

# The Bergsonian Personality Between the Metaphysics of the Self and the Psychology of Speech

Dr. Mostefai Abdelkader<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Lecturer, Ibn Khaldoun University, Tiaret, Faculty of Humanities, Laboratory of Philosophical Studies and Issues of Human and Society in Algeria (Algeria).

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## Abstract:

This article presents a thorough analysis and concise description of the personality of Henri Louis Bergson, the veteran French philosopher who introduced a unique philosophy that is neither Kantian nor Cartesian but, in general, constructs a new concept of metaphysical realism that transcends extreme materialistic scientific perspectives. The core of Bergsonian personality revolves around the notion of pure duration, based on the profound sense of intuition. Its focal point is the human being who possesses the essence of vital freedom. Bergson, for those unfamiliar with his complete works, sought to comprehend existence through the spontaneity of spiritual experience inseparable from the struggles and realities of life. His books and writings, characterized by an encyclopedic tendency, represent a blend of evolutionary metaphysics, functionalistic esthetics, psycho-sociological perspectives, and mystical insights in his final days.

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**Email Author:** mosaek7@gmail.com

## Introduction:

In this research, we offer a distinct type of translation, somewhat critical in nature, providing a concentrated and simplified narrative portrayal of the French philosopher Henri Louis Bergson. This translation aims to shed light on Bergson's life and philosophical works for those who are unfamiliar with his

biography, ideas, language, and philosophical contributions, or who have not had the opportunity to read or study his works. It is important to recognize that every philosopher's life is a concept that is written by or written about in the language of their era.

Henri Louis Bergson is widely regarded as one of the prominent figures in European intellectual philosophy, particularly within contemporary Western philosophy, especially during the rise of philosophical movements in the 20th century. His areas of focus include philosophy of science, epistemology, philosophy of language, and analysis. However, unlike philosophers such as Carnap, Bertrand Russell, or Wittgenstein, he did not conform to a strictly logical framework, nor was he solely preoccupied with linguistic issues like Saussure or Noam Chomsky. Nevertheless, he indirectly presented a critique of language as a background for his philosophy of meaning, discussing important perspectives that require further exploration through his diverse works.

Hence, in many sections of this endeavor, we will make explicit use of the language of analytical philosophy and some expressive tools of logical positivism. The incorporation of linguistic semiotics becomes essential when dealing with such a pursuit.

To grasp the essence of Bergson's philosophy, it is crucial to examine his writing style. Therefore, our primary focus lies on his translated and untranslated works, without extensively citing numerous sources and references, as our objective is to highlight the advantages of a comprehensive biography.

Without delay, we acknowledge that this research delves into a highly introspective and essay-like topic, as Bergson's ideas concerning language and thought have often been overshadowed. While numerous studies have explored his overall philosophy as an integrated intellectual framework and profound spiritual orientation, particularly in Algeria and various universities in the Arab world, our aim is to present a condensed representation of Bergson's unique thinking and his broader philosophical perspective to readers who may be unfamiliar with him or who hold preconceived notions about his work.

Following an exploration of Professor Bergson's extensive body of work, we believe that a serious study that comprehends the bilingual nature of his language and thought, as well as the material it presents, will be well received by specialists. The goal is to provide readers, whether students or intellectuals, with a concise understanding of Bergson's distinctive ideas and his general philosophical outlook.

### **First: Henri Bergson / Biography and Works**

We will not delve into the details of Henri Louis Bergson's life, as they fill the references and dictionaries dedicated to the philosophers who discuss him in their profiles. Instead, we will focus on the illuminating glimpses of this free thinker's journey, with a particular emphasis on his position regarding his linguistic achievement<sup>1</sup>.

To begin with, we are not concerned with dates as mere numbers in the man's career<sup>2</sup>, but we are interested in his accomplishments, as the achievement of every philosopher is manifested in their profound writings. Henri Louis Bergson, as a disciplined pragmatist, specialized in philosophical studies at an early age.

He had the opportunity to connect with scholars and thinkers of his time, and he was well aware of the developments and innovations taking place in the fields of creativity. It is no wonder, as he excelled in them, particularly in the realm of technical mathematics. Since his teenage years – according to the

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<sup>1</sup>- Henri Louis Bergson was born in 1859 to a French father and a British mother. He passed away in 1941 in his hometown of Paris, France. In fact, he belonged to a family that originated from Western Germany. It is said - as a side comment - that he was a philosopher who lived, witnessed, and buried his fame!

<sup>2</sup>- The most important dates associated with the achievements of this renowned philosophy professor indicate that he started as a teacher in secondary education and then specialized in university education. He was quickly appointed as a diplomatic attaché, representing his country in the League of Nations (New York), and he was soon elected as the head of the committee of intellectuals.

He obtained his doctorate in 1889 and was appointed as a lecturer at the Collège De France in 1898. Later, he joined the École Normale Supérieure in Paris, where he also received his diploma.

In 1913, he was honored with membership in the French Academy for his contributions to science and philosophy. Prior to that, he was elected as a member of the Academy of Moral and Political Sciences through his active participation in its institute.

Bergson was associated with numerous human rights and intellectual organizations. However, his most notable recognition came in 1927 when he received the Nobel Prize in Literature for his intellectual and practical services to humanity.

specialized biographies – during his formative and secondary education, he demonstrated a wide knowledge of this field, which he would later use to shape his perspective on thought, language, and symbols when he shifted towards literature and the humanities.

When Bergson reached the rank of professor, his lectures in France and Britain, as mentioned in the dedicated biographies, attracted an unprecedented following of intellectuals and enthusiasts of knowledge and philosophical theories. His lectures enjoyed remarkable attendance, evidenced by references made by those who diligently translated his academic formation. This is not mere flattery, as he indeed possessed a captivating and eloquent language, a fascinating delivery style, and a profound philosophical, intellectual, and artistic spirit.

Moreover, it has been noted that even his lecture at Columbia University in New York, United States, garnered broad interest from experts and peers. In addition to his mastery of English, he was also fluent in French and European Latin, considering them his native languages.

Our philosopher has undoubtedly influenced and been influenced by various aspects and fields. Mr. Bergson was an esteemed teacher and educator who acquainted himself with education through his experience in general secondary education, even before entering the prestigious universities and institutes. He was also an active participant, presenting highly significant papers at continental and international conferences. He wrote articles about these conferences in leading journals of his time. Additionally, he never missed the meetings and seminars organized by the most esteemed institutes of those days.

By the way, this veteran philosopher – as previously mentioned – witnessed the leap of medical and natural sciences, alongside the transformations of fundamental human and social sciences, including linguistic specializations associated with the ancient and modern Latin and Indo-European languages.

It must be added, almost needless to say, that he was a skilled poet and a well-versed reader in Eastern and classical literature, with a passion for profound

music and impressionist painting, to name a few. His life as a dedicated academic, primarily devoted to teaching, writing, and caring for his books, was free from surprises or peculiarities, despite the recognition and admiration he garnered here and there.

It is also worth mentioning that Henri Bergson was a devout Christian and a believing Catholic who had a deep fear of God. Towards the end of his life, he turned towards what is known as the evangelical spiritual renewal, which was evident in his strong Sufi-oriented outings and writings.

His call to adapt philosophy to the realities of objective existence as it is manifested remains steadfast. He speaks about philosophy and the useful scientific truths with a semi-utilitarian approach, seeking to bridge the gap between philosophy and metaphysical and practical utilitarian perspectives.

For clarification, the man remained grateful to classical philosophy and never diminished the importance of general philosophy in comparison to empirical science or any other field. Instead, he aimed to coordinate between them, in terms of language, thought, and development. Overall, Henri Louis Bergson, at least until his time, was considered a reformer of French philosophy and perhaps Western European philosophy as well. This can be seen through a series of significant impacts, some of which we will enumerate gradually. These impacts relate primarily to psycho-sociological and anthropological issues, as well as pure theological matters. Not to mention the vital aspect of linguistics and its ontological roots.

## **Second: Bergson / Effects and Ideas**

We should not be deceived by the titles that the front page of any book carries, as every publication by Bergson – or any other author for that matter – has undergone a process of narration. Therefore, our goal is not to repeat a kind of bibliography of the author's works and his other classifications in the form of lectures, research, articles, or dissertations. He personally collected them in his books, which were compiled for him after his departure.

I mentioned earlier that this does not concern us much, as much as we aim to clarify what he intended to convey in his philosophy, through what he wrote in his concise and meaningful language. We aim to delve into the depths of his underlying ideas, not just through their titles but also through the patience of exploring their depths. It should be noted here that the thesis of the dissertation he submitted to obtain a doctoral degree was actually a study centered around the philosophy of psychology, which was later printed and distributed.

With some explanatory explanations and very brief comments – without further ado – here are the most important compilations and works, almost arranged in sequential order. Here is their description as follows:

### **1. Laughter:**

It is the "first" fundamental research on the reasons behind this phenomenon. It formulates its problematic by asking: What makes people laugh and why? It is the first attempt to unravel this human behavior, as man is inherently a laughing being according to the logic of gender within the species.

### **2. Laughter:**

The book "second," originally a collection of articles with a simple and somewhat deceptive title, discusses the expression through laughter. It is a serious philosophical study that delves deeply into the secrets and effects of laughter and attempts to illustrate the significance of humor and its connection to language. This booklet concludes with an elevated viewpoint that delves into the depths of art and the transcendental aesthetic sense.

### **3. Creative Evolution:**

In reality, this book is powerful in its presentation and ideas. Thanks to it, the reputation of his cosmic theory about the nature of the soul was lost, a theory that he wanted to apply to human life. However, what is remarkable about this book is his criticism of the idea of automatic evolution put forth by the Englishman Charles Darwin, which was prevalent at that time.

### **4. Direct Data of Consciousness:**

This book focuses on privacy, the nature of time, and the nature of personal freedom (or what is known as free will). It provides a comprehensive overview of Bergson's unique and pure method and approach. It may have been influenced by what René Descartes, the father of modern rational philosophy, and the Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza proposed.

#### **5. Duration and Simultaneity, or Coexistence:**

This book addresses the concept of "duration," which Bergson himself considered as the central term in his philosophy. It coincided with the popularity of Isaac Newton's theory of physical relativity. It criticizes the idea of time, denies relativity itself, and challenges the fourth dimension.

#### **6. Matter and Memory:**

It is a reflective and insightful treatise on the characteristics of the human soul and its relationship to the human body. It acknowledges the reality of living and inert matter. This book has been beneficial to pedagogical theories in enriching teaching methods. This is evident, for example, in the work of the renowned philosopher and educator Jean Piaget.

#### **7. Spiritual Energy:**

This book consists of a series of lectures on consciousness, the psyche, thought, and the world of language, illusion, and false reality, among other topics. They have been compiled together despite their divergent contents, resulting in a book that falls within the general philosophy of psychology.

#### **8\_ "The Idea and the Mover / An Introduction to Metaphysics:**

In reality, they are two books that are naturally published together, dedicated to the Bergsonian tendency and the consolidation of its rooted vital doctrine in the moderate metaphysical thought that aims to move the methodology of pure reason.

#### **9\_ The Source of Ethics and Religion:**

It is a clear philosophical work that came to evaluate the state of ethics and society. It delves into the major beliefs and their intricate concepts. The author wrote it in a later stage of his life, after completing his style in language and the maturation of his thought.

### **10 – Writings and Sayings:**

In three parts, they were all compiled and published after his death. They were excellently gathered from scattered and unpublished remnants in volumes after his departure. His students took care of them, some of which were originally articles published by Bergson in the prestigious "Philosophical Magazine" of those days, as well as the specialized "Metaphysics and Ethics Journal" at that time."

Once again, it should not be overlooked that Professor Henri Louis Bergson participated and influenced two other great works in French language and philosophy, both of which bear his thought and pen:

1. Editing selected works of "Mesures ou Unités" (Philosophy) within what was known as the "French Science" series in the famous dictionary called "Larousse," which, by the way, is widely circulated and found on the shelves of the most esteemed libraries, whether public or academic.

2. His contribution of valuable research materials in the dictionary "André Lalande," known for its role in the academic sphere. It is a technical and critical dictionary of philosophy, considered the greatest of its kind. It is the result of a massive collective effort by members of the French Philosophical Society, and its revision took a long time. Furthermore, it should be added that Professor Bergson personally supervised the translation of some of his works and articles into other languages, especially English. He even reviewed them himself due to his keen interest in conveying ideas from one language to another, primarily. The rest of his works were undoubtedly translated into the most important languages worldwide, including, of course, the Arabic language.

### **Bergson's Intellectual Orientations:**



Bergson embarked as a materialistic thinker – liberating himself vehemently from the remnants of mediatory scholastic tradition – as a young man, cautiously following the path of the materialistic and social secularist doctrine, particularly with the English philosopher Herbert Spencer. He adopted the idea of absolute truth, asserting the evolution of life and the development of the mind along with it.

Bergson saw that the life of the living mind is the fundamental and essential reality for all of humanity. On the other hand, in response to Oswald Spengler's call, the right-wing German philosopher who proposed the philosophy of decline and decay of Western civilization, Bergson returned, always, to everything that is vital and authentic in human nature<sup>1</sup>.

However, gradually, he began to abandon or even overturn his initial foundations. Yet, he soon became convinced of his doubts and began to question the ability of matter, science, and even natural language to explain what is profound, essential, subjective feeling, and all purely intellectual aspects of human beings as humans. According to Henri-Louis Bergson, the "self" would simply be the foundation of existence in place and the secret of coexistence with time – the durational time as he understands it – not time in the classical physical sense<sup>2</sup>.

Consequently, the first half of the twentieth century represented three peaks of controversy:

One between religion and matter, through the conflict between fervent secularists and new conservatives.

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<sup>1</sup>- Among the philosophers mentioned, we can mention:

Spencer Herbert (1820-1903)

Spengler Osvelt (1880-1963)

<sup>2</sup>- Here, for clarification, we find two meanings in Bergson's work:

The first meaning relates to time as the official guardian of what he called "durée" (duration), and its meanings include continuity, vision, absolute truth, and immediate communication, all of which are closely related to the internal necessity based on deep contemplation and free thinking.

As for the second meaning, it regards time as a mere companion to the general spatial nature, intersectional stillness, and classical relative physics. It is suitable for studying external differences related to work and utility. For further reference, please consult:

Henri Bergson, "durée et simultanéité," p.u.f Paris, France, 7th edition - 1968, Chapter 2.

Another between intellect and life, manifested in the disagreement between rigid pragmatists and genuine spiritualists.

And the third between language and thought, clearly apparent between conservative grammarians and semiotic linguists.

The latter seems to be our subject of concern! Indeed, this intellectual orientation, which we have called Bergsonian Vitality, is not merely a philosophy in itself. It is rather a designated and registered symbol of Bergson's philosophical project aimed at establishing a philosophy of intellectual creativity, evolutionary philosophy, a philosophy concerned with *elan vital* – ultimately rooted in the call to that Sufi and existential horizon that is constantly renewed.

Once again, these perspectives are driven by a unified philosophy of essence, whether we consider it enduring or vital, with a dual direction (having metaphysical and psychological inclinations).

### **Third: Bergsonian School, Doctrine, and Language**

While Bergson was initially academically rooted in the doctrine and language, having acquired knowledge through established sources and refined his understanding in prestigious institutions, he did not rigidly adhere to fixed opinions. He was open to reservations and calmly presented different views for discussion.

Before prematurely passing judgment on Bergson's views on language, it is necessary to carefully examine his writings from their original sources. He is well-known as the founder of the "vital intuition" school of thought, but the core ideas of his philosophy are actually "non-doctrinal" from a methodological perspective, as mentioned earlier. They were met with non-presumptuous theories of knowledge and other prevailing traditional philosophical approaches.

Bergson's ambition was to transcend biased and narrow-minded doctrines in both philosophy and science simultaneously. He rejected the theory of a

closed cognitive system or, at best, believed that the doctrine should always remain open. He preferred his own thoughts to remain unclassified rather than confined to a specific corner, current, or foundation. He had no qualms about his own ideas and his books being outside the classification altogether. In reality, the "non-doctrinal" aspect referred to is not independent of the theory that believes in the creative and progressive advancement of humanity as a whole. They are the ultimate goal of the entire evolutionary process, as understood by Bergson at least. This process is based on the futurist perspective and is firmly rooted in various rational individuals' opinions, principles, scientific and practical tools, all in line with the ideological tone based on the long-term interest of humanity.

Thus, if there is no escape from its orbit, the doctrine itself is considered the cornerstone, with "intuition" representing the thought, mood, and sentiment of what is known as "vitality." It embodies the concept of "duration" in the framework of this spiritual philosophy, as a gelatinous mold (in the language of life) and as a pure experience lived through the same intuitive sense, not merely linguistic expression, as is the case with the new positivists.

Bergson's philosophy of life is precisely the most organized application of discourse directed towards conscious existence in itself and its essence. Not far from this intellectual perspective, Bergson appreciates democracy as a political and social way of life.

### **Other Questions and Perspectives:**

Now we raise questions about the doctrine (and methodology) and about language<sup>1</sup> (and philosophy):

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<sup>1</sup>- We argue that hardly any of Bergson's works can be found without an inclination, perspective, or critique towards language and other expressive symbols. However, the challenge lies in how to fulfill them amidst the demands of the chapters in his books. This is where the problem lies (...) Immersing oneself in each paragraph - specifically addressing language - requires a considerable amount of time and intense focus in order to deduce consequential conclusions similar to what we do in the field of philosophy of religion and analysis... You can refer to this author for further information:

Henri Bergson- les deux sources de la morale et de la religion. 3<sup>ème</sup>-edition - publications maison Gallimard. Saint-g France ; 1982 Tom.1

Where will Bergson ultimately find himself amidst the extremism of doctrine (in philosophy and religion as well) and the exaggeration of methodology and its proponents (in sciences in general, including perhaps linguistics)?

Perhaps he will eventually steer his thinking towards the challenge of opening the boundaries between them, a deliberate openness that seeks credibility, as every doctrine has criticisms, and every methodology has reservations. Thus, his theory of research became intertwined with theoretical research and harmonized with the system of nature and the image of the mind. Together, they represent the single manifestation of life with all its attractions and conflicts.

But is there a kind of audacity in the search for a "philosophy of language" in Bergson's work?

Where are the profound perspectives on par with the momentum we see with the Vienna Circle or the Prague School?

What is the origin of that pre-existing existence beyond meaning, and where does it exist if it is outside the structure?

Where does the discourse of language fit in Bergson's intuitionist thought, which is immersed in the search for intentional significance?

Perhaps daring language itself is not enough to formulate a critical theorization of it, as well as the relationship between language and thought in its recognized dialectical form. Because, as we have accepted the intended relationship according to Bergson, we find that it does not have a self-standing structural significance, let alone a purely semiotic one. However, that attribute is actually a distinctive sign for it, in our estimation, as the interpretation of language used in daily communication within the framework of communicative thought requires a moderate renewal between advanced scientific and philosophical theories and the subsequent frameworks derived from them.

In general, Bergson is that personality, that thinker who did not embrace or adhere to a specific doctrine. Instead, he unified various doctrines in a remarkable synthesis. In this, the authenticity of Bergsonian philosophy as a philosophy of the mind becomes evident, with a tendency towards analysis more than language. Nevertheless, he prioritized the philosophy of intellectual realism, and he certainly did not neglect the revitalization of moral philosophy. He persistently defended values and major spiritual principles against the tyranny of materialism and the deviation of science from its path. He wanted to transform it into a tool for refinement and make it a creative intellectual means to align its course.

### **Conclusion:**

At the end of this brief presentation, the reader of this humble article may wonder, why Bergson? As professors in higher education, we preferred to uncover the veils on prominent figures and great personalities in the history of philosophy, especially modern Western philosophy, which our students only know by name. Alongside such a biographical narrative, we touch on the rediscovery of language paths in early human science philosophy as a tool for thought and a means of writing and expressing what goes on in the depths of the mind and the recesses of the subconscious.

The intended clarification about language as language – regardless of its gender – both as a means of communication and as a creative concern for intelligence, without repeating the academic debates revolving around the origins of speech or delving into the roles of language with the growth and development of contemporary communication and interaction tools. Returning to our main topic... In the case of Henri Louis Bergson, we were attracted to him because he was not known as a philosopher of language during the golden decades of contemporary philosophy. After that, the field was dominated by the opinions of linguists, symbolic interactionists, and the new structuralists. Moreover, his ideas are still alive and have not been extinguished. This means returning to the fundamental introductions and understanding their analyses and compositions within the context of refined

thought. Therefore, reviews and discussions in this regard are necessary. Although Henri Louis Bergson emerged in the first third of the past century, his ideas are still burning and have not been extinguished. It is sufficient to mention that he is the founder of the philosophy of life, which requires unveiling many of its assumptions and positivities. On our level as researchers (professors or students) specializing in philosophical matters, we emphasize that his views on language and thought have been somewhat ignored or neglected by us. While this may not have been intentional, it was necessary for us to draw attention to this, hoping that there are, for example, master's theses or even doctoral dissertations that address the positions of moderate philosophers like them, familiarizing themselves with their ideas and works!

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