

A Deleuzian Reading of Bergson

The Challenge of Bergsonism.

By Leonard Lawlor

New York: Continuum, 2003. 176 pp.

ISBN: 0-82646-803-9. Paperback. \$45

Review by Rune Moelbak

I first had an encounter with Bergson as part of my ongoing effort to better understand the deceased French philosopher Gilles Deleuze. Deleuze claimed Bergson to be one of his main influences alongside Spinoza and Nietzsche and even wrote a book about him, which he entitled *Bergsonism*. Deploying this very same term in the title of his book, Leonard Lawlor, professor of philosophy at the University of Memphis, seems to have arrived at Bergson from a similar vantage point. This is attested to in the nomenclature that is extracted from and informs Lawlor's reading of Bergson: a nomenclature which sheds light on key notions central not just to Bergson but also to Deleuze. Key Deleuzian concepts such as good sense and common sense, the body as machine, difference of kind and difference of degree, complication and implication, difference and repetition, immanence, surplus, multiplicity and folds are everywhere to be found in Lawlor's writing. As a result I found the book to illuminate not just Bergson but also Deleuze, or, perhaps rather, to create a "zone of indistinction" between the two. While Deleuze is rarely mentioned in the book itself, his presence is always felt as the distinct "memory" from which Lawlor appropriates Bergson.

Memory, of course is a key Bergsonian term, which when contrasted with Perception, makes up the fundamental difference of nature of which all reality is made. Despite this initial dualism between perception and memory, Bergson nevertheless distinguishes himself from the Western tradition of philosophy by arguing that this dualism of distinct natures never exists in actuality. Memory has always already passed into a perception and a perception always already includes a memory. In effect, therefore, Bergson lends himself to a monist interpretation that avoids all the pitfalls of more traditional dualist arguments. This indeed is why Bergson is well worth a read and why, I suspect, Lawlor finds it worthwhile to write his book.

In the majority of Lawlor's book, Lawlor seeks to explicate Bergson's alternative to a dualistic ontology, which he does by providing us with a

rather close reading of Bergson's perhaps most important book, *Matter and Memory*. These chapters, which make up the main body of the book, are then followed by an extended appendix, which includes a commentary on Bergson's lesser known work, *The Two Sources of Morality*, and an English translation by Athena Colman of Jean Hyppolite's essay on Bergson from 1949 entitled the *Various Aspects of Memory in Bergson*.

Like Bergson, Lawlor starts out in chapter one by redefining perception, not as a representation of an object, but as images in themselves, thereby undercutting the false Kantian dualism between things as they appear to me versus things as they appear in themselves. Perception *is* matter, not a representation of matter, and this is precisely what Bergson means by his concept of the image: "a certain existence that is more than what the idealist calls a *representation*, but less than what the realist calls a *thing*" (Bergson quoted on p. 9). From here, Lawlor follows Bergson in defining the human body as the intersection between pure image and pure memory: the point of action which breathes life into matter or memory into perception. The human body thus comes to occupy a central place in Bergson's ontology, since it is the very site of the dissolution of the dualism between image and memory, object and subject.

In one of his few departures from Bergson's actual writing, Lawlor here offers an interesting discussion of the difference between the body in Merleau-Ponty and the body in Bergson, contrasting the phenomenological account of the lived body with the vitalistic account of the machinic body. The conclusion here seems to be that although both Bergson and Merleau-Ponty can be said to offer an ontology that rests on the primacy of the human body, their understandings of the body are widely disparaging.

In chapter two, Lawlor introduces Bergson's distinct notion of "memory," which acts as the other ideal point of the difference of nature that includes perception as its opposite. Lawlor here distinguishes between pure memory and habit memory, where pure memory is the conservation of the past as co-existing with the present, and habit memory is the actualization of this past into an action-oriented present. At the one extreme, memory is completely removed from the interests of the body; at the other it is completely eclipsed by the immediacy of a perception. Memory in Bergson's understanding can thus be said to designate various degrees of hesitation between the ideals of a pure contemplation and a pure action.

In chapter three, Lawlor develops Bergson's concept of intuition, which he defines as a turning towards pure memory, a method of detaching oneself

from concrete action-oriented knowing so as to intuit the spiritual surplus that remains over and above the material. In the second part of the chapter, Lawlor draws on some of Bergson's other works to develop a Bergsonian theory of language based on this novel concept of intuition. Lawlor here argues that the use of language and the communication of ideas, which language makes possible, always necessitates a leap outside of language into the pure memory that is presupposed as its context. This ability to inhabit a past that was never present but is always presupposed by the present is what Lawlor equates with the primacy of intuition. Intuition, Lawlor argues, is not only what makes it possible to have a conversation, but also what makes it possible to shift between conversations and allows for a creative use of language.

Having laid out Bergson's non-dualistic ontology in the first three chapters, Lawlor concludes that Bergson is a philosopher not of matter and memory but of a pure undivided becoming, giving rise to the challenge that we think, not in terms of subject and object, but in terms of duration.

The *Challenge of Bergsonism* offers the reader a concise summary and interpretation of some of Bergson's key ideas. While it does a good job of explaining the concepts developed by Bergson in *Matter and Memory*, I found the sections on language, society and morality, developed in the latter part of chapter 3 and the appendix, less intelligible. Lawlor tends to err on the side of abstraction and I sometimes found Lawlor's descriptions and theoretical arguments too terse. He does not provide very many examples from the reader's everyday life, and when he does, he mostly recounts Bergson's own examples. This makes the book a hit or miss rendition of Bergson, which does not provide as much of a commentary on Bergson as a summary of his ideas. This might leave readers who have already read Bergson and are looking for further elucidation of his texts through novel examples and extensive commentary wanting more. It might also prove too dissatisfactory for readers who have not read Bergson and therefore need to be provided with more context and clarification than Lawlor is able to give. However, readers who have read or are interested in Deleuze, will be delighted to find in this book key Deleuzian terms traced back to their Bergsonian origin, an accomplishment which makes this book unique in comparison with other commentaries available on Bergson.