

The revival of Bergson in the Twenty-First Century

Date: 26 November 2021

Venue: Ateneum – The Finnish National Gallery

Program

9.15. Welcome and introduction by Sami Sjöberg and Stefan Nygård

9.30–12 Session 1

Bergson and Lebensphilosophie. Then and Now (r)
Caterina Zanfi (CNRS, Paris)

Conceptual Thought – Differentiating a Bergsonian Topic
Jan- Ivar Lindén (Heidelberg/Helsinki)

Short break

Bergson and Political Thought: Some Reflections from Two European Case Studies
Tommaso Giordani, University of Tallinn

Henri Bergson and Surrealism: Art, the Vital Impetus, and the Persistence of Memory
Donna Roberts, University of Helsinki

12–13.15 Lunch break

13.15–14.45 Session 2

Bergson and Technical Creativity
Julius Telivuo, University of Jyväskylä

Science and the Bergsonian Method
Katariina Lipsanen, University of Jyväskylä

Avoid Cutting the Gordian Knot: Bergson's Analysis of Four Theories of Heredity and Variation in the Early Twentieth Century
Lauri Myllymaa, University of Jyväskylä

14.45– 15.15 Coffee break

15.15–16.15 Session 3

Camera Eyes and Convergence in Creative Evolution (r)
Tano Posteraro, Penn State

Changing Past: Bergson and the Double Movement of Continuity and Change
Juho Hotanen, University of Jyväskylä

16.15–18 Keynote and roundtable

Anarchist Nominalism: Bergsonism, Art, and Ideology
Keynote lecture by Prof. Mark Antliff (Duke University)

Roundtable: Bergson studies in the 21st century

Abstracts

Keynote lecture

Anarchist Nominalism: Bergson, Art and Ideology
Keynote lecture by Prof. Mark Antliff (Duke University)

In thinking about how I could contribute to the impressive interdisciplinary scope of this important conference, one thought kept returning to me: how can we constructively reconsider the relationship between Bergson's impact in the fields of art, literature, and politics, when examining his pervasive influence on the historical avant-garde? This question seems to me to be a pressing one, in part due to our academic tendency to parse our understanding of Bergson's influence into mutually exclusive disciplinary arenas, whereas modernists and ideologues claiming allegiance to Bergson almost invariably integrated politics into their aesthetics or aesthetics into their politics. To address this issue as well as its broader implications for the study of modernism, I will undertake an examination of one such ideological variant—anarchism—and its relation to the Bergsonian aesthetics of the celebrated sculptor Henri Gaudier-Bzreska and the poet Ezra Pound, who collaborated in founding the Vorticist movement on the eve of the First World War. By considering works of art in terms of notions of creativity and creative expression, art criticism, sculptural methods, and beholder reception I will demonstrate how we can reframe concepts of ideology in terms of states of mind and interpersonal relationships, the very categories that proved so compelling to those ideologues and artists claiming allegiance to Bergson's methodological project.

Session 1

Bergson and Lebensphilosophie. Then and Now
Caterina Zanfi, CNRS, Paris

The philosophy of life is one of the most complex and problematic philosophical currents in the 20th century. The category itself is often vague and ambivalent, in part because it was initially used polemically by its adversaries. The criticisms voiced by Heinrich Rickert and György Lukács among others held it accountable for the most tragic political developments

in Germany and Europe in the first half of the century. Bergson was always proposed among the leading names of this philosophical current, although he himself has never claimed proximity. How justified is this juxtaposition, and how much has it conditioned the reception of his work? How can we update our understanding of the philosophies of life of the early 20th century, in the current ecological crisis? I will try to answer these questions, considering in particular the moral and political implication of Bergson's philosophy of life.

Jan-Ivar Lindén (Heidelberg/Helsinki)

Conceptual Thought – Differentiating a Bergsonian Topic

Bergson tends to see concepts as pragmatic functions, enabling our skilful orientation in the world. This conducts him to search for philosophical alternatives to epistemic strategies founded on conceptual determination. It is here that he introduces intuition, a function later on cherished in quite different philosophical and literary settings. In order to understand the Bergsonian project, it is important not to be misled by the ordinary connotations of the word intuition and see how Bergson develops his topics in a metaphysical context which concerns the relation between life, knowledge and consciousness. Some questions however arise concerning the Bergsonian way of describing concepts as an equivalent to the fixed, practically important points of orientation in vital perception. It is not evident how we should understand reflective conceptual thinking in this context. Is Bergson's view of concepts perhaps too instrumental? A comparison with the ancient tradition in general and Aristotle in particular, allows us to shed some light on these matters and suggests a possibility of ontologically rehabilitating the stable, which for Bergson is often confounded with the rigidity of instrumental reason. Through these critical remarks it can also become clearer how Bergsonian philosophy of life can add some important modifications to the metaphysical tradition.

Bergson and Political Thought: Some Reflections from Two European Case Studies

Tommaso Giordani, University of Tallinn

My talk is an attempt to explore a number of methodological and substantive issues concerning the relationship between Bergsonian philosophy, cultural Bergsonism, and European political thought in the opening of the 20th century. What did embracing Bergsonism mean in the *belle époque*? Did it imply any specific political positioning? What, if any, was the distance between Bergson's own philosophical project and those pursued by people claiming his philosophy? To what extent can we talk of Bergson's influence on *belle époque* political thought? How do we distinguish between cultural politics and the politics of cultural positioning in examining different European "Bergsonians"? Answers to some of these questions will be given by the examination of two intersecting case studies: the very famous one of Georges Sorel and the less well known one of Sorel's first British translator, Thomas Ernest Hulme.

Henri Bergson and Surrealism: Art, the Vital Impetus, and the Persistence of Memory

Donna Roberts, University of Helsinki

Through the themes of time, memory, and the *élan vital*, this paper explores ways of connecting the philosophy of Henri Bergson to the ideas and artistic practice of the Surrealist movement. I wish to show how key elements of Bergson's thinking correlate with Surrealist principles concerning the open-ended, transformative, and creative dynamics of life, as well as the epistemological value of non-analytical modes of thought. I argue that, in spite of his rejection of Bergson on political grounds, the leader of the Surrealist group, André Breton, shared much common ground with the philosopher in his understanding of nature and the human place within

it, thereby describing Breton's eco-poetic view of nature as akin to Bergson's view of life in *Creative Evolution* as one of "reciprocal interpenetration". Using examples of Surrealist paintings by Salvador Dalí and Yves Tanguy, I explore how Bergson's ideas about the subjective pluralities of time and evolutionary life as a form of memory can be read into the fluid morphologies and psychological landscapes of surrealist art.

Session 2

Bergson and Technical Creativity

Julius Telivuo, University of Jyväskylä

This paper discusses the technological themes in Bergson's thought. Bergson mainly assimilates technicity to the mechanic instrumentality of human intelligence. However, I argue that Bergsonian dualisms are never simple dichotomies, where one of the terms would be more valuable or fundamental than the other. Rather, a Bergsonian dualism always expresses a productive, creative tension which must be considered as a whole or as a systemic dynamism. Accordingly, I argue that technology cannot be reduced to a mechanistic and material degeneration, but it is profoundly linked to human creativity, including a wide range of artistic pursuits. The paper develops a Bergsonian view of technology from three main points of view: (1) Bergson's critique of mechanistic conceptions of reality; (2) technology as the continuation or supplement of evolution; (3) the artistic creativity of technical intelligence.

Science and the Bergsonian Method

Katariina Lipsanen, University of Jyväskylä

For Henri Bergson scientific knowledge plays an important part in philosophy. In his 1916 lecture for the philosophy students of Madrid Bergson presented his philosophical method as including two phases: 1) a scientific phase and 2) intuition. The first phase means exploring the scientific studies done on the subject matter at hand. This includes any field necessary for the study: biology, mathematics, sociology etc. It seems that the aim is to learn as much as possible about the nature of the object of our study before engaging in what Bergson calls the "properly philosophical" phase, intuition. Similarly in his work *Mind-Energy* Bergson notes that in order to gain philosophical knowledge about things such as the nature of life, we must follow the *lines of facts* (*fr. lignes de faits*) that will guide us towards the truth. Discovering or creating these lines seems to be the essential part of the scientific phase. This paper explores the role of scientific knowledge from the perspective of Bergson's philosophical method: how are the lines of facts formulated and how are they connected to the truly philosophical phase of intuition?

Avoid Cutting the Gordian Knot: Bergson's Analysis of Four Theories of Heredity and Variation in the Early Twentieth Century

Lauri Myllymaa, University of Jyväskylä

Darwin left a legacy: the unresolved problem of the causes of heredity and variation.

He did not provide a robust explanation of the profound cause of the variation that provided the material for the natural selection to select from. While the formulation of the theory of natural selection was a ground-breaking event in biology, it was just one stage in the progress of evolutionary theory, not its cause. This left the stage open in the second half of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century for new theories aiming to provide explanatory mechanisms to answer to the problems created by questions of heredity and genetic variation. In the early twentieth century, there were four scientific theories that tried to explain the causes

of heredity and variation: 1) a theory of insensible small variations, 2) a theory of sudden, sensible variations, 3) a theory of externally directed variations, and 4) a theory of internally directed variations. This paper examines the method with which Bergson analyzes and, in a sense, consolidates the merits of each rivalling biological theory with his philosophical approach to evolution.

Session 3

Camera Eyes and Convergence in Creative Evolution

Tano Posteraro, Penn State

Henri Bergson was an early and important critic of Darwinism. One of his more pressing criticisms concerned the idea that chance variations producing a random pool of individual differences furnish the conditions requisite for natural selection—the principal cause of evolution—to do its work. Bergson agreed that natural selection works on variations, which are individual differences, and even conceded that these differences most likely consist in what Weismann called the germ line. But Bergson denied that they are chance or accidental occurrences, what today we understand as mutations and copying errors. Life, for Bergson, does not evolve through a series of accidents. It is trended and patterned by tendencies. His case study for this idea was the convergent evolution of the camera eye. Convergence refers to the repeated appearance of like characters across distant lineages like snails and spiders, or humans and octopuses. It is an infamously difficult phenomenon to explain by dint of natural selection for chance variations alone. Bergson's idea is that convergence is neither an accident or anomaly of an otherwise random variational process, nor does it merely reflect the influence of similar environments acting to bring about, via selection, similar solutions in the form of convergent organs. Bergson thinks that convergence reveals the deep unity of life. Life is unified in the movement of its unfolding. Unrelated species can sometimes channel the unified impulse of evolution and converge on the same traits without inheriting them from a common ancestor. This is apparently what we see in the camera eyes of humans and octopuses. In this paper I reconstruct Bergson's argument and then compare it to some recent scientific research on the topic. I conclude by identifying the elements of Bergson's account that remain compelling today.

Changing Past: Bergson and the Double Movement of Continuity and Change

Juho Hotanen, University of Jyväskylä

Both Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Gilles Deleuze underpin the notion of differentiation in their readings of Bergson: the actualization of virtual memory is always differentiation. In the recent discussion, Alia Al-Saji interprets this idea as the “reconfiguration of the past.” In my presentation, I will focus on Matter and Memory and examine in what sense we can speak of the differentiation of the past within Bergson's philosophy itself. At first, it seems that the function of both habitual memory and pure memory is only to preserve the past. Taken separately, habitual memory and pure memory give the static condition of recollection, but Bergson explains that concrete experience consists of a movement that passes from one to the other. He describes a “double movement” of contraction and expansion that not only preserves the past within the present but also opens up the unforeseen novelty of the future. My suggestion is that this double movement implies both the continuity and the changing of the past. The change of the past is not only an addition of a new present each moment but a

movement of the whole of the past in the same sense as Bergson writes about movement within bodily perception: “the whole has changed, as with the turning of a kaleidoscope.

Biographical Notes

Mark Antliff is the Mary Grace Wilson Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Art, Art History & Visual Studies and is author of *Inventing Bergson: Cultural Politics and the Parisian Avant-Garde* (Princeton University Press, 1993) and *Avant-Garde Fascism: The Mobilization of Myth, Art and Culture in France, 1909-1939* (Duke University Press, 2007 and Les presses du réel, Paris, 2019) as well as co-author of *Fascist Visions: Art and Ideology in France and Italy* (with Matthew Affron, Princeton University Press, 1997), *Cubism and Culture* (with Patricia Leighton, Thames & Hudson, 2001), and *A Cubism Reader: Documents and Criticism 1906-1914* (with Patricia Leighton, University of Chicago Press, 2008 and Les presses du réel, Paris, 2019). With Vivien Greene, he co-curated the major exhibition *The Vorticists: Rebel Artists in London and New York, 1914-1918*, which opened at the Nasher Museum of Art and traveled to the Peggy Guggenheim Collection in Venice and Tate Britain in London (ex. cat. London: Tate Publishing, 2010-11). The conference associated with this exhibition resulted in *Vorticism: New Perspectives* (Oxford University Press, 2013). His most recent book is, *Sculptors Against the State: Anarchism and the Anglo-European Avant-Garde* (Penn State Press, 2021).

Tommaso Giordani is an intellectual historian with a background in philosophy. He specializes in French and Italian intellectual life in the beginning of the twentieth century, and has worked and published on pragmatism in France, on transnational exchanges between French and Italian Marxists, and on Bergson and Sorel. He is currently working on a monograph on Georges Sorel, a thinker to whom he dedicated his doctoral work.

Juho Hotanen defended his doctoral dissertation on Merleau-Ponty’s Reading of Descartes: *From Cartesian Duality to the New Ontological Structure* in 2019 at the University of Jyväskylä. His current research project is entitled *Change and Continuity: Bergson, Merleau-Ponty, Deleuze*. He is currently (2021–2022) a visiting scholar at The Pennsylvania State University, Department of Philosophy.

Patricia Leighton is Professor Emerita of Art, Art History and Visual Studies. She received her PhD from Rutgers University. Her field of research is late nineteenth-/early twentieth-century art and politics in France, and the history of photography. She has won numerous awards and fellowships. The first art historian to publish a study of the importance of the anarchist movement for the development of twentieth-century modernism, in *Re-Ordering the Universe: Picasso and Anarchism, 1897–1914* (Princeton University Press 1989); she extensively expanded on this subject in *The Liberation of Painting: Modernism and Anarchism in Avant-Guerre Paris* (University of Chicago Press 2013). She is also co-author, with Mark Antliff, of *A Cubism Reader: Documents and Criticism, 1906-1914* (University of Chicago Press 2008), trans. *Le cubisme devant ses contemporains—Documents et critiques (1906-1914)* (Paris: Les Presses du réel, 2019) and *Cubism and Culture* (Thames & Hudson 2001), trans. *Cubisme et culture* (Paris: Thames & Hudson, 2002). She is currently researching photography and anarchist ideology in the 20th century, and presenting her scholarship at conferences and in publications.

Jan-Ivar Lindén teaches philosophy at the universities of Heidelberg and Helsinki and directs the *Centre for Historical Ontology*. Originally working on the ontology of habituation (*Philosophie der Gewohnheit. Über die störbare Welt der Muster*, Alber 1997), he is currently working on the Swedish edition of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. Recent publications: *Prolegomena zur historischen Ontologie* (Winter 2019), *Aristotle on Logic and Nature* (Peeters 2019), *Aristoteles - antike Kontexte, gegenwärtige Perspektiven* (Winter 2020, together with P. König) and *To Understand What is Happening. Essays on Historicity* (Brill 2021). In Swedish there are the books *Modernitet och paradiset* (SFV 2020) and *Sinnliga frågor* (Eithe 2011). In French there is an anthology on animality: *Animalité. Six interprétations humaines* (L'Harmattan 2011).

MSSc **Katariina Lipsanen** is a doctoral researcher of philosophy at the University of Jyväskylä. Her doctoral dissertation studies the history of philosophical intuition from the perspective of metaphor of sight. She has previously studied topics of intuition and philosophical methods especially in the philosophy of Henri Bergson.

Lauri Myllymaa is a doctoral candidate, defending his dissertation in December 2021. In his thesis, he studies the developmental aspects of human capacities of knowledge in Maine de Biran and Bergson. His general interest in philosophy is focused on modern metaphysics, especially in the philosophies of Descartes, Leibniz, Locke, Hume, and Kant. His other areas of interest include the history of science – especially life sciences – and contemporary research, findings, and theories of evolutionary biology and psychology, as well as neuro- and cognitive sciences.

Tano Posteraro received his Ph.D. from Penn State in 2019. His first book, *Bergson's Philosophy of Biology*, is due out through Edinburgh UP next year. He is co-editor, with Michael Bennett, of *Deleuze and Evolutionary Theory* and author of a number of articles and chapters on biological themes in 20th century continental philosophy. He is currently a SSHRC Post-Doctoral Researcher with Concordia University.

Donna Roberts is currently a researcher at the University of Helsinki with the group project *Science, Literature and Research: Avant-Garde Encounters with Biology and Ecology*. She holds a PhD in Art History and Theory from the University of Essex, completing her PhD thesis on the para-surrealist periodical *Le Grand Jeu* and the work of the Czech painter, Josef Šimá. After undertaking post-doctoral studies at the Institute for Aesthetic Research, Autonomous University of Mexico, her research has focused on the writings of Roger Caillois and the surrealists' interest in the natural world, specifically their engagement with historical discourses on nature and the human place within it. She is currently writing a monograph on this subject, in which she analyses surrealist art and writing in relation to Enlightenment and Romantic philosophies of nature, the evolutionary influences on Freud's metapsychology, and historical developments in ecological thought.

Julius Telivuo is a post-doctoral researcher at the University of Jyväskylä. He defended his thesis *Intensive Technics: Immediate Materiality and Creative Technicity in Gilles Deleuze's Philosophy* in 2020. His key areas of interest are modern French philosophy, post-structuralism, metaphysics and philosophy of technology. In his present research, he focuses on the role of technology in contemporary culture and in socio-economic-political power.

Caterina Zanfi is a researcher of the CNRS in the laboratory “Pays Germaniques - Transferts Culturels” at the École normale supérieure in Paris. She is author of *Bergson, la tecnica, la guerra* (Bologna 2009) and *Bergson e la filosofia tedesca* (Macerata 2013, French transl. Paris 2013, German transl. Freiburg am Br. 2018, Russian transl. Moscow 2020). Her current research focuses on the anthropological and ecological implications of the European philosophies of life in the early 20th century. Since 2018 she has been President of the Société des amis de Bergson and directs with Frédéric Worms the journal *Bergsoniana*.