

French Vitalism: Bergson

1. Welcome to yet another video lecture on late nineteenth century critiques of the rising hegemony of science during the industrial revolution. In past lectures we have explored philosophical idealism as an alternative to mechanistic materialism. At the turn of the nineteenth century, transcendental idealism argued that the objective world of science was ultimately the outer expression of an inner transcendental subjectivity. Americans operationalized this insight into the principle of mind over matter in the practical realms of morality, health and wealth. British idealists would adopt a developmental model of evolution to critique the scientific reduction of reality to elemental algorithms and initial conditions in favor of a teleological, purposeful understanding of reality in terms of its ultimate end, that is, that of mature human flourishing. In this lecture we will be exploring the French contribution to this same movement—the romantic vitalism of Henri Bergson
2. Bergson argued for an orientation to reality that took as its model neither matter nor mind but life. Complementing the analytical objectivity of modern science and the expressive subjectivity of modern romanticism, was a third perspective, a model of living interdependence drawn from life in which organisms evolve together, adapting to one another but in so doing also shaping each other, thereby creating the very ecosystem they inhabit. Unlike Darwinian evolution life is not simply adaptation but also creation.
3. Evolution as creation is also different from British idealism's model of developmental maturation. True creativity, whether in nature, or in art and or even in technological invention is unpredictable, often even inconceivable in advance of its actual concrete emergence. Bergson argues that evolution does not follow a predetermined trajectory. As in later existentialism, existence precedes essence. Life creates its path in the walking of it. In retrospect an invention may appear inevitable, but an invention can also create new needs that did not exist, were not even conceivable in advance. Aristotle for example did not “lack” a smart phone. He did not need one, more, he could not have even conceived of one, let alone predict its future invention. So too disembodied from its surrounding ecosystem, an organic process may appear to function as a deterministic algorithm. But isolated organic processes under experimental conditions in the lab is not life in the world where conditions are not controlled, and so all other things cannot be taken for granted,

and so ignored. Thus existence does not follow but precedes essence, actuality does not arise from but grounds possibility. Contingency, not determinism, subjectivity not objectivity is fundamental.

4. Ultimately then, Bergson's critique of modern science is not its focus on matter over spirit or on origin over end, but rather on its being abstract and analytical, reducing motion, change, ultimately life itself to an algorithmic sequence of discrete mathematical points and instants. Such an approach to reality is essential for the prediction and control of our environment, for mastering nature to serve human welfare. But like James and other nineteenth century idealists, Bergson will place will over intellect, engagement over abstract theory, subjective experience over its objectification. Reality, experienced concretely and holistically as vibrant and alive, not as a "dead mechanism," but as an *élan vitale*.
5. Time will be the workbench on which Bergson works out his prioritization of life over object, consciousness creativity over deterministic causality. He contrasts the "clock time" of modern science from the "lived" time (duration or *duree*) of consciousness. Galileo and Descartes founded modern science on the mapping of movement and change upon a geometrical grid of dimensionless points and timeless instants. Time thereby becomes effectively "spatialized" as "fourth dimension" on the same geometrical grid. This geometrical space time grid then becomes a "block universe" in James deprecating phrase, where past, present and future are merely psychological appearances, that is, how the line appears at different points along its static extension. Motion is frozen into a static geometrical grid.
6. Bergson argued by contrast, that while a useful abstraction, science's space-time grid is just that, an abstraction from lived reality. Lived reality is organic, engaged and continuous rather than objective, digital and discrete. Places and moments are not dimensionless points or timeless instants. Places are inhabited. They can be nested or overlap. Each moment has its own *duree*, or "duration", its own measure, pacing and rhythm. Not all things can be mapped on the same grid, or sound to the same metronome.
7. For example, the past is not a mechanical cause discrete and separate from its present effect. Rather the past "flows" into the present to which it remains present as eddies of

memory. So too the future is not some predictable goal towards which the present is to be understood as a mere means. Rather the present is pregnant with a future that cannot be fully, concretely predicted until it emerges. A dialogue is not a succession of alternating monologues. In speaking I address my audience. What has just been said informs my response to them.

8. So too, creativity by definition, cannot be the unfolding of a pre-determined formula. It is opportunistic and contingent. It is neither a mechanism nor an algorithm, Reality is alive and a whole, all of a piece.
9. So too spatially, where does one organism end and its environs begin? Are the three pounds of bacteria in our gut, our biome, part of us or part of our environment? Or the water in our bloodstream, or the air in our lungs? All organs are organisms in their own right, and all organisms, organs of their larger ecosystem. Depending upon one's perspective and interest we are each both one organism and a society of organisms.
10. Bergson's point in all this, again, is not to refute science, but to put science in its proper place. Science is a tool by which the intellect carves the world up into objects we can manipulate and control, processes we can trigger and optimize. Science enables us to technologically reshape our world for our own utility. He does not debate its value but its hegemony in contemporary culture.
11. In fact Bergson will draw upon a new technology that had just arisen to model the scientific view of the world—the movie. Scientific space-time is cinematic he argues, a succession of static images to abstractly simulate movement. An algorithm to conceptually simulate life.
12. Concrete living reality by contrast is not static but dynamic, not discrete but continuous. Reality in other words, is energy, in the literal Greek sense of *energeia*, from *ergon*, work. Reality is ever “at work,” crafting and creating what exists only as we live into it. The intellect may recognize patterns, but the will produces the prototype, which if imitated and reproduced becomes the pattern.
13. Reality is also ever full, a *plenum*. Absence, lack, negation—what traditionally is thought to precede actuality, and drives becoming, these are not real, Bergson argues, but relative to what one is looking for. Empty rooms are still full of air. Famously in discovering the new world Columbus writes that he has encountered an “empty” continent ripe for the

taking. Of course he also notes the flora and fauna as well as the numerous natives that inhabit the land.. But natives are part of the natural world, they belong with other animals and vegetation not with the civilized world.

14. Bergson will focus not on desire which can be defined by what one lacks but does not presently have. As Lacan has argued, the logic of desire is to seek means for satisfy a lack. Rather his stress is on joy, *juissance*, the sheer delight that lies in the very performance of the activity. And joy or delight not as a static state of mind or object of consciousness , but joy, as active, not in an instant but as a moment which takes time, which has its own *duree*. Joy as active enjoying.
15. Bergson will look to art to redeem the mechanism, the instrumental rationality of the industrial age. For art if it is creative, is not a means to satisfy goals we already have. Creative art evokes new ways of seeing and feeling, new ways of thinking and acting, new ways of living. He is both inspired by and himself helped *to* inspire a new genre of painting, one that broke with both classical and romantic schools of art, cubism. For what is characteristic of cubist art is that the image on the canvas is not static but unstable. In combining multiple angles and surfaces of its subject, it is less a representation of what it depicts, but rather the encounter of a presence that one's eyes cannot pin down or resolve into a static image.
16. Bergson argued that music illustrates this logic of life the best. For music cannot even be heard as music in a discrete instant. Music includes the timing between the notes. A melody is not simply a succession of notes but a continuous movement of sound. While it can be analytically dissected into separate notes on a page in an actual performance its first notes are not gone remain resonant as the music continues on to its close. The performance is a single event, a moment in the life of musician and audience, not a succession of sense data across instants, but an ongoing play of tones and timing, chords and pauses mutually shaping and enhancing one another. Life is more like a symphony, a symphony more like life, than either are to a machine or an algorithm.
17. As Charles Taylor has emphasized in his history of secularity, that with thinkers like Bergson, art takes on a religious aura; the artist becomes a secular seer, a visionary or prophet whose work offers new ways of connecting to what is still held sacred, however inchoately. Art becomes literally "*avant garde*, the cutting edge of cultural evolution. Its

very creative originality transgresses settled canons, challenging viewers and audiences to see and hear in new ways. Thus we should not expect authentically creative art to be commercially successful art, at least not at the moment of its original unveiling or opening performance. Great artists, like powerful prophets are more likely to be rejected than embraced. Both need time to work their magic on their audiences, to school them into new ways of seeing and hearing, thinking and living. Like Augustine argued about the sacred host in the Eucharist, in consuming it, it consumes us transforming us into the Body of Christ for our own time and place.

18. Can such art reach a mass audience? If it cannot be mass produced, can it at least be mass reproduced in images and recordings for a mass market?
19. Einstein and Bergson encountered one another in a public debate over the nature of time after Einstein's publication of his work on relativity. Scientists thought won that debate. It seemed to them that Bergson did not understand relativity theory at all, and that he was stubbornly insisting on a traditional view of time that had now been scientifically refuted. Certainly the effect of the debate was for Bergson, once applauded as the greatest philosopher of his generation, to be dismissed by "serious" thinkers as obsolete, his "vitalism" an illusion, a misunderstanding of the nature of life.
20. However with the recent evolution of electronic and digital technologies, and with questions rising over the relationship between the virtual and the real, recent thinkers, especially Giles Deleuze have sought to retrieve Bergson's distinction between the digital and the real. Take digitally engineered music with its surreal clarity, crisp precision and perfect pitch that can "perfect" a musician's performance, or even create music that could never be performed in real life by any actual musicians however gifted. Or take recent 4K high definition video recordings whose resolution exceeds that of the human eye. What to make of such "better than real" hyperreality? Does it enhance or degrade human life? Does it prove that reality is itself ultimately digital? Or does the retro nostalgia for analogue phonographs, photographs and film, let alone the continued appeal of live performances, live theater, and live band tours, not evidence that Bergson was onto something here however ineffable and elusive. Is Bergson right that our sensory experience is not ultimately reducible to an algorithm of discrete sense data across consecutive instants. Is it true that while VR may simulate experience, still, however

immersive, it remains but a simulation, not real life, not what makes life worth living. Is VR better treated a temptation to escape from “real life”? Is it a profanation of all we hold sacred?

21. Finally, as with British and American philosophers of religion, Bergson will also apply his distinction between static and living realities to the history and variety of religious belief and practice. While he resists a developmental teleology as undermining the unpredictability of creativity and originality, he will nevertheless decry “primitive” religion as static, its natural vitality frozen by unthinking conformity and mindless repetition, ultimately rotting into decadent sensationalism and extravagance. He will also condemn traditional institutional Christianity for enforcing a closed orthodoxy, that routinizes its founding inspiration and charisma into similarly empty, moribund ritual and childlike magical sentimentality.
22. As we have already seen with his American contemporary William James, Bergson argues that for religion to be vital and relevant it must remain open and creative, fearlessly tapping the interior depths and protean motility of that cosmic *elan vitale*, beyond any and all word and image. Reality is movement and movement is life. Life is creativity and creativity is life. and its creativity that generates time, and time creativity. And all of these transcendentals: movement, life, creativity, time, all are functions of will over intellect, feeling and desire over logic and system.
23. In short, for Bergson, “primitive” religion is “popular” religion, and institutional religion, mass religion. Both deaden originality and creativity, spontaneity and authenticity. Like mass culture, static mass religion comforts and entertains more than enlivens and empowers. It sanctifies the old order rather than prophesying anything new. Institutional religion is more a convenience and a commodity than a numinous revelation of a sacred that is both *tremendum* and *fascinans*, awesome and sublime.
24. Like Britain, France too will feel summoned to civilize and evangelize. And, like Britain, it will build an empire to feed its industrial might while also serving as the *avant garde* for humanity’s ongoing evolution.
25. In closing this series of lectures on industrial idealism, let us now turn to the late comer in European colonial idealism, the German empire. By 1900 it is a bare thirty years old, its colonial ambitions throttled by rival empires already in place. Consequently in contrast to

the heady optimism of the United States, Britain and France, German thought will be pessimistic, casting a cynical eye on its rivals as already in civilizational decline. German *Kultur* will alone be left standing as the final hope for a humanity of noble dignity and selfless excellence worthy of the children of God.