

Viewpoints

A critical exposition of Bergson's process philosophy

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doi: [10.33750/ijhi.v5i3.154](https://doi.org/10.33750/ijhi.v5i3.154)**Abstract**

This paper is a critical and expository study of the basic ideas in the process thought of Henri Bergson. Process philosophy is one of the oldest traditions in metaphysics, traceable to the doctrine of Heraclitus, an ancient Greek thinker. It is opposed to the idea of the Milesian thinkers like Thales and Anaximenes, who believed that reality consists of an unchanging substance that persists. Overtime, the view that reality is a novelty and, as such creative became a discourse of interest, either implicitly or explicitly, for many philosophers in the different epochs of western philosophy. As a result, different ideas emerged in an attempt to explain processes. However, these ideas have been discovered to point toward two directions – mechanism and finalism. As against this stance which pointed toward an end to the creative and novel posture of reality, Henri Bergson came up with his philosophy of multiple virtualities. However, how successful was his project? In this paper, therefore, we critically assess some strengths and weaknesses of the basic ideas in his thought process. However, though we have noted some inherent problems in his thought, Bergson's idea of reality as multiple virtualities gives room to reality as continually processual, overcoming the mechanistic or finalistic you of other thinkers.

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**1. Introduction**

Henri Bergson's process thought, distinctively dissociated from other process thinkers through the role of the *elan vital* in the creative process, is a reaction to two basic views of other process theorists. For Bergson, the existing process theories as presented by other process philosophers, can collectively be classified into mechanism and finalism (teleology). Bergson believes that though these two theories see reality as a process, they fail to offer a better understanding of the process's dynamism and creativity as they tend to conceive of the process as a machine or moving towards a predestined end. The problem created by these two theories is a projection of an end to and lack of creativity in the processual unfolding of reality. With his notion of the *elan vital* and its role in the continuous string of processes, Bergson attempts to reconstruct the nature of reality as

constantly unfolding in a more creative direction than assumed by both mechanism and finalism.

2. Understanding Process Philosophy

In thinking about ontology as a study that deals with being and existence (Udoh, 2016, p. 6), we can adopt an ontology that either takes substances or processes as primary (Winters, 2017, p. x). However, substance metaphysics has been the standard approach in the Western philosophical tradition (Armstrong, 1997, p. 5). Accordingly, substance philosophy (metaphysics) seeks to understand reality by subordinating them to substantial things. However, while substance metaphysicians argue that reality is fundamentally comprised of distinct individuals that endure through time, process metaphysicians hold that reality is a complex configuration of interacting processes (Winters 2017, p. 90).

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Process philosophy, therefore, pivots on the thesis that the processual nature of existence is a fundamental fact with which any adequate metaphysics must come to terms. Bearing in mind that the primary task of metaphysics is to provide a cogent and plausible account of the nature of reality. At the broadest, most synoptic, and most comprehensive level, process philosophy seeks to help us understand the nature of things to characterize and explain the realities we encounter in the world about us and to render intelligible the world as our experience presents it to us. Moreover, it is to this mission of enabling us to characterize, describe, clarify, and explain the most general features of the real that process philosophy addresses itself in its characteristic way (Rescher, 1996 p. 8).

Process philosophy is that type of philosophy that takes reality to consist in process or processes, and which, if it acknowledges elements other than process, comprehends these elements, at least partially, within a process (Reck, 1975, p. 58). It centers on the claim that creativity is fundamental to the nature of things and that genuine novelty emerges within the process (Lawhead, 2002, p. 479). As a study in metaphysics, the key issues that concern process philosophizing as distinct from substance philosophy/metaphysics are those of significance, centrality, priority, and emphasis. In this regard, process philosophy emphasizes that the holistic conception of any reality in the world calls for prioritizing activity over substance, process over product, change over persistence, and novelty over continuity. Process philosophy simply represents “the anti-substantial trend” in philosophy (Umotong, 2018, p.115)

A process is a coordinated group of changes in the complex of reality (Rescher, 1996, p.38). As a philosophical tradition, it has been described as an attempt to take time and continuity seriously (Lee, 1973, p.3). The idea of process describes an actual or possible occurrence that consists of an integrated series of connected developments unfolding in programmatic coordination. It is an orchestrated series of occurrences that are systematically linked to one another either causally or functionally (Rescher, 2000, p. 22). Rescher further noted that "the inherent futurity of process is an exfoliation of the real by successively actualizing possibilities that are subsequently left behind as the process unfolds (p. 22). Worthy of note is the fact that processes develop over time. As a result, any particular natural process is a combination of existence in the present with tentacles that reach into the past and future.

The idea of process represents a categorical concept that provides a thought instrument for organizing the knowledge afforded us by experience concerning the course of events in the world. As a categorical concept, it begins with a series of hypothetical references to establish the conclusion that some *apriori* precondition, or set of conditions, must be posited to account for the concept with which we began (Hanks, 1975, p. 24). For a process-oriented mentality, therefore, it is the event that constitutes the basic unit of experience (Hanks, 1975, p. 25).

3. Basic Ideas of Bergson's process philosophy

In developing his process thought, Bergson maintains that the philosophical method should be quite unique and different from the scientific method. However, he believes that any approach to philosophy should not be presumed to stand outside of time. For him, a method cannot be separated from the time in which it is written, the revelation of the ontology of time as duration (*durée*), or in the alteration of the object it purports to know (Atkinson, 2013, p. 89). The method of Bergsonism reflects the influence of his philosophical training, which was characterized by the antagonism between the two predominant French philosophical traditions of his time. Reflecting upon this French philosophical history, he sought to develop a method to integrate individual thinkers' substantial differences into a common movement. As later observed by Atkinson, this inclination towards integration marks a shift from his earlier work, where he emphasized separating his theory of duration from the spatializing tendency in philosophy and science (2013, p. 90).

Bergson is most concerned about establishing a method for philosophy because he thinks that philosophy lacks precision (Bergson, 1946, p. 1), and this lack of precision in the discipline arises from its methods. According to him, if we turn to look at the issue of precision in philosophy generally or in other disciplines, we may be made to question the idea that precision is a matter, at the superficial level, of style or, more deeply, of a method which could be described independently of the subject-matter to which it is to be applied (Moore, 1996, p. 16). While the test of precision is a matter of method, it exceeds method to focus on the matter of subject-object also. In other words, for a method to be precise, it should be able also to establish a precise relationship between the knowing subject and the object of knowledge. But Bergson is of the opinion that if we adopt a subject-matter-specific view of precision, then the discipline of philosophy will be plunged into a serious dilemma; for in so far as philosophy aspires to the abstract, that is, to establishing theses which would hold independently of any particular subject-matter, it risks losing the possibility of precision together (Moore, 1996, p.16). In *Creative mind* (1946), he sees philosophy as assuming the position of a self-contained system. This assumption of a self-contained status bars philosophy from attaining precision and is incapable of offering an acceptable and satisfactory explanation of reality. He opines:

The fact is that a self-contained (vrai) system is an assemblage of conceptions so abstract, and consequently so vast, that it might contain, aside from the real, all that is possible and even impossible. The only explanation we should accept as satisfactory is one which fits tightly to its object, with no space between them, no crevice in which any other explanation might equally be well lodged; one which fits the object only and to which alone the object lends itself. Scientific explanation can be of such kind; it involves absolute precision and complete or mounting evidence. Can one say as much for philosophical theories? (1946, p. 8-9).

From the above excerpts, Bergson is of the opinion that philosophical claims lack precision because in their appeal to abstractness, they tend to remain indifferent to or be affected by the real facts such as, for instance, the presence of plants in the world. The outcome is that our knowledge of this reality could be easily blurred. For Bergson, therefore, philosophical work of any sort has to be rooted in the concrete because if it fails to reckon fully with the concrete nature of appropriate subject-matter, the formal trappings of knowledge of any reality will be vain (Moore, 1996, p. 17).

Bergson says that there are two profoundly different ways of knowing a thing (Stumpf and Fieser, 2012, p. 385). In the first way, we "move around" the object, and in a second way, we "enter into it" (Bergson, n.d, p. 1). Knowledge derived in the first way depends on the vantage point from which we observe an object; therefore, this knowledge will be different for each observer and, on that account, relative. Moreover, knowledge derived by observation is expressed in symbols, where symbols can refer not only to this specific object but to any and all similar objects. But the second kind of knowledge, however, is absolute, according to Bergson, because in this case, by entering into the object, we overcome the limitations of any particular perspective and grasp the object as it really is (Stumpf and Fieser, 2012, pp. 385-6). Bergson illustrates these two methods of knowing with various examples. In one such example, he states:

Consider, for example, the movement of an object in space. My perception of the motion will vary with the point of view, moving or stationary, from which I observe it. My expression of it will vary with the systems of axes, or the points of reference, to which I relate it; that is, with the symbols by which I translate it. For this double reason I call such motion relative: in the one case, as in the other, I am placed outside the object itself. But when I speak of an absolute movement, I am attributing to the moving object an interior and, so to speak, states of mind; I also imply that I am in sympathy with those states, and that I insert myself in them by an effort of imagination. Then, according as the object is moving or stationary, according as it adopts one movement or another, what I experience will vary. And what I experience will depend neither on the point of view I may take up in regard to the object, since I am inside the object itself, nor on the symbols by which I may translate the motion, since I have rejected all translations in order to possess the original. In short, I shall no longer grasp the movement from without, remaining where I am, but from where it is, from within, as it is in itself. I shall possess an absolute (Bergson, n.d, pp. 2-3).

Bergson means that when we move around an object, our knowledge of it is relative, and, in this case, we cannot have proper knowledge of it. This is what some philosophers and metaphysicians attempt to do, and this leads to a relative knowledge of reality. However, by entering into the object, we have absolute knowledge of the object in its original state. According to Bergson, the two faculties of knowledge correspond to the two ways of knowing intellect and intuition.

4. Intellect and Intuition

Henri Bergson's metaphysics process is centered on his conviction that there are two fundamental ways of knowing the world; the intellect and intuition (Akpan 2012). Lawhead (2002) further comments that his entire philosophy is

permeated by the division between these two competing approaches to epistemology. However, how do these two methods identified by Bergson affects our knowledge? Bergson attempts to establish a distinction by observing that when we go around an object, we only end up analyzing the object from different viewpoints. Any knowledge arrived at as a result of the analysis is derived from the intellect. The intellect, therefore, provides knowledge based on analysis, and things are understood here in terms of concepts, categories, and symbols (Akpan, 2012, p. 313). This method is generally employed as the scientific method of knowing. Bergson believes that in the end, scientific meaning, in so far as it is based on analysis, misrepresents the nature of whatever object it analyzes.

But what exactly is wrong with the intellect, and why is it wrong to rely on the method of analysis in the quest to unfold reality? For Bergson, ironically, the analytic intellect learns by destroying the essence of the object it analyzes. He calls this essence of the object "duration," which is a dynamic, thriving, pulsing, living and continuing existence for him. The analysis method destroys this essential duration by separating into several independent and static parts what is a unified, organic and dynamic reality in true life. Bergson, therefore, points out two fundamental defects in the analysis method. First is the problem of representing the object of knowledge in terms of concepts and their associated symbols, thus blurring the true nature of reality (Akpan, 2012, p. 313). The second problem is that, in trying to capture the object in concepts and language, the analysis method must reduce it to universal qualities. This ordinarily would strip the object of its unique feature and concreteness, as it becomes a barren abstraction (Akpan, 2012, p. 313).

According to Le Roy, when we apply analysis to our operations of knowledge, it shows us that our understanding parcels out, arrests, and quantifies, whereas reality, as it appears to immediate intuition, is a moving series, a flux of blended qualities (1912, p. 12). This also means that the intellect solidifies whatever it touches, presenting us with a common-sense understanding. According to Bergson, the form of knowledge derived from the analytic intellect was not originally meant to help us grasp reality in its essential form. Rather, it is meant to help us understand the practical aspect of it. Because of this, therefore, Bergson says that the intellectual method of analysis is not ideal for philosophical speculation.

But if the intellect cannot be relied upon as a source of metaphysical knowledge, how can we come to terms with the basic nature of reality? Bergson will respond that such knowledge is only possible through intuition. Intuition is, for Bergson, the pure method of philosophy. It has its rules centered on what Bergson terms "precision." According to him, an absolute reality could only be given by intuition, while everything else falls within the province of analysis. What then does Bergson mean by intuition? For him, "By intuition is meant the kind of intellectual sympathy by which one places oneself within an object in order to coincide with what is unique in it and consequently inexpressible" (Bergson, n.d, p.7). This means that, for Bergson, the method of intuition helps one to enter into the object of knowledge. it

brings absolute knowledge because in entering into the object of knowledge, one overcomes the limitations of any particular perspective and grasps the object that it really is. For Bergson, if there is any means of having absolute instead of relative knowledge of reality, of placing oneself within it instead of looking at it from outside point of view, of having intuition instead of making the analysis; or seizing it without any expression, translation or symbolic representation, then metaphysics is the means. Metaphysics, then, becomes, for Bergson, the science which claims to dispense with symbols; the science of intuition (Bergson, n.d, p. 9).

There is a fundamental problem with Bergson's faith in intuition. Let us take, for instance, the fact that intuition has no laid down principles through which it could be approached. How possible, then, is it for two different people to intuit the same knowledge? As difficult as this may sound, Bergson believes that it is possible because the method of intuition is precise. In this sense, Bergson presents metaphysics as a discipline that just any individual cannot undertake, but one with utmost interest for precision.

5. The Process of Time and Duration

Having established intuition as the method of his philosophy, Bergson moved on to focus on time as the primary quantifier of reality as we live and observe it. The task of thinking in real time, or what he calls *duree* (duration), is fundamental to Bergson (Hill, 2013, p. 301). The phenomenon of time is significant in Bergson's philosophy, for it seems to be the bridge that overcomes the dichotomy between the internal mind and the external world (Akpan, 2012, p. 316). Bergson urges us to think time concretely; he invites us to consider the real act of moving, the happening of what happens and asks us to construe movement in terms of qualitative change, not as change that we measure after the fact and map into space (Guerlac, 2006, p. 1). When we see time, Bergson notes, as an intellectual, scientific concept, that is, as a line, or a circle, time stops moving. Time, conceived in this manner fails to capture the true novelty in nature because we advertently turn it (time) into space.

Change presupposes time; it is, in fact, nothing but a temporal process; however, change may be defined, it certainly cannot be defined unless time is taken into account (Cunningham, 1914, p. 525). Without reference to time, the attempt to define change will involve a flagrant contradiction. So, to be conscious, at least in the sense that the finite individual is conscious, is just to be in time. Hence, it follows that existence, as a conscious experience, is essentially temporal in its nature; conscious experience means enduring from moment to moment within the stream of time (Cunningham, 1914).

Bergson differentiates between spatial time (what he also calls scientific or clock time) and duration (real-time). Spatial time is an intellectual, scientific concept while duration is time as we experience and live it. In time and free will, Bergson approaches duration as a consciousness of that which endures. According to him, to exist means to endure, and to endure is to be "a qualitative multiplicity with no likeness to number; an organic evolution which is yet not an increasing quantity; a pure heterogeneity within which there

are no distinct qualities" (2001, p. 226). Duration (real time) is Bergson's term for consciousness's dynamic, ever-changing nature, a consciousness expressed and manifested in and through and- as time. From Bergson's perspective, duration is an indivisible fusion of manyness and oneness; it is the ongoing, dynamic, temporal flux of awareness; it is a flowing that is ever new and always unpredictable; it is the continual, seamless, interconnected, immeasurable movement of our awareness, manifesting simultaneously as both the knower and what is known (Barnard, 2011, p. 6-7).

Duration, then, is heterogeneous. It is the time that endures, the real-time. To endure, therefore, means to pass on to the absolutely new and to do this in a manner that is, by its very nature, unforeseeable. If time is to be thought of as real, Bergson argues, then the new must be ever up-springing, and the forms that arise must be essentially unforeseeable; otherwise, time is only repetition and not in any sense a reality. In duration and simultaneity, he succinctly explains his position thus:

Duration is essentially a continuation of what no longer exists into what does exist. This is real time, perceived and lived. This is also any conceived time, because we cannot conceive a time without imagining it as perceived and lived. Duration therefore implies consciousness; and we place consciousness at the heart of things for the very reason that we credit them with a time that endures (1965, p. 49).

Bergson, therefore, conceives time as a force. This is what he implies by real duration. He argues that western philosophy has lost sight of the power of time as the productive force that displays the emergence of the absolutely new. Everything exists in time, and time is the reality that endures.

Bergson believes that metaphysics as a study of reality should begin with the most concrete reality. This concrete reality is the "self." But how do we distinguish true self when all we do is to analyze it? This does not pose a problem to Bergson. This is because he employs a corresponding approach from his two concepts of time to sustain that there are two aspects of the self. Accordingly, he points out the two aspects of self as the "superficial self" and the "real self." The superficial self has to do with a succession of psychological states which can best be understood through analysis. However, Bergson refers to the enduring and continuous self by the real self. But what can we observe from Bergson's classification of the self? One thing comes to our mind, Kant's noumena and phenomena. As against Kant's argument that we cannot know the real self, Bergson maintains that we can know the real self-intuition by living in it, and thus, we can apprehend it by a form of knowledge that eludes the senses as well as the intellect (Lawhead, 2002, p.484). Bergson notes that though our intellects can comprehend static parts, we cannot grasp movement or duration. Only intuition can grasp duration, and reality can only be unveiled by duration (Akpan, 2012, p.318).

6. *Elan Vital* as the Creative Force of Life

In developing his thought process, Bergson assesses other philosophers' ideas on change and development. This is

because, for him, the main task of contemporary philosophy should be the intention to provide a philosophical theory of development (Horkheimer, 2005). However, he recognized that the philosophers of development had failed in this task. Bergson begins with an investigation into the doctrines of Spencer, Darwin, Lamarck, the neo-Darwinians, and the neo-Lamarckians. For him, it is correct to say that the essence of the world, “substance” is development; nevertheless, any philosophy that describes being as resting in itself, persisting in all changes and eternally remaining the same essence, misses the truth. Change is not merely the external, but rather the very core of being and it is impossible to explain the world with the schema of a fixed thing that only changes its modes of appearance (Horkheimer, 2005, p. 10).

Bergson’s conviction is that the concept of the thing that persists in its changing circumstances is merely formed to cope with life’s practical tasks, whereas it does not imply the true state of reality. Instead, Bergson says it “belongs to the picture of the world embedded deep in consciousness by linguistic conviction and sketched out by the understanding for practical goals” (Horkheimer, 2005, p. 10). Bergson develops his argument that every evolutionary theory contains assumptions inherited from classical philosophy. He then classified these theories into two main standpoints: mechanism and finalism.

Mechanistic theories maintain the view that reality is a complete system, constantly manifesting in different levels. On the other hand, finalism is the view that a particular reality recognizes its challenges in a given environment and then evolves intending to overcome them (Guerrero-Bosagna, 2012, p.287). Bergson contends that evolutionary history is divided into stages that can be seen all at once from spatialized time (Bergson, 1944, p. 233). According to him, such a conception of time, where it is seen as a series of intervals rather than a continuum, is embedded in an ancient metaphysics concerned with the analysis of time into a series of state-of-affairs, implying an underlying classical metaphysics. In contrast, becoming, for Bergson, is among the most striking characteristics of life. Therefore, because most evolutionary theorists understand time, Bergson describes these theories as mechanism and finalism in that they understand “process” and “evolution” as agglomerations or series of states of affairs.

Accordingly, Bergson argues that the mechanistic or finalistic conception of the process cannot explain the change or creativity that is so evident in the world. Change, novelty or creativity, Bergson concludes, is best explained in terms of an *elan vital*, a vital impulse, which drives all organisms toward constantly more complicated and higher types of organization. Bergson maintains that this vital impulse is the interior element of all living things and is the creative power that moves in unbroken continuity through all things. For Bergson, “all things are motivated by this vital impulse, and it is the fundamental reality” (Stumpf and Fieser, 2003, p.414).

The *elan vital* is the essential interior element of all living things and is the creative force or power that moves in unbroken continuity through all things. It is what Imre Lakatos will call the “hardcore” of scientific research (Essien,

2013, p.73). The *elan vital* is the creative force or power that moves in unbroken continuity through all things. Through his description of the *elan vital*, Bergson sees reality as a dynamic process that possesses a spiritual force that provides novelty to the world. However, it caused to wonder if Bergson’s vital impulse could be conceived as an activity of consciousness. In tackling this doubt, Bergson employs tact by appealing to supra-consciousness as against mere consciousness. Hence, Bergson describes this vital force as being of God whom he sees as the source of all realities.

7. Evaluation

Henri Bergson could best be described as a problem-focused process thinker. In his thought, he thinks about philosophy in terms of the history of its problems, most of which he believes are false problems. According to Moore (1996, p.97), these problems and false problems are the mechanistic and finalistic conceptions of realities. As against these positions, Bergson sees the process of reality as unending. For him, reality has an interior element (the *elan vital*) change to attain novelty of a particular reality. In Bergson’s process philosophy, reality or existence is fundamentally conceived of as an activity. Life is activity, and time is its substance of it. The intellect is a product of the activity of life created by evolution for the practical purposes of life. It is one means of achieving his life purpose, of pushing forward the active principle, the vital impulse. This partial and derived nature of the understanding is due to the contradictions attached to its concepts, which disappear when the true nature of reality is grasped (Carr 1909, p.43-4).

The philosophy of Bergson is one of action, process, and movement. He offers a philosophy that makes changes its basic principle. However, two of his anchor points suffer serious criticism. First is his theory of intuition. The problem is, “to what extent do we have such intuition that Bergson talks about?” Or how do we come to measure our intuition, and with what criterion should we use to assess the inter-subjective verification that each individual intuition is correct? Following these questions, some scholars, like Akpan (2013), have accused Bergson’s philosophy of being somewhat mystical. According to him, mystical experience derived from intuition cannot give objective knowledge. Hence, he sees Bergson as, more or less, a subjectivist and adherent problem.

Again, his notion of *elan vital* is another well-criticized part of his philosophy. Bergson describes life as an activity, effort, explosive force, and the impulse to create. But following from the unique character of his vital impulse, Barr (1913, p.647), asks “what meaning can be given to activity without something active and something acted upon, a creation without a creator?” According to him, the vital impulse is left as a verb without a subject. Again, there is another criticism that the presence of *elan vital* in his philosophy suggests pantheism. Critics argue that if this is the essential interior element of all realities, as he claims, then he is reaffirming, like Spinoza, that God and all realities are the same.

Notwithstanding the criticisms, however, Bergson’s metaphysics makes changes its basic principle. His

understanding of the real as virtual multiplicity tames polarized discussions of reality. Bergson, indeed, distinguishes the big difference between the method of science and metaphysics. He points out that while scientific (mathematical) continuity is merely discontinuity infinitely repeated, duration is a continuum of successive heterogeneous phases that excludes the discontinuity of any externally related units (Umotong, 2018, p.126).

8. Conclusion

In this paper, we have been able to discuss the basic ideas involved in Bergson's process of thought. We have seen that although Bergson agreed with certain undeniable aspects of a philosophy of becoming, he did not embrace the view that process is a mechanism or tends toward an end of some sort. For him, there was something more vital that animated the process of becoming and raised it above mechanistic or finalistic laws. Bergson maintains that duration as the ultimate reality does not merely encompass individual selves; rather, it runs through all things. This creative force of becoming, the *elan vital*, is the original dynamism or animating energy which is always in a flow of becoming and yet, at the same time, creative.

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