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While intelligence treats everything mechanically, instinct proceeds, so to speak, organically. If...we could ask and it could reply, it would give up to us the most intimate secrets of life. -from Chapter II Anticipating not only modern scientific theories of psychology but also those of cosmology, this astonishing book sets out a impressive goal for itself: to reconcile human biology with a theory of consciousness. First published in France in 1907, and translated into English in 1911, this work of wonder was esteemed at the time in scientific circles and in the popular culture alike for its profound explorations of perception and memory and its surprising conclusions about the nature and value of art. Contending that intuition is deeper than intellect and that the real consequence of evolution is a mental freedom to grow, to change, to seek and create novelty, Bergson reinvigorated the theory of evolution by refusing to see it as merely mechanistic. His expansion on Darwin remains one of the most original and important philosophical arguments for a scientific inquiry still under fire today. French philosopher HENRI BERGSON (1859-1941) was born in Paris. Among his works are Matter and Memory (1896), An Introduction to Metaphysics (1903), and The Two Sources of Morality and Religion (1932). He was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1927.

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From Reader Review Creative Evolution for online ebook

Richard Fulgham says

This book must be read slowly and deliberately -- do so and it will give you an insight into the brilliance of one of the most revolutionary and extraordinarily perceptive philosopher scientists of the 20th Century, IMO. Bergson changed the way scientists see the world by introducing his conception of an "original impetus", which began simply (if "intelligently") and evolved matter into living, increasingly complex lifeforms and concurrently evolved an increasingly complex consciousness within it -- as an "imperceptable thread" (my wording) ultimately called the elan vital.

In my case, after reading carefully and filling the book's margins with notes, Professor Bergson seems to be proving (showing) that all science up until his time (circa 1930's) was concerned with objects as they were at a particular moments, whereas in fact these objects were and are in a state of continual "being" (duration), making their actuality or essence unknowable.

He chronologically takes us through the writings of Plato and Aristotle (the natural trend of the intellect)-- Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz (becoming in modern science) -- and even through the Criticism of Kant and the evolutionism of Spencer. Bergson thoroughly critiques each philosophy and shows us why they are not dealing the world as it really is.

Through this he weaves his own philosophical system based on Creation and Evolution by (quote):

". . . showing us in the intellect a local effect of evolution, a flame, perhaps accidental, which lights up the coming and going of living beings in the narrow passage open to their action: an lo! . . . (making) of this lantern glimmering in a tunnel a Sun which can illuminate the world.

"Boldly (Kantian and Spencerian science) proceeds with the powers of conceptual thought alone, to the ideal reconstruction of things, even of life. . . . But the essence of things escapes us, and will escape us always; WE MOVE AMONG RELATIONS; THE ABSOLUTE IS NOT IN OUR PROVINCE; WE ARE BROUGHT TO STAND BEFORE THE UNKNOWABLE.

". . . BUT AN INTELLECT BENT UPON THE ACT TO BE PERFORMED AND THE REACTION TO FOLLOW . . . WOULD DIG TO THE VERY ROOT OF NATURE AND MIND."

In simpler words, the observation of any object changes reality for that object. It is only real as a moving "being", animated by an original impetus and kept real by an "elan vital" which cannot be known because "being" cannot be defined. What we call "real things" are illusions which become "real" to us only when we stop their duration. Heidegger spends thousands of pages unsuccessfully trying to define "being", which ultimately he can only label as "dasein". What we observe as the real world is matter and consciousness evolving concurrently from simple to complex as they move through space and time.

This means that the original impetus, the spark, the first flame, began neither in space nor time. Later quantum physics would support Bergson's insight, considering that an electron (as one example) cannot be seen without turning it into something else, or ever stranger, disappearing into what can only be other universes parallel to our own.

IMO, this means a creative force must exist that animates matter and consciousness; and that could only have originated in that Singularity outside time and space which I in my particular need call the thought of "God". You can call "it" what you will: the Tao, Buddha, Nature, et al.

In my possession is a 1932 edition of "Creative Evolution" which had lingered on a library shelf over eighty years but had been checked out only three times after 1970. Sometimes I wonder where are my fellow philosophers and why I seem in my pained isolation to be the last of the 20th Century philosophers of mind. But that is because I am a crazed crackpot in the collective mind of those who measure men by their wealth. My contemporaries are in the universities, religious orders and lecture tours, where they belong. Yet even I am animated by the elan vital. Even I am part of the "God" finally perceived by Henri Bergson.

"Creative Evolution" was a sensation when it first appeared in 1932, the work of an already distinguished Professor Bergson of the College de France. It gave the world at last a new and scientific conception of the God long intuited by prophets, priests, poets, writers and grizzled, scarred, aging gray bearded philosophers

Robin Friedman says

I wanted to reread Henri Bergson's "Creative Evolution" after reading William James. Although best known for his development of pragmatism, James had a highly speculative side late in his career, and he praised Bergson highly in his book, "A Pluralistic Universe." Although they have serious differences, both Bergson and James share an emphasis on a stream of consciousness view of the mind, and on the importance of freedom, chance, and indeterminacy.

Bergson wrote "Creative Evolution" in 1907. At James' urging it was translated into English in 1911 in the still standard translation of Arthur Mitchell. James died before he could write the introduction he contemplated to the book. The book is one of the relatively rare works of philosophy that received a large and enthusiastic popular reception. Bergson became internationally famous and highly sought out as a lecturer for some years following its publication. In 1927, Bergson received the Nobel Prize for literature, a rarity for a writer whose only publications were in philosophy. By the 1940's, however, the book had become little noticed by professional philosophers and lay readers alike. Of late, there have been scholarly efforts to look again at Bergson.

In one sense the early popularity of "Creative Evolution" is puzzling as sections of the book are notoriously difficult and obscure. The book left me cold when I first read it some years ago, but a second reading, after reading James, helped me understand where the book was going. Besides the lengthy technical discussions of matters ranging from biology to mathematics to the history of philosophy, Bergson was a master of allusion and analogy and of beautifully clear writing which pressed home his conclusions where his argumentation was dense and foggy. The writing is brilliant and poetic but makes use of loose metaphors and obscure thinking which lessens its value.

Part of the difficulty I and many modern readers have with the book lies in its approach to the nature of philosophy and its relationship to science. As the title indicates, "Creative Evolution" is in part about Darwinism and evolutionary theory. Bergson wants to show that there is more to human life and to human evolution that can be accounted for by what he terms mechanism. In the process of developing his position, Bergson spends a great deal of space with Darwinian theory and, in places, with his objections to it. Most of his objections, especially with further developments in biology, appear not well taken and outside the scope of how philosophy should be developing its questions and making its arguments. If philosophy is concerned with meaning and with reflections on science rather than with the substance of science, Bergson in many places steps over the line. Much of the book appears to be based on a willy-nilly combination of philosophical reflection with scientific issues which lessens its appeal and which contributed to the eclipse of the book after its early popular reception.

There remains much of interest in "Creative Evolution" to the extent that the book can be read as a reflection on the findings of science and on the possible limitations of science rather than as a critique of scientific findings. Bergson tries to find a way between a scientific philosophy of mechanism on the one hand and a teleological philosophy based upon ends and final causes on the other hand. Bergson develops a philosophy based upon duration and change -- the felt experience of the passage of time, which Bergson argues eloquently, cannot be explained either mechanistically or teleologically. Bergson argues that human endeavor and conduct cannot be fully explained by the methods of the natural sciences or, indeed, by any science as indeterminacy and freedom are at their core. He finds biological development for human beings was in the direction of freedom and intelligence. Intelligence, he argues, is basically pragmatic and related to physical, geometrical objects but does not exhaust human creativity. Bergson finds the source of creativity and change in time through a mysterious intuitive ability that tends to be covered over by practical

intelligence. Here again, many modern readers, lay and philosophical, will demur to intuitionism. Bergson sees life as in its essential spiritual part as consisting in constant change and development in a direction that cannot be predicted in advance. In fact, every individual's development is unique.

Here is a lengthy paragraph from near the middle of Bergson's book that captures something of his thought, his writing, and his concept of philosophy as both individual and communal. Other passages could be cited as well. Bergson writes (pp 209-210)

"Human intelligence, as we represent it, is not at all what Plato taught in the allegory of the cave. Its function is not to look at passing shadows nor yet to turn itself round and contemplate the glaring sun. It has something else to do. Harnessed, like yoked oxen, to a heavy task, we feel the play of our muscles and joints, the weight of the plow and the resistance of the soil. To act and to know that we are acting, to come into touch with reality and even to live it, but only in the measure in which it concerns the work that is being accomplished and the furrow that is being plowed, such is the function of human intelligence. Yet a beneficent fluid bathes us, whence we draw the very force to labor and to live. From this ocean of life, in which we are immersed, we are continually drawing something, and we feel that our being, or at least the intellect that guides it, has been formed therein by a kind of local concentration. Philosophy can only be an attempt to dissolve again into the Whole. Intelligence, reabsorbed into its principle, may thus live back again its own genesis. But the enterprise cannot be achieved in one stroke: it is necessarily collective and progressive. It consists in an interchange of impressions which, correcting and adding to each other, will end by expanding the humanity in us and making us even transcend it."

In its approach, "Creative Evolution" is outside the mainstream of philosophy in the United States and in Europe and is something of a throw-back to German romanticism. The philosophical issues it raises, however, remain much alive. This is a frustrating, difficult book to read with valuable thought and insight intertwined with some unfathomable writing. It was a quirk that "Creative Evolution" became for a brief time a popular book. Readers who want to struggle with a difficult and in part outmoded work, may still find the effort worthwhile.

the gift says

i do not know what to say about this work, i do not follow it all, it might be closer to a 3, but the writing is very good. the introduction hails bergson as 'the most serious philosopher of life of the 20th century...', and makes a good argument for his continuing relevance, his unique approach, all of it down to his approach to time- 'duree'- and valourization of 'intuition'. as i am not studying him but have read a few by and a few on bergson, i can see how difficult, how contrary, his way of understanding 'intellect' and thereby 'science', as beholden to physics/geometry, that has no time for living creation- the 'impetus' that manifests itself through evolution, that leads from single-cells to the great division between plant and animal, then the effective, practical, development of nervous system and then brain, enabling/informing motion...

the early chapters, the philosophical take on evolution, i found difficult and opposing what little i do know about the theory- eventually i began to see bergson is working not on the matrices of usual 'evolutionary biology' but on the concept of 'life', as this is not simply organic forms diversifying, sustaining, surviving through environmental changes, 'adapting', but how this 'life' is creative, new, responsive, though his contention humans are somehow an evolutionary 'peak' seems mistaken, an introduction of 'telos', a religious idea, that there is a 'direction' to evolution, that we adapt through generations often in a 'neo-lamarckian' manner... this probably loses most evolutionary biologists if not scientists in general...

i do like his latter chapters, particularly the 'cinematographical mechanism of thought...', though i do not

know how accurate is his dismissal/inquiry on the concept of 'nothing', mainly these were ideas i had read before, encouraging to remember, and certainly all the other reading on bergson was very helpful. the summation is heartening, as he goes through some philosophy history to get there (plato, aristotle, descartes, leibniz, spinoza, kant, spencer), the idea: scientific knowledge is not the only or best way to understand the world, despite its obvious practical efficacy, the ideal of freedom is not met in mechanistic/geometric/spatial views of space, the ideal is found through the intuition/duration/creativity of time...

♥ Ibrahim ♥ says

This book in its own way, like many of Bergson's works, is a work of apologetics to help those who don't believe in God or who eliminate the whole idea altogether. I would read the chapter on Bergson in Will Duran't Story of Philosophy first and then plunge into this masterpiece of his.

Ahmed Hamad says

One of the major crises we are facing today is the division of the "mind" and the "soul". There were those that proclaimed "power" over the souls through organized and institutionalized religions for centuries (which still exists in some regions today). Science had become a tool to be used by the authority, or a game they'd let the little kids get busy with so long as it does not go against the teachings of those religions. But amidst it all, science continued to grow exponentially everywhere on the globe, and now that the religious power has fallen, we've become obsessed with everything surrounding it. We've granted our intellectualism an unreal power, we've deprived the world of everything we couldn't explain through the materialistic "snap-shot" view of life, we are continuing to murder the human soul, and ironically we've forgotten what the essence of the pursuit of Knowledge and development of Science were about.

This has been a topic I've scuffled with for over a couple of years now so I did not really know what to expect when I opened this book to be honest. I certainly struggled as I flipped through those pages. It is a book to be read and absorbed VERY slowly. It was quite an insightful read, perhaps even enlightening. We can indeed let science be part of life once again, and give its real meaning. Then and -maybe- only then will we grow as human beings and unleash our capabilities.

I am quite sure I'll be coming back to it in a few months.

"But, everywhere except in man, consciousness has let itself be caught in the net whose meshes it tried to pass through: it has remained the captive of the mechanisms it has set up. Automatism, which it tries to draw in the direction of freedom, winds about it and drags it down. It has not the power to escape, because the energy it has provided for acts is almost all employed in maintaining the infinitely subtle and essentially unstable equilibrium into which it has brought matter. But man not only maintains his machine, he succeeds in using it as he pleases. Doubtless he owes this to the superiority of his brain, which enables him to build an unlimited number of motor mechanisms, to oppose new habits to the old ones unceasingly, and, by dividing automatism against itself, to rule it. He owes it to his language, which furnishes consciousness with an immaterial body in which to incarnate itself and thus exempts it from dwelling exclusively on material bodies, whose flux would soon drag it along and swallow it up. He owes it to social life, which stores and preserves efforts as language stores thought, fixes thereby a mean level to which individuals must raise themselves at the outset, and by this initial stimulation prevents the average man from slumbering and drives the superior man to mount still higher. But our brain, our society, and our language are only the external and various signs of one and the same internal superiority. They tell, each after its manner, the unique,

metaphysic. The other is that it leaves open the possibility of perceiving an alternate reality (what excited Huxley).

Chapter 3 is about his metaphysics, which are not very clearly expressed. There appear to be avenues unexplored by him. What are the consequences of matter being infused with consciousness? Magic? Why is it that intellect and geometrical thinking is what produces objects in perception? What is the mechanism.

What does have value is his theory that chaos is not the absence of repeatability, but is a stochastic process that can be understood as an aggregate of individual "wills." This is used to support his vital theory of evolution. That each organism "wills" its variation in seemingly random fashion, but at a higher order, it produces the regularity of genera.

Chapter 4 is a critique of various philosophic systems after establishing his "cinematographic" theory of perception. His basic point is that matter is in continual flux, yet we are only able to perceive it as a sequence of discrete states, hence the illusion of permanence.

Salma Hasan says

<3

Julian Mathews says

Many times it's not the complexity of the concepts but the opacity of the style that keeps philosophical discourse confined to ivory towers and dusty bookshelves. Then, every so often, comes along a philosopher who can actually string a few sentences together and has something to say. Bergson is more than that, and it becomes more clear as the text progresses. It may be kind of slough getting through all the biologism of the first chapter, but hang in there, it get's better. It should be noted, that aside from simply providing much of the metaphysical ground work for In Search of Lost Time, Bergson actually inspired Proust's prose as well.

If you're new to Bergson, I might read Time and Free Will and Matter and Memory first, as this is in ways a divergence and a continuance of those two works.

Nachtreich says

Più si va avanti con le pagine più diventa un testo, al massimo, simpatico e da non prendere "seriamente". Specie dal secondo capitolo in poi.

Bob Nichols says

Evolution, Bergson argues, is characterized by the progressive development of freedom, which culminates in human consciousness and the capacity for choice about how interaction with the environment will occur. Bergson's second theme is that the impulse that underlies evolution's movement toward freedom is energy. All life is energy. Energy is activity and mobility. Energy is the push behind how that activity will occur.

Energy and freedom come together. Energy matches up with instinct and intelligence that are the twin poles of how life organizes its movement. But these are not pure states, and intelligence as consciousness exists in some limited degree within instinctive beings. Bergson writes that the humblest organism is conscious to the degree that it has the power to choose how it will move. This choice is freedom. Consciousness holds the capacity and power for choice, which reaches its most expansive expression in humans.

Evolution's march toward freedom is evolution's creativity. Bergson's stance here stands in contrast to the mechanistic (deterministic) themes then emerging in Darwinian thinking, but it also stands in contrast to predestined ends that others hold for human kind. Evolution is not the realization of a plan, Bergson says. In contrast to both, Bergson believes that this development of freedom resulted from life forms attempting to find new ways to survive in a demanding or hostile world. In this way, Bergson's theory is not different than the essence of Darwinian theory.

Bergson's own creative contribution to evolutionary theory is his emphasis on "becoming." Life is never a static state, but is continually changing. Static states are but moments in time that have been isolated by thought. Here he takes on Greek thought that would relegate ceaseless motion to an illusory material world that is secondary to the world of eternal forms. Uncomfortable with change, predominant Greek philosophy (Plato and after) addressed their dilemma with their own sleight of hand by positing logical truths as eternal forms as there can be no dispute that, for example, "A equals A." But Bergson says in reality there is no such Form. Bergson is equally critical of modern scientific theory that isolates as it analyzes, looking at parts as opposed to parts of wholes that transform through time. Science misses the whole that provides a simple unity of function, despite its dependence on a multiplicity of parts (sub-actions). In his emphasis on wholes and transformation, Bergson is notably similar to the structuralist thought of Jean Piaget who was to write later in the century.

In our free choices, Bergson says we create ourselves and this, along with innate character, makes us individual. But this self is not a thing. It is continually re-made, yet variability here is premised on deeper reality to our soul. What is the permanent core to our life is our impulsive force, which is ourselves as self-organizing entities. The self, in effect, goes through life not as solid matter, but as a wave. In this way, Bergson's theory seems to back into modern quantum theory about the ultimate nature of reality, suggesting that perhaps there is more similarity between organic and non-organic matter than once supposed.

Yet, there is a difference and this constitutes Bergson's essential underlying focus. Bergson traces his theory back to the beginning of life itself, to that transition point between life and non-life where the former draws energy from the latter and converts inert matter into life. The role of life is to place indeterminacy into matter. Life is a current of energy sent through matter, he writes, and draws from it whatever it can. In this way, life "spiritualizes matter." Heredity transmits more than character and physical traits. It transmits vitality, a single, powerful unity of impulse, a genetic energy that fights against disorder. This life force takes solar energy, stores it, and then uses it ("explosively") to survive. As the embodiment of this energy, we are a unity that then converts energy into a multiplicity of actions that enable our bodies, and ourselves, to survive.

Taking some liberty with Bergson, this unity - this self-organizing capacity directed toward survival - is our core Self, as it is the continuous entity that survives throughout all of its transformations. It is this life force that constitutes our essence and innermost soul. As with Schopenhauer's Will, Bergson's "elan vital" may be dismissed as overly obscure or mystical by many, but this is the terminology that captures the essence of life's drive to survive, to seek its well-being, and to reproduce itself. What this life force might be in more specific terms continues to be illusive to this day, and Bergson should not be faulted for not providing greater definition.

As a final comment, and as a criticism, humans have freedom of choice. This is not in doubt. But Bergson does not make it clear that such freedom is not pure. Humans are free to choose, but to do what? To what ends do they direct their (free) choice? Ultimately, action is directed toward evolution's twin goals, which are

really the same thing: survival and reproduction. These goals are the fixed essences of life itself. In this sense we are not so free after all (even though we can commit suicide). As with all life forms, we seek to be free to achieve our life-given natures (ends) and to preserve ourselves as self-organizing entities, fighting to maintain order amid the pressures of disorder. The capacity to do this with maximum flexibility manifests itself in the free will of humans, but this capacity - remarkable as it is - is nevertheless directed toward the same ends we share with all life forms. Like them, we seek to be free to survive, to achieve well being, and to achieve evolution's "purpose," which is to reproduce ourselves. In this way, we share the same essence as all of life.

Adam says

Nowhere near as important or relevant today as *Matter and Memory*, I'd say, but still the work of a sophisticated philosopher who easily outshines most of his fellows of the continental school of Philosophy.

The chapter on Nothing is interesting. I don't particularly agree with him, mostly because he fails to look at the concept with the precision of an analytic philosopher such as Meinong, whose category of "subsistence," if accepted by Bergson, would probably radically alter the chapter on Nothing, but the ideas are engaging and inspiring, and it remains one of the most interesting statements against Nothingness.

Dorian Neerdael says

Un des livres principaux de Bergson où celui-ci tente de déployer son ontologie du devenir, avec l'importance qu'il accorde habituellement à la durée. La philosophie ne peut pas faire l'impasse sur les avancées scientifiques et doit admettre les conséquences de l'évolutionnisme darwinien. La philosophie doit abandonner la métaphysique traditionnelle d'un absolu fermé sur lui-même, au profit d'un monde dont la valeur principale est la création, c'est-à-dire la liberté, la croissance et le changement. De ce point de vue, Bergson pourrait être lu avec les philosophes de la différence.

C'est un très bon livre, malgré sa complexité au premier abord. Bergson écrit bien, son style est doux mais il aurait mieux fait de diviser ses quelques 369 pages en plus de quatre chapitres, parce que c'est un peu peu alors.

Paul Toth says

Brilliant, if occasionally outdated. Don't read this for insight into evolution. Read it to learn how to see the world with a constant sense of renewal.

Drew Gordon says

Dense, but it's a good example of original thought. It is rewarding and makes you feel like you're climbing a ladder of smart; especially when all of the epiphanies are set out in italics. Although, like most French philosophers, the last chapter is incomprehensible because it is basically a personal statement to one of his contemporaries (see: *Archeology of Knowledge* by Michel Foucault).

