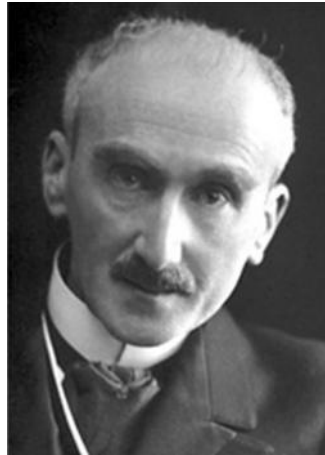


## **Nobel Prize in Literature 1927**



**Henri Bergson**

**The Nobel Prize in Literature 1927 was awarded to Henri Bergson "*in recognition of his rich and vitalizing ideas and the brilliant skill with which they have been presented*".**

In his *L'Évolution créatrice* (1907) [*Creative Evolution*], Henri Bergson has declared that the most lasting and most fruitful of all philosophical systems are those which originate in intuition. If one believes these words, it appears immediately with regard to Bergson's system how he has made fruitful the intuitive discovery that opens the gate to the world of his thought. This discovery is set forth in his doctoral thesis, *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience* (1889) [*Time and Free Will*], in which time is conceived not as something abstract or formal but as a reality, indissolubly connected with life and the human self. He gives it the name «duration», a concept that can be interpreted as «living time», by analogy with the life force. It is a dynamic stream, exposed to constant qualitative variations and perpetually increasing. It eludes reflection. It cannot be linked with any fixed point, for it would thereby be limited and no longer exist. It can be perceived

and felt only by an introspective and concentrated consciousness that turns inward toward its origin.

What we usually call time, the time which is measured by the movement of a clock or the revolutions of the sun, is something quite different. It is only a form created by and for the mind and action. At the end of a most subtle analysis, Bergson concludes that it is nothing but an application of the form of space. Mathematical precision, certitude, and limitation prevail in its domain; cause is distinguished from effect and hence rises that edifice, a creation of the mind, whose intelligence has encircled the world, raising a wall around the most intimate aspirations of our minds toward freedom. These aspirations find satisfaction in «living time»: cause and effect here are fused; nothing can be foreseen with certainty, for certainty resides in the act, simple in itself, and can be established only by this act. Living time is the realm of free choice and new creations, the realm in which something is produced only once and is never repeated in quite the same manner. The history of the personality originates in it. It is the realm where the mind, the soul, whatever one may call it, by casting off the forms and habits of intelligence becomes capable of perceiving in an inner vision the truth about its own essence and about the universal life which is a part of our self.

In his purely scientific account, the philosopher tells us nothing of the origin of this intuition, born perhaps of a personal experience skilfully seized upon and probed, or perhaps of a liberating crisis of the soul. One can only guess that this crisis was provoked by the heavy atmosphere of rationalistic biology that ruled toward the end of the last century. Bergson had been brought up and educated under the influence of this science, and when he decided to take up arms against it, he had a rare mastery of its own weapons and full knowledge of the necessity and grandeur it had in its own realm, the conceptual construction of the material world. Only when rationalism seeks to imprison life itself in its net does Bergson seek to prove that the dynamic and fluid nature of life passes without hindrance across its meshes.

Even if I were competent, it would still be impossible to give an account of the subtlety and scope of Bergson's thought in the few minutes at my disposal. The task is even more impossible for one who possesses only a very limited sense of philosophy and has never studied it.

At his starting point, the intuition of a living time, Bergson borrows in his analysis, in the development of his concepts, and in the sequence of his proofs, something of the dynamic, flowing, and almost irresistible essence of this intuition. One has to follow every movement; every moment introduces a new element. One has to follow the current, trying to breathe as best one can. There is scarcely time for reflection, for the moment one becomes static oneself, one loses all contact with the chain of reasoning.

In a singularly penetrating refutation of determinism our philosopher demonstrates that a universal intellect, which he calls Pierre, could not predict the life of another person, Paul, except in so far as he can follow Paul's experiences, sensations, and voluntary acts in all their manifestations, to the extent of becoming identical with him as completely as two equal triangles coincide. A reader who wants to understand Bergson completely must to a certain extent identify himself with the author and fulfil enormous requirements of power and flexibility of mind.

This is by no means to say that there is no point in following the author in his course, for good or ill. Imagination and intuition are sometimes capable of flights where intelligence lags behind. It is not always possible to decide whether the imagination is seduced or whether the intuition recognizes itself and lets itself be convinced. In any event, reading Bergson is always highly rewarding.

In the account, so far definitive, of his doctrine, *L'Évolution créatrice*, the master has created a poem of striking grandeur, a cosmogony of great scope and unflagging power, without sacrificing a strictly scientific terminology. It may be difficult at times to profit from its penetrating analysis or from the profundity of its thought; but one always derives from it, without any difficulty, a strong aesthetic impression.

The poem, if one looks at it in that way, presents a sort of drama. The world has been created by two conflicting tendencies. One of them represents matter which, in its own consciousness, tends downwards; the second is life with its innate sentiment of freedom and its perpetually creative force, which tends increasingly toward the light of knowledge and limitless horizons. These two elements are mingled, prisoners of each other, and the product of this union is ramified on different levels.

The first radical difference is found between the vegetable and the animal world, between immobile and mobile organic activity. With the help of the sun, the vegetable world stores up the energy it extracts from inert matter; the animal is exempt from this fundamental task because it can draw energy already stored up in the vegetables from which it frees the explosive force simultaneously and proportionately to its needs. At a higher level in the chain, the animal world lives at the expense of the animal world, being able, due to this concentration of energy, to accentuate its development. The evolutionary paths thus become more and more diverse and their choice is in no way blind: instinct is born at the same time as the organs that it utilizes. Intellect is also existent in an embryonic stage, but still mind is inferior to instinct.

At the top of the chain of being, in man, intelligence becomes predominant and instinct subsides, without however disappearing entirely; it remains latent in the consciousness that unites all life in the current of «living time»; it comes into play in the intuitive vision. The beginnings of intelligence are modest and manifestly timid. Intelligence is expressed only by the tendency and the ability to replace organic instruments instinctively by instruments sprung from inert matter, and to make use of them by a free act. Instinct was more conscious of its goal, but this goal was, on the other hand, greatly limited; intelligence engaged itself, on the contrary, in greater risks, but tended also toward infinitely vaster goals, toward goals realized by the material and social culture of the human race. Inevitably a risk existed, however: intelligence, created to act in the spatial world, might distort the image of the world by the modality thus acquired from its concept of life and might remain deaf to its innermost dynamic essence and to the

freedom that presides over its eternal variation. Hence the mechanistic and deterministic conception of an external world created by the conquests of intelligence in the natural sciences.

We will find ourselves, then, irremediably cornered in an impasse, without any consciousness of freedom of mind and cut off from the sources of life we carry within us, unless we also possess the gift of intuition when we trace ourselves back to our origin. Perhaps one can apply to this intuition, the central point of the Bergsonian doctrine, the brilliant expression that he uses about intelligence and instinct: the perilous way toward vaster possibilities. Within the limits of its knowledge, intelligence possesses logical certainty, but intuition, dynamic like everything that belongs to living time, must without doubt content itself with the intensity of its certainty.

This is the drama: creative evolution is disclosed, and man finds himself thrust on stage by the *élan vital* of universal life which pushes him irresistibly to act, once he has come to the knowledge of his own freedom, capable of divining and glimpsing the endless route that has been travelled with the perspective of a boundless field opening onto other paths. Which of these paths is man going to follow?

In reality we are only at the beginning of the drama, and it can scarcely be otherwise, especially if one considers Bergson's concept that the future is born only at the moment in which it is lived. However, something is lacking in this beginning itself. The author tells us nothing of the will inherent in the free personality, of the will that determines action and that has the power to trace straight lines across the unforeseeable curves of this personality. Furthermore, he tells us nothing about the problem of life dominated by will power, about the existence or non-existence of absolute values.

***For more details please visit:***

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