



October 2023

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Recommended Citation

Aguirre, Lucas (2023) "Bergson's Environment: Towards an Ecological Understanding," *International Journal of Undergraduate Research and Creative Activities*: Vol. 5: Iss. 2, Article 19.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7710/2155-4838.1088>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.cwu.edu/ijurca/vol5/iss2/19>

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Abstract

This paper draws on the thinking of the French philosopher and biologist Henri Bergson, and attempts an understanding of the environment while considering Bergson's metaphysics. Why is it that the bulk of the discussion concerning environmental problems takes place within a narrow framework that has difficulty recognizing the intrinsic value of nature? In this paper I try and explain Bergson's description of the ways that consciousness seeks to know the world around it, and conclude that modern thought fails to recognize the sensual, sympathetic nature of experience. Only through understanding the ecology of our own thoughts can we hope to reach an understanding of the environment and how to live with it in a harmonious and ecologically conscious manner.

Bergson's Environment: Towards an Ecological Understanding

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Published online: 19 June 2013
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Abstract

This paper draws on the thinking of the French philosopher and biologist Henri Bergson, and attempts an understanding of the environment while considering Bergson's metaphysics. Why is it that the bulk of the discussion concerning environmental problems takes place within a narrow framework that has difficulty recognizing the intrinsic value of nature? In this paper I try and explain Bergson's description of the ways that consciousness seeks to know the world around it, and conclude that modern thought fails to recognize the sensual, sympathetic nature of experience. Only through understanding the ecology of our own thoughts can we hope to reach an understanding of the environment and how to live with it in a harmonious and ecologically conscious manner.

“My desire for knowledge is intermittent, but my desire to bathe my head in atmospheres unknown to my feet is perennial and constant. The highest that we can attain to is not Knowledge, but Sympathy with Intelligence” –Henry David Thoreau¹

To try to examine the myriad of ecological problems such as pollution and climate change would be redundant, as most of us are already aware of the problems and their causes. In writing this paper, I wanted to avoid analyzing any one particular aspect of the relationship we have with our environment; in other words, I wished to diagnose the illness shaping our position towards the environment instead of reiterating its symptoms. The deeper I dug in trying to address our mistreatment of the biosphere in its totality, the more it was uncovered that at the core of the issue lay an ideological problem more than a social or political one. What appears puzzling is that despite the ever-growing amount of evidence linking our various lifestyle choices to ecological degradation, it seems impossible to practically deal with these choices on the scale necessary to effect change. Human beings existed with no major impact on the environment for hundreds of thousands of years. However, the past few millennia and especially the past few centuries have brought about technological changes that have given rise to an inherently destructive relationship; it is clear that we must radically re-evaluate our entire human situation so as to be better attuned to the well-being of the

planet. For the most part the solutions offered are still largely delimited by the ways of thinking which got us into our current situation in the first place; the only two options being an attempt at lightly mitigating the consequences of climate change (such as driving a hybrid vehicle), or facing them with a resolute nihilism.

Within the paradigm of life and values that we have constructed since the Enlightenment, it seems like we have lost the ability to have a meaningful relationship with our environment. It is not that the reigning worldview is opposed to such an emotive relationship, but rather that the modern attitude for dealing with virtually everything precludes even the possibility of such a relationship. For this paper I started by trying to choose an environmental ethic to defend, but soon realized that what I was after was not an elaboration on how we should treat the environment, but an understanding of how to even think about the environment. Do we regard natural processes in the way that the sciences do, with a hope to understand such processes in the same way we understand the workings of an automobile? Do we (almost arbitrarily) agree on an environmental ethic and judge our actions according to how they weigh on its moral scale? I suggest that the proper route to inhabiting the planet in a manner that is healthy for both human beings and the vast web of organisms that we live alongside begins unassumingly. Any ideology with which we approach our situation will already have imposed limits on possible solutions; in this manner, I am advocating an open and pragmatic beginning for our thinking. An open pragmatism grounded just as much in the subjective emotional experience as it is in the empirical rational one. In this work I will draw on the thinking of the French philosopher and biologist Henri Bergson and his description of the workings of our understanding in the hope to critically analyze conventional thinking, and begin to outline a route of ascension for the mountain of ecological problems we face.

The foundation for Bergson's thinking about life and consciousness rests on his metaphysical suppositions regarding the two fundamental ways in which philosophy seeks to know a thing. Moreover, these two fundamental ways of knowing are not unique to philosophy, they are in fact the pathways through which consciousness itself engages with the world around it: "-instinct and intelligence are two divergent developments of one and the same principle, which in the one case remains within itself, in the other steps out of itself and becomes absorbed in the utilization of inert matter"². The first way of knowing is what Bergson describes as intellectual; the way that analyzes an object by moving around it, seeking to know it from the outside. This is contrasted with the experiential mode of intuition, which seeks to enter into a given object in a way that coincides with it; it is neither a synthesis nor an analysis of what is given, but an absolute account of the thing itself. Because of these two different perspectives through which consciousness understands the world, Bergson writes that, "The first kind of knowledge (intellectual) may be said to stop at the relative; the second (intuition), in those cases where it is possible, to attain the absolute"³. The

exterior mode of the intellect considers things spatially, and in this way only knows an object relative to other objects, judging and comparing from the outside. But such an understanding in terms of others is as far as one which rests purely on extension will allow. This way of knowing by means of comparison cannot be absolute; what the intellect seeks to understand can only be comprehended and this only by definition in relation to other things. Inversely, an act of intuition consists of an act of sympathy, in understanding something in and of itself without resorting to comparisons or analogies. Intuition is subjective inasmuch as it is the absolute account of a subject, in contrast with an objective account that takes stock of possible relations between objects (which are objects insofar as we are ignoring their interiority).

Bergson asks us to consider an analogy which functions to represent the two different approaches which consciousness takes in understanding its environment. The example consists of constructing a poem when one is only given its scrambled letters. If these letters were component parts of the poem, one might have a chance of restructuring the original through intellectual engagement by guessing at the arrangement of the parts. In this case the meanings of the parts are not altered by their order, and we only arrive at an arrangement that is nothing more than the sum of its parts. The problem however is that these letters are not component parts, they are partial expressions of the poem which, taken outside of the context and feeling which the poem invites, are meaningless by themselves⁴. If one knew the poem, one could indeed place all of the letters in the correct order so as to reconstitute the poem, while the inverse operation is simply impossible. It is in this way that Bergson argues that it is possible to pass from intuition to analysis, but not from analysis to intuition⁵. Even when we attempt to stumble upon the poem by arrangements of its letters, we first must form an intuition of what we wish to represent, and arrange the fragments accordingly. From this intuition of the poem's possible meanings we mistakenly try to rebuild it, not realizing that what the poem expresses is not immanent in its construction: "The very idea of reconstituting a thing by operations practiced on symbolic elements alone implies such an absurdity that it would never occur to anyone if they recollected that they were not dealing with fragments of the thing, but only, as it were, with fragments of its symbol"⁶ (Italics mine). In other words, the poem consists in more than a random arrangement of letters; it has its own interiority for which the arrangement of its letters is a skeleton that bears the vitality of its meaning.

The analytic mode of the intellect necessarily deals with symbolizations and representations of things, as the intellect is concerned with action. The clear and distinct outlines of spatial things that we perceive are merely revelations of opportunities to act on them. In proportion to the action that consciousness is capable of, it separates and represents to itself what it experiences as symbols. The capability for consciousness to interact with the world around it then rests on its ability to consider things in their exteriority and relative to other things; in this way "intelligence... even in its humblest form, already aims at getting matter to act on matter... The more consciousness is

intellectualized, the more is matter spatialized”⁷. Intelligence is molded in the likeness of objects and it is only in this capacity that it is able to understand and act on them. Bergson equates the successes of positive science with successes of the intellect; the facts and clear demarcations that scientific analysis takes for granted are merely reflections of the intellect itself. One cannot describe intellect without implying the geometrical and repeatable relations that the intellect perceives; we think that our rules of logic are universal because in fact they are elaborations of the mechanisms of thought that allow us to perceive the universe in the first place.

There is no denying the wealth of knowledge that these mechanistic investigations have uncovered, but such investigations can only exist within their own clinical vacuum. They exist precisely because they only take into account certain relative aspects of existence, and leave alone those aspects that cannot be accounted for by anything other than themselves. The rapid development of science and technology has rested on this intellectual paradigm, and as the fruits of its labors have increasingly nourished modern life, its scope has widened to include all aspects of our existence. Bergson’s philosophy is important precisely because it seeks a more holistic understanding than the intellect can provide; and it is in this holistic manner that I believe we can be better equipped to establish a balanced relationship with our environment once again. But how exactly will an understanding of both intellect and intuition guide us towards an ecologically conscious way of life? Will our understanding of ecology be one that is fully graspable by means of simple and relative concepts?

Bergson writes that the natural inclination of the human mind is to seek clear concepts which it can grab a hold of, this being exactly the impetus driving scientific investigation. In fact, to attempt the sort of intellectual sympathy that he describes as intuition, “the mind has to do violence to itself, has to reverse the direction of the operation by which it habitually thinks”⁸. In other words, the mind must cease to focus on its external perception of itself as an object and enter back into the dynamism which constitutes its lived duration. It must step back into itself and recognize the intrinsic value in and of itself; value not relative to what lies outside of it. The mind is not made up of the static and graspable concepts with which the intellect is used to dealing, but exists continually experiencing novel situations. In the same way that we can describe the path of a projectile by the points through which it passes, we can describe the mind by the ideas and concepts which pass through it. We cannot however describe the projectile’s dynamic motion itself with static descriptions of points any more than we can describe the vital impulse of the mind by a description of states of mind. Intuition cannot be concerned with practical action because it has no practical objects that it can manipulate. It follows then that Bergson’s notion of truth is one where applicability is synonymous with clarity: “The clearness of a concept being scarcely more at bottom than the certainty, at last obtained, of manipulating the concept profitably”⁹. The problem is that if we rest our conception of the cosmos on a model that only sees the

value of things in their manipulability and use, we preclude the possibility that they can have value by themselves.

As has been suggested earlier, what characterizes the intellect is its utter inability to grasp the passage of time apart from symbolizations and analogies; in a word the intellect is unmoving. It tries to grasp the creative progression of the cosmos in terms of fixed concepts, but does not find truth as it attempts to perfectly replicate actuality with those concepts. Bergson is not interested in defining what truth is; his task is seeking a sympathetic understanding of lived experience. For him this lived experience is comparable to the creative passage of the cosmos, ceaselessly experiencing new situations with facts rooted only in the past and the future still undetermined. It follows then that the clockwork universe of the intellect does somewhat mimic reality but is only a still-life of it, and what is real is not any fixed universal law, but the dynamic nature of existence itself: "Reality flows; we flow with it; and we call true any affirmation which, in guiding us through moving reality, gives us a grip on it and places us under more favorable conditions for acting"¹⁰. Bergson's process-based ontology stresses the change that is inherent in experience, and works to dethrone the reigning notion that truth is eternal. His notion of intuition breaks free from the rigidity of concepts and places itself within the change that is inherent in existence. In embracing change, intuition allows for a creative freedom that is unknown to the intellect, and consequently invites an understanding of nature that is more alive than a purely mechanistic conception will allow.

It is on this foundation of accounting for life and giving credit to the lived experience that we can begin to construct an ethics that is ecological in the fullest sense of the word. Bergson's Philosophy is not a return to naïve animism, but an opportunity to reestablish the aliveness of nature and give it an equal voice in the current environmental debate. It is a reminder that we cannot approach the value of the environment with purely intellectual ends in mind. We should leave our cold and disenchanted epistemology behind to reify the living, breathing web of life that is the environment. Such a perspective would draw little distinction between the vital impulse of nature and our own, and indeed eliminate many of the bifurcations of understanding which have contributed to the ecological crisis in general: "What was immobile and frozen in our perception is warmed and set in motion. Everything comes to life around us, everything is revived in us"¹¹.

Our current approach to ecology seems too geared towards the nature's manipulation and use, instead of geared towards a way of life that we know would be more sustainable than most modern western lifestyles. Bergson's vision of the future is one that does not see the entirety of reality as fitting into wholly determined concepts, and sees pragmatic suggestions as fluid, capable of adapting through duration to meet whatever obstacles may present themselves. His idea of mutability, however, is one that

is quite different from the mutability of technology. Bergson's epistemology describes the acquisition of knowledge not as the discovery of truths about reality, but as the invention of such truths¹². In this way, Bergson does not place truth completely outside of what we are able to grasp a hold of in the flux of reality, but does not see it as being ever completely caught within our grasp either. In taking an approach to addressing environmental problems, a pragmatic approach would guide us by both the empirical and the ideal. The empirical can direct and mentor us through the relationships that we can prove exist within the environment, and the ideal can help shape our aspirations of the sustainable society towards which we strive. While the empirical rests on the past, by taking change and creativity into account the ideal opens us to the future, and gives us a firmer grasp on reality: "Apart from the truths which translate mere sensations, it is, according to pragmatism, the truths of feeling which would push their roots deepest into reality"¹³. The intuition that sympathizes and sensuously experiences the world has a wider scope, and affords us a broader perspective on our environment than the intellect does. Such an intuitive approach to ecology would evaluate our lifestyles from a point of view which sees our connection to the environment as fundamental, and for the most part would have a radically different set of values than those currently practiced in the industrial world.

For the most part, the pillars of our industrial society are expressions of the intellect which have proven profitable enough to become institutionalized. What are these pillars? Most political and economic systems in place today function purely in terms of what they are able to manipulate and have control over. Technology likewise attempts a mastery over nature so as to direct it towards whatever ends we see as useful. Such systems seem to have the common denominator of a particular conception of nature that refuses to recognize its vital impulse, deafening our ears to the gasps of our expiring environment. I suggest that there is an entire family of systems, an entire framework of thinking, which given its lack of holistic perspective, does not see any intrinsic value in the environment. Such is the limited sort of thinking that seems to be leading us towards environmental disaster, and blindly perpetuating our value systems in a narrow and rigid framework. The directions that holistic thinking points us may at first seem radical, but only because we are so deeply entrenched in our current ways of life. I would like to re-invite intuitive understanding back into the debate about environmental problems, so that we can increasingly sympathize with nature to shed light on new societal paradigms. It is clear that maintaining the status quo concerning our treatment of the earth is simply not an option, and that we must be both imaginative and grounded as we begin to tackle environmental problems. I firmly believe that if we learn to harness our intuition and ground it pragmatically, we can build an ecological understanding that will lead us towards a future we can sustain.

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¹ Thoreau, "Walking."

² Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, 168.

³ Bergson, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, 21.

⁴ Bergson, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, 33.

⁵ Bergson, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, 42.

⁶ Bergson, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, 33.

⁷ Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, 189.

⁸ Bergson, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, 51.

⁹ Bergson, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, 59.

¹⁰ Bergson, *The Creative Mind*, 255.

¹¹ Bergson, *The Creative Mind*, 186.

¹² Bergson, *The Creative Mind*, 256, "- while for other doctrines a new truth is a discovery, for pragmatism it is an invention."

¹³ Bergson, *The Creative Mind*, 258.