

GETTING BERGSON STRAIGHT

The Contributions of
Intuition to the Sciences

Pete A. Y. Gunter
University of North Texas

Series in Philosophy



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Foreword

Randall E. Auxier

Southern Illinois University Carbondale

The book you are reading is the result of more than a half century of learning and achievement in the philosophy of science. In particular, this book attempts to situate the philosophy of Henri Bergson in light of our latest science. It shows that Bergson's key ideas anticipated positions we now need to adopt widely in order to accommodate, philosophically, the trends and discoveries of today's science. The main reason to involve Bergson in this effort is not to give credit where it is due (although that should be done), but rather, Bergson still has many ideas that will lead us in the right direction in the future. Bergson's contribution to our self-understanding is only now becoming clear.

I think I can safely let the book speak for itself in terms of the detail, since it is clear, concise, and accessible to non-specialists in both the philosophy of science and the thought of Bergson. Bergson's philosophy is extremely difficult to understand, even though it seems deceptively straight-forward when one begins reading. Really plumbing the depths of the ideas and their relations is, however, a task that requires years of work. Obviously Pete Gunter put in those years and here presents us with the summary results, at least as regards the general outlines of the Bergsonian philosophy.

One reason this project is necessary is that Bergson is enjoying a long delayed re-consideration. His thought has never wholly disappeared, since many important philosophers, from Whitehead and Merleau-Ponty, through Bachelard, Deleuze, up to the present have made good use of Bergson's ideas in developing our awareness of time. Also the occasional scientist, notably Ilya Prigogine, would bring Bergson back into the conversation. The descent of Bergson's thought always remained significant, but perhaps not as significant as it should have been. Einstein's allies and minions did a hatchet-job on Bergson as a philosopher of science, as documented by Jimena Canales in the 2015 book, *The Physicist and the Philosopher*. Canales' investigation shows that Einstein's intent was to replace philosophy with physics, and one can say he largely succeeded.

Part of the reason that Bergson is on the rise again is that the philosophical weaknesses of Einstein's picture of the universe have finally caught up to the fantasies of the physicists. The need to demand that our experience of time is not real, in the sense that it is not an important or reliable source for knowledge of the physical universe, never sat well with most of the philosophers. The public did not appreciate the depth of this claim, thinking they could have their

experience of time and their General Relativity too. Philosophers of science knew better, and split into camps depending upon how objectionable they found the construct of spacetime. If we follow Canales' account, we can see that if Henri Poincare had lived another ten years, the history of 20th century science would be very different. We would not have given Einstein's new block universe a hundred years of ascendancy.

But now Bergson's re-assessment has been coming mainly from Continental philosophers who are impressed by certain limited aspects of Bergson's ideas. Bergson was talented at phenomenological descriptions of our experience, even though he was not a defender of phenomenology. Yet, it is tempting to draw on some of his deeper insights about experienced time and ignore the radically empirical framework, which is a philosophy of science, within which these descriptions emerge. That is the situation this book corrects. As Bergson re-emerges and Einstein's universe passes into a very real past, Gunter believes, and rightly, that we must include the work with and on science to get Bergson straight. Thus, Gunter corrects misperceptions and misreadings that have persisted for decades while also re-balancing current readings that are too one-sided.

I have said something, then, about the book, and will let it speak for itself. But I want to say something about the author, since, in a way, this is a culminating effort regarding his extensive work on Bergson. I also want to situate the work on Bergson in the larger context of Gunter's overall work. In the more than 30 years I have known Pete Gunter, I have had the privilege of learning a good deal about what you might call "the man behind the philosopher." Among the most personable of Texans, the man is not only easy to get to know, he's difficult to resist. Pete seems to know everyone and everyone seems to know Pete (so, pardon my familiar way, but I can't bring myself to call the man "Gunter" in the part that follows.) I mean this in the best way, but Pete is a born storyteller, and I don't think the connection between that gift and his philosophical pursuits is incidental. It's just a little hard to puzzle out.

The more one looks at Gunter's life and achievements, the more evident the core of his interests—he needs Bergson, time, physics, and biology to serve a broader concern: nature. The Renaissance man—philosopher, environmentalist, composer, songwriter, novelist, historian, genealogist, humanitarian—begins to come into focus only when you realize that Pete Gunter is a fellow *out for a good time*. But that doesn't mean just what it sounds like. The emphasis must be on the word "time." A "good time" is the best a finite person can hope to achieve in life, or if not wholly good, at least something interesting to mitigate the repetition. To have time is to live an imperative to use it and endure it well. We have minds only to facilitate action, Bergson says, and Pete has taken it as an imperative.

These creative projects, in art, literature, and even political organizing, bear an essential relation to his philosophical thinking, and his most significant

endeavor: his environmentalism. Whether we like it or not, philosophy is autobiographical and to deny this violates the first principle of philosophy – that its aim is self-knowledge. So even though the connections among these far-flung contributions may seem vague, they are not only real but also have a determining influence of what we think and how we say it.

The reason for the connection is simple: we do not come to know ourselves apart from what we *do*, our actions (and thinking is an activity, after all). If we wish to know what we *can* do, our actions must break creative ground (at least for us, as individual actors). We constantly do things we haven't done before, and our way of adapting our own bodies to needed movements that negotiate the world end up navigating a *terra incognita* for each of us. Whether you realize it or not, there is a way *you* tie your shoes, brush your teeth, even button your shirt, and it's yours alone. Your acts, *not* some category of acts, but *your* individual acts, over time, become generalized, refined, fluid, and thus, your body *becomes* a reservoir for a general field of action that you may or may not enact. That field of possible acts accompanies you everywhere you go as a generalized body. I summarize here a view explained by Bergson in *Creative Evolution*, of course.

For example, you might be able to play the guitar, as Pete can; or you might be able to imitate a citizen of France or Germany who speaks English with an accent, as Pete can; or perhaps you can write funny songs, as Pete can. The same can be said for anything else you have learned to do by repeated action and refinement over time. And you *can* do these things even when you aren't actually *doing* them. It is a generalized capacity or power that your body *is*. Generalization thus exists in the field of actions, both possible and actual, in the sense that the possible actions exist as paths of movement even when not followed.

For this reason, and for other reasons, if you want to know whether you can become good at writing, for example, you have to write, to enact it – you have to *care* about it, choose it over and over. It's something we do with our bodies, and there is a good deal of mediation between inspiration, idea, act, and product. To create a more or less smooth set of transitions between the impulse to write and having written something “good,” then, is an effort involving many exercises and enactments. To have a “talent” for such a thing means that one is able to refine and smooth the path.

In what follows, I want to talk about that process of creation, as Bergson understands it, and bring his view to bear on the creative work of Pete Gunter, both as a philosopher and as an interpreter of Bergson. Anyone who has ever known Pete Gunter, even if only briefly, knows that he tells stories. His stories are usually historical, whether casual recollections, or observations about human oddities, foibles, and failings, or ones that start out with “did you know that . . .” followed by some remarkable tidbit of fact. If he tells you a story in

conversation, it usually ends with a question and a shake of the head, a sort of “can you believe that?” and truth-is-stranger-than-fiction sigh. He writes like he talks, and in spite of what many people may believe, that isn’t easy to do. It takes practice. The style is straight, easy, sometimes wry.

His novels, for instance, are excavations of his family’s past, and always with the sense that there is something inescapable about one’s family line. It isn’t about fate, or destiny; it’s about the *active presence* of the past, but also about the *weight* of the past. Bergson holds that nothing of the past is lost in the present and all of the past is *actively* present, and Pete’s writing addresses and claims that point of view. In the long run, the weight becomes too much to bear and vitality becomes too diffused to bring about meaningful change. But as he writes in a song, “the second law of thermodynamics is a Heraclitean law.” (Yes, Pete wrote a folk song about entropy.)

Pete’s novel, *River in Dry Grass*, ends with the protagonist coming to a momentous decision: for him to let the past be buried and to disappear. In short, he decides to defy, if he can, Bergson’s principle about the full and active presence of the past. If the past can’t be undone, and it cannot, then why not at least put it to sleep? This is the protagonist’s choice, and the reasons for it, insofar as there are any, don’t add up and never will and never can. Justice cannot really be served when everyone deserves worse than he or she is getting, so mercy is a new secular universalism. There are no fallen angels begging for redemption, just earthly exiles seeking resident amnesty. To understand, really, what would lead someone to devote so much effort to interpreting a philosopher like Bergson, it helps to see something of the “theology” behind it.

Philosophy and Fiction

The perennial question that arises when one considers a philosopher who writes fiction is “what’s the connection, if there is one?” Of course, there have been many philosophers who were truly great writers, and Henri Bergson was certainly among the best –they gave him the Nobel Prize for literature, but philosophy is all he wrote (I doubt that could happen in our day). On the other hand, philosophical imagination usually isn’t dominated by narrative structure. The order we find in philosophers tends to me more architectonic. Yet, I encourage readers to approach this book as a sort of story. Imagine that you are getting a complex fireside story by an uncle, somewhat eccentric, whom you have known your whole life. This book is written in formal style, so you will need to insert, occasionally, “and would you believe . . .” and with an occasional, “now, you won’t know about this, but . . .” when the connecting tissue of the story is added, I think you will see that you don’t want to nod off until this one is over.

I have had the opportunity to read quite a lot of Pete’s academic work, and sometimes it seems to me that I’m dealing with two completely different writers, if I compare it to the non-academic stuff. But Pete has been one of my

principal teachers in the area of Bergson studies, and so I can hear that connecting tissue when I read it. He puts a good bit of that in when he delivers an academic paper. It helps with understanding, then, to imagine the accent and the uncle, and the fireside. You should try it.

Pete Gunter is well known in the philosophy profession, and beyond it, as a songwriter. The legend of his songs passes from cohort to cohort among professional philosophers and thus, his recording, *Chicken Fried Escargot* has become as much pirated in the profession as any manuscript of the later Wittgenstein. You might call the recording a sort of “self-bootleg,” since Pete ultimately endorses this piracy. Originally captured in analogue, the thing finally showed up in digital form a few years back. I suppose that was inevitable.

Why has this music become the fabric of legend? I have heard tell that when he was President of the Southwestern Philosophical Society in the 1970s, he delivered his presidential address with his guitar in hand. Even if that’s fiction, it ought to be repeated. The profession needs more tall tales than it currently possesses. The songs for which Pete is best known are mostly two-minute ditties, many of them parodies of show tunes, in which Pete places the doctrines and characters of the history of philosophy into comic settings. Different professors like different ditties, but among the perennial favorites are “Don’t Blame the *Umgebung*,” featuring a chorus sung falsetto from the standpoint of Peter Abelard, and the “Peloponnesian War Blues.” The latter, being a fairly standard 12-bar, Delta blues number, contains one of the better internal rhymes I have ever encountered:

They say if you religious, you’ll burn old Sparta down
If you believe in Jeeeee-sus, you’ll burn the Peloponneee-sus to the ground
It never made much sense to me, to kill for Christ in 399 BC
Don’t wanna go down to Sparta and fight no Peloponnesian War

I don’t see how that can really be improved on, either as a lament or as a commentary on Vietnam (which was the time when Pete wrote it). Thus, I recommend that the current book should be read with a willingness to share a secret irony with the storytelling uncle.

None of this is intended to lighten the very serious and very important contribution this book makes to getting Bergson straight. In many ways, it’s about getting Gunter straight. The concern Gunter brings to the interpretation of Bergson is that of a multifaceted and accomplished person who, with a lifetime of effective activism and advocacy regarding environmental causes, has been able to use his command of science to make great changes in his part of the world, or as he would say, his neck of the woods. Pete has saved more of the woods, perhaps, than anyone since John Muir. Bergson helped him do that, along with a deeply informed orientation toward life, energy, and change. Gunter’s full command of these ideas, along with a dozen others, made him

persuasive as an advocate for conservation and building respect for nature. His significant literary ability and his voice in narrative have been no small part of his persuasiveness.

The uncle at the fireside is to be taken with great seriousness, and in a way that the dry as dust academic philosopher never will be. If Pete once sang a presidential address, one thing can be said for it: people remember it. And that is a part of what must be included in the rhetoric of philosophy, its form as communicated, its impact as a living meaning. Bergson had a similar gift. People *wanted* to read his books. And you will want to read this one.

And Pete Gunter is, without question, the most authoritative living source for Bergson interpretation. Indeed, one can place him with the four or five best in the history of this line of interpretation, with an extra palm added due to the historical distance Gunter enjoys and the access he has to subsequent developments in science. So, put another log on the fire, sit back, and enjoy this story. And tell it to your friends.

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