to Bergson's biographer Philippe Soulez (1989), his interventions were decisive in convincing Wilson of both the French commitment to the League of Nations and the importance of the U.S. not only providing financial resources, but also adding its full military force to the struggle against the Axis powers.

Following the war, Bergson sought to retreat from public life and return his attention fully to his philosophical work. This return was interrupted, however, by his nomination in 1922 to the International Committee on Intellectual Cooperation, an advisory group for the League of Nations, whose other members included Paul Valéry, Thomas Mann, and Albert Einstein. Bergson's interpretation of Einstein's theory of relativity was published in 1922 (1965) as Duration and Simultaneity, leading to a controversial series of intellectual confrontations between them.

In 1925, ill health forced Bergson to retire from his public duties. On being awarded the 1927 Nobel Prize for Literature, he was unable to travel to Stockholm for the ceremony. He was nevertheless able to complete his most sociological and ethical work, The Two Sources of Morality and Religion [Les deux sources de la morale et de la religion] (1932), and publish a final collection of essays, The Creative Mind [La Pensée et le mouvant] (1933). Following the outbreak of World War II and the Nazi invasion of France, Bergson refused an offer of exemption from anti-Semitic treatment under the Vichy regime. Instead, despite a declared affinity with Catholicism, he registered as a Jew. He died shortly after of pulmonary congestion, on January 3rd, 1941.

**Three Major Works**

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Despite not engaging explicitly with social or political questions, Bergson's influential texts on time, memory, and evolution all have potentially wideranging social implications. Most of his major contributions to modern thought can be traced back to his analysis of a single problem: that of the spatialization of time, or more specifically, the confusion of duration with extensity.

For Bergson, the way we most commonly and immediately treat time in our everyday lives actually translates it into something more like space: the abstract, homogeneous medium of Newtonian physics, which is also implied in the time we measure and record with clocks, calendars, and timetables, treats instants as though they were points in space, and reduces time to the distance between them. Rendering time measurable, being able to compare different processes of change and movement, is so important to human activity, from planning and organizing in everyday life to carrying out scientific experiments, that this spatialized conception of time comes to be taken for granted: it is one of the “immediate givens of consciousness” referred to in the French title of *Time and Free Will*.

The critical aspect of Bergson's philosophy consists in asking us to give up this habit of thinking of time in terms of extension. A correlative gesture is the call to recognize the experience of a nonspatialized temporality, which he terms *duration (la durée)*. Duration can be accessed directly only through an act of intuition whereby we “insert ourselves” in duration. Where spatialized time implies an abstract medium in which things move, duration refers to “pure movement,” continuous growth. Pure movement does not mean conceiving of movement as independent of matter: it is, rather, a question of reversing the habitual direction of thought, such that, instead of taking the existence of objects in space for granted, and from this perspective considering their motion, we rather begin with the fact or experience of movement and consider secondarily that which moves.

A further key thesis of Bergson's philosophy is that duration—or reality itself—is creative in that every moment is radically new and qualitatively different from the last—even in (in fact because of) its continuity with those before and after. Thus, where clock time is extensive, quantitative, and homogeneous, duration is intensive, qualitative, and heterogeneous. Clock time implies predictability; duration implies inventiveness and radical change. These two tendencies—one creative and indeterminate, the other mechanizing—are found in all Bergson's major works. In *Time and Free Will*, he argues that our reduction of time to the status of a homogeneous spatial medium obscures the creative aspect of reality, making it seem as though everything in the universe were governed by deterministic laws—thus constructing a defense of freedom at the metaphysical and a psychological levels while also accounting for the efficacy of the quantitative understanding of time in both science and everyday life.

In *Matter and Memory*, it becomes clear that Bergson's central dualism between creative and deterministic tendencies is not simply one of false appearance (spatialized time-mechanism) versus underlying truth (duration-creativity); rather, they are two tendencies that in their very opposition to one another together constitute reality. On this basis, he argues for the immanent reality of both spirit and matter, moving beyond traditional philosophical disputes that treat idealism (the view that reality is in some sense a projection or construct of the mind) and realism (viewing the world as existing independently of mind) as mutually exclusive. This treatment also allows him to argue, contrary to contemporaneous scientific research, that the brain may be the instrument of recall without necessarily operating as a physical repository for memories.

In *Creative Evolution*, the two tendencies are found in biological life: on the one hand, a creative force...
(the élan vital) that is responsible for the ongoing, open-ended development of life in divergent directions; on the other hand, the restrictive effects of the matter in which this creative evolution must be realized. Once again, the critical aspect of Bergson's argument is based on an analysis of our tendency to reduce real time or movement (here in the form of the process of evolution) to a series of points along a scale (this time represented by the set of evolved species). As with his accounts of time and memory, this analysis leaves us with a flawed understanding of evolution and life as mechanical and determinate. While material constraints do have a mechanizing effect on the products of evolution, it is the very nature of the élan vital to resist this tendency in its ongoing creative development.

**Philosophy of Society**

It is perhaps unsurprising that a philosophy centered on a rigorous defense of freedom, creativity, and change, and which incorporated critical accounts of the limitations of scientific and intellectual thinking, should have appealed to those concerned with social and political reform. Before World War I, a number of contemporaries, such as Péguy and Sorel, perceived the sociopolitical potential of Bergson's philosophy and urged him to turn his attention more firmly in the direction of politics and social movements.

Sorel published five articles on Bergson in the journal *Mouvement socialiste* and along with Edouard Berth, promoted the project of bringing together the thought of Bergson and Karl Marx. Bergson himself was sympathetic to these calls, as he was to Albert Adès's request in 1918 that he dedicate a series of seminars to reframing his earlier work in more practically political terms. Yet despite an interest in political economy and the study of society demonstrated in his lycée teaching and in the social significance he attributed to laughter in his short book on the subject, it was not until his final work, appearing twenty-five years after *Creative Evolution*, that he directly addressed social and political questions in detail.

Bergson's final major work, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, comprises a genealogical and philosophical enquiry into the nature of society, an account of the sociocultural role and origins of religion and morality, a socioevolutionary theory of fiction, and a diagnosis of the problems of the modern political era. Here the creative and mechanizing tendencies that *Creative Evolution* accounted for in biological life (and that can be traced all the way back to the distinction between duration and extensity of Bergson's early work) are addressed in terms of human society and culture, where they constitute the two sources of divergent forms of society: morality and religion. At the same time, this retrospectively makes clear the ethical, social, and political significance of the opposition between duration and extensity (or creativity and mechanization) explored in the metaphysical, psychological, and biological registers of his previous works.

In *Two Sources*, not only intelligence, but also sociality are treated as evolved human traits that are beneficial for survival and carry certain drawbacks. Though, following *Creative Evolution*, these traits are the product of the creative tendency in biological life, it is the mechanizing tendency that most easily takes the dominant role in organizing human society.

Intelligence poses a threat to societies in the form of individualism. The role of morality is to keep such threats in check by operating as a form of social pressure to ensure that each member of the group adheres to its laws, customs, and norms. However, for Bergson, morality in the form of pressure is the product of the tendency in life toward stasis or closure. He refers to it as “closed morality” and to the society it helps preserve as a “closed society.” However, since the respect and responsibility
members owe one another within the closed society do not extend to those outside its walls (real or symbolic), the threat of individualism reemerges at the intersocial level, with whole communities endangering one another.

Hence, in contrast to the closed society, Bergson conceives of an alternative social form that would derive from life's creative tendency—the open society made possible by open morality. The latter would be based on aspiration rather than on pressure, and an expression of the unbounded creativity of living evolution would constitute the basis for a society with neither restrictions on membership nor implicit sanctioning of destruction of life—a kind of ethical cosmopolitanism with biological roots.

Though Bergson recognized that there are huge obstacles to achieving the open society, he also argued that, in the modern era, when the mechanizing tendency toward the closed society is supplemented by the destructive power of mechanized warfare, such that entire national populations face the threat of extinction, it is more urgent than ever for humanity to try to make the immense effort required.

In the course of his discussion of the ethical movement from the closed to the open, Bergson pays close attention to the role of religion, distinguishing the static religion of the closed society from the dynamic religion associated with those mystic figures that exhibit a boundless and unconditional love toward others (Christ being archetypal). A particularly striking aspect of Bergson's account is his theory of fabulation in which he attributes an evolutionary and social function to the human capacity to construct and believe in the fictional (this being one of the conditions making religious belief possible in the first place).

The emphasis he placed on the figure of the true mystic seems to be one reason for the relative neglect of this text among Bergson's works (along with its late appearance). Hence, its potential value for the philosophy of society, political theory, the sociology of religion, and indeed, the social and political study of fictionalizing more widely, has only recently begun to be considered.

See also Darwinism and Social Darwinism; Empire and Political Thought; Gramsci, Antonio; Political Philosophy and Political Thought; Popper, Karl; Sorel, Georges; Twentieth-Century Political Thought; United Nations, Theories of the

Further Readings

- Bergson, Henri. (1922) 1965. Duration and Simultaneity, with Reference to Einstein's Theory. Reprint, Bobbs-Merrill Indianapolis, IN.

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