

Bergson and Bergsonism: A Reply to Riggio
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Adam Riggio gives us an interesting insight into a science war *avant la lettre* between two iconic twentieth century figures in philosophy and physics, Henri Bergson (1859-1940) and Albert Einstein (1879-1955). Bergson was once a household name, but now almost forgotten, and Einstein's name has become almost unforgettable. Bergson was arguably one of the most important philosophers of the early twentieth century, and even then, one of philosophy's most controversial figures.

On Bergson and Einstein

Riggio focuses on the challenge posed by Einstein's theory of relativity against Bergson's idea that the essence of time is *durée*, that is change internal to itself. Riggio focuses principally on Bergson's *Creative Evolution* which was originally published in 1907, and then translated into English in 1912. It was this text that occasioned the public debate between Bergson and Einstein at the *Société française de philosophie* in Paris in 1922. This debate preceded the release of Bergson's book *Duration and Simultaneity* that, according to Einstein and other scientists and philosophers, contained an error that revealed a fundamental misunderstanding of the theory of relativity. In his defence, Bergson claimed that he had been misunderstood.

Riggio ostensibly takes up this dispute as the basis for his claim that Bergson and Einstein were participants in one of the earliest examples of a Science War. This is not a new argument. The physicists Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont were among the first to claim that the contemporary origins of the 'Science Wars' could be found in the debate between Bergson and Einstein (1997). More recently, the intellectual historian Jimena Canales has published *The Physicist and the Philosopher* (2015), which treats the debate as a decisive moment in the formation of two cultures, and indeed, two world views.

Riggio's purpose seems genuine. He seeks to trouble the received view that it was Einstein who bested Bergson in order to determine the conditions necessary to reconcile philosophy and science in mutually rewarding quest for truth. This is instructive. Riggio follows the reception of Bergson's ideas to argue that this debate shaped his legacy. But here, it is an overstatement to suggest that Bergson's participation in the science wars can be isolated to his critique of evolutionary biology in *Creative Evolution* (1907). It is important to note a consistency in his method and logic with respect to science. Indeed, each of his major publications focused on a science of his time to argue that scientific explanation tends to obscure the motility and mobility of time. To this end he takes up, psychophysics in *Time and Free Will* (1889), psychology in *Matter and Memory* (1896), and perhaps less well known, sociology in *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* (1932).

Philosophical Networks

To my mind, Riggio places too much emphasis on the debate with Einstein to make the claim that Bergson's 'stumbles in professional and political conversation with Albert

Einstein destroyed his career' (2015, 2). Riggio uses the debate and its aftermath to attribute Bergson's ostensible demise to insufficient professional and intellectual networks. This allows him to use Bergson's case to claim that '[p]hilosophy's practitioners must be aware that their arguments and intuitions must be integrated with wider professional networks and the ideas they can supply for the sake of further evidence and ongoing critique of arguments and ideas within their own discipline' (2015,13).

This is important and useful advice. And yet, to me, it serves less as an argument for why Bergson's metaphysics has not taken up by scientists than as an explanation for why Bergson has not been taken up within the ranks of analytic philosophy. Indeed, it is from being situated from within such a network that Riggio himself can claim that Bergson was 'driven into total obscurity' after the debate (2015, 8). Now, this observation only makes sense from the perspective of an analytic philosophy where Bergson's contributions have largely been ignored, if not ridiculed. Indeed, one only need recall Bertrand Russell's unflattering appraisal that Bergson 'never thinks about fundamentals, but just invents pretty fairy-tales' (387) to appreciate the hostility of analytic philosophy toward Bergson's philosophy of intuition. And thus, it is only from the perspective of one sensitive to the rhythms of analytic philosophy—as Riggio himself is—that it is possible to claim that Bergson's reputation was *ruined*, and that, no one—and here, especially analytic philosophers—could take Bergson seriously. The debate with Einstein was not revelatory from this perspective, but confirmatory.

For those, like me, who are not invested in the divisions between analytic philosophy and the continental tradition, this assessment of Bergson's legacy is somewhat bewildering. For this is the same Bergson who was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1927, became Foreign Honorary Member of the American Academy of Arts & Sciences in 1928, and was then awarded the *Grand-Croix de la Legion d'honneur* in 1930. By any other reckoning, these accolades would suggest the culmination of a vibrant and robust intellectual career. And yet, they receive little mention from Riggio. It makes sense when we understand that such awards are irrelevant from the perspective of an analytic philosophy that has already discounted the professional contributions of this erstwhile philosopher.

This is perhaps one reason why the Einstein-Bergson debate holds such fascination for Riggio. It is a signal moment of Bergson's promise for redemption and his failure to persuade. It represents the moment that 'rationality' emerged victorious over 'intuition', and interestingly, a rare moment of alignment between science and analytic philosophy against 'irrationality'. For Bergson, duration is that which science eliminates, and which analytical philosophy can neither conceive nor express. If duration 'is what one feels and lives', then by this account, there could be no space for Bergson's metaphysics within either science or analytic philosophy because, in the end, its inclusion would only serve to prove Bergson's point. This observation also helps us to account for the reason that Bergson's repeated attempts to clarify his position never took hold in philosophical circles after the debate (see for example, the appendices to *Duration and Simultaneity*, 1999).

Philosophy and Physics

As Riggio notes, the stakes in the debate between Einstein and Bergson were about the relationship between philosophy and physics. But he presumes that Einstein emerged unscathed from the encounter. But this is perhaps not altogether certain. As Canales observes, when Einstein was awarded the Nobel Prize shortly after his debate with Bergson, it was not for his theory of relativity, but rather for ‘his discovery of the law of the photoelectric effect’ (2015, 3-4). Arguably, Bergson’s critique was a success insofar as the president of the Nobel Committee intimated that Einstein’s theory of relativity ‘pertains to epistemology’ rather than to physics, an observation directly related to Bergson’s effectiveness in debate (Canales 2015, 3-4). Even so, what Riggio demonstrates, albeit obliquely, is that the aftermath of the debate served to close philosophical ranks against Bergson.

For anyone predisposed against the idea of duration as immediate experience, it would not be difficult to retrospectively connect Bergson’s supposed ‘failure’ with the ‘Bergsonism’ that preceded him. Bergsonism combined a spiritualism with a common sense that transcended academe in its popular appeal to a broad public audience. Paul Douglass gives a nice anecdote in *Bergson, Eliot, and American Literature* regarding Bergson’s popularity following the publication of *Creative Evolution*: ‘Bergson was forced to reserve seats at lectures for his students; journalists, tourists, clergy, foreign students, and even ladies of fashion crowded the hall’ (1986, 12).

Similarly when Bergson arrived in New York at the invitation of William James in 1913, he caused the city’s first traffic jam as society figures flocked to hear him speak. From this perspective, Bergsonism was a force in its own right and created the conditions of legitimacy for Bergson’s eschewal from the kind of ‘reason’ espoused by scientists and analytic philosophers. But Bergson’s Bergsonism brings to mind the standing of another towering intellectual figure who similarly inspired admiration and vitriol: Karl Marx. As his collaborator and friend, Friedrich Engels observed in a letter to Conrad Schmidt: ‘The materialist conception of history has a lot of dangerous friends nowadays, who use it as an excuse for *not* studying history. Just as Marx, in commenting on the ‘Marxists’ of the late seventies used to say: “All I know is that I am not a Marxist”’ (Engels to C. Schmidt, August 5, 1890).

By Riggio’s account, Bergson many not have had many friends, even dangerous ones. He notes that the ‘the textbook account sees the vitriol as entirely philosophical in origin, because professional networks are not usually taken to be significant causal factors for philosophical developments’ (Riggio 2015, 12). But here, perhaps, it was precisely Bergson’s populist support that at once helped to animate philosophical vitriol and replaced a professional network. Indeed, as Walter Lippmann observed at the time, Bergson was considered to be ‘the most dangerous man in the world’ insofar as his philosophy threatened to put society’s institutions on the defensive (Lippmann 1912, 100-1). If this observation is taken at face value, we might even go so far as to say that his philosophy threatened to put science and philosophy on the defensive.

Bergson v. Bergsonism

Just as Marx sought to distinguish himself from the Marxists, so too must we distinguish Bergson from his Bergsonism. This means that we must insist on distinguishing the problem of the general reception of Bergson's claims with the question of how Bergson's philosophy might inform a philosophy of science. To do so, we must insist on the kind of careful measured style of argumentation that a close reading of Bergson rewards. This requires something that Riggio explicitly acknowledges goes beyond the scope of his article because his 'essay is not a scholarly exegesis of his works' (2015, 2). Bergson requires a generous reading, one that sees a lyrical turn of phrase as an expression of his theory of time rather than its undoing. From this, we might see the stake that science and philosophy have in checking Bergson's advance.

We can see how from Riggio's perspective that: 'Bergson's arguments were widely interpreted as an attack on Einstein's physics, because the Frenchman was never clear until it was too late to salvage his reputation about his own theory being a supplement to mathematical physics instead of competition' (2015, 11). But here, as Canales reminds us, Bergson *was* clear. Indeed, his clarity and precision are signature elements of his philosophical argumentation. The wreckage of the debate between Bergson and Einstein has arguably more to do with an alliance between analytic philosophy and science than it has to do solely with an absence of professional network. At the end of the day, these may amount to the same insight, viz., that Bergson was not entirely responsible for the shaping of his own reputation.

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