

# Book Review: Life Lessons from Bergson

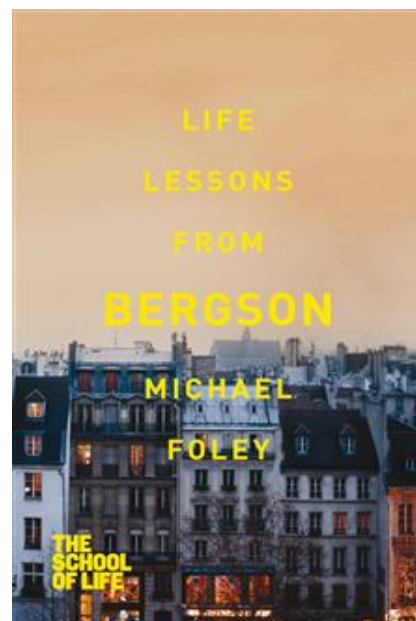
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*Nineteenth century French philosopher Henri Bergson emphasized the importance of attention, learning, humour and joy for life. This short book, part of the Life Lessons series from **The School of Life**, takes Bergson's work and highlights his ideas most relevant to solving ordinary everyday dilemmas. **Michael Foley** shows himself to be a highly informed and adept reader of Bergson's writings and makes efficient and effective use of some of their key ideas in this short book, writes **Keith Ansell-Pearson**.*

**Life Lessons from Bergson. Michael Foley. Pan Macmillan. September 2013.**

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This short book by the poet Michael Foley, published by Macmillan and under the aegis of '[The School of Life](#)', aims to give the reader insight into how Bergson's ideas can be applied to life so as to enrich their experience of everyday reality. I consider the effort worthwhile for the simple reason that Bergson himself held to the view that philosophy should not only facilitate speculation but also give us more power to act and to live. Although Bergson's work is driven by a desire to deal with the fundamental topics of philosophy – such as the nature of time and memory, the character of evolution, the significance of life, and the nature of freedom – he does indicate at various points in his writings that theoretical insights into these topics can dramatically influence our conceptions of ourselves and our everyday practices. At one point, for example, in an essay on the category of possibility, he states that our speculation on the relation between possibility and reality is not a simple game but a preparation for the art of living, so making it clear that he is part of a tradition of philosophy going back to the ancients that holds that philosophy can change lives. It is also clear that he follows modern philosophers such as Spinoza – though Bergson is not a Spinozist (since he holds that novelty and freedom are real features of the creative process of the world in which the course of what happens is not pre-determined) – in upholding the view that theoretical speculation should enable human beings to increase their powers of acting and living.

Foley's book is not intended to be an academic book or to make a scholarly contribution, and it should not be judged in these terms. He shows himself to be a highly informed and adept reader of Bergson's writings and makes efficient and effective use of some of their key ideas in this short book. It contains mini demonstrations of how Bergson's ideas on duration, on memory, and on perception and attention, and so on, can be instructively applied to instances of everyday life. There are chapters ranging from learning how to swim along with the reality of process, or learning how to tune into the melody of duration, to learning how to enhance one's perception of, and attention to, the world and, most funnily, learning how to experience mystical raptures without becoming St Teresa.

So, just how can Bergson's ideas enrich our experience of the world, including our perception of it and attention to it? Bergson was of the view, like Whitehead after him, that reality is process and change, and this means that nothing can be regarded as simply fixed or final. Although it can be fatiguing for us to think this way, since we seem to have no stable points of anchorage in the world, Bergson thought that such an appreciation of reality could ultimately liberate us from various dogmatic and stifling conceptions we hold about ourselves and the world we inhabit. Bergson is always drawing parallels between the way the world evolves – creatively, spontaneously, and in terms of novelty – and the way we evolve as individual organisms. Of course, Bergson shares the chief ambition of philosophy, which is to dispel human beings of their illusions about themselves and the world, including fears and superstitions. But he pursues this aim in a highly original and fertile manner by paying attention to what it means to exist as a temporal human being and to perceive the world as a creatively evolving one. For Bergson philosophy is ultimately an attempt to, as he put it, 'think beyond the human state'. By this he means going beyond our intellectual habits of representation and broadening our perception of the universe, thinking for example in terms of the creative impetus of life and that makes novelty possible, thinking the relation between subject and object in terms of time rather than space, and thinking in terms of fluids rather than our prevailing logic of solids. We think all the time in terms of discrete things and isolable objects whereas for Bergson, as for Whitehead, there is only universal interaction.

Foley brings out well the practical import of these ideas. He is as much a follower of William James as he is of Bergson and throughout the book he freely draws on James's ideas to support and even enrich those of Bergson, and he also, quite appropriately in my view, shows the connections between the ideas of Bergson and other process philosophers and those of Eastern traditions of thought and where, for example, process is privileged over substance. Both Bergson and Eastern modes of thinking wish us to give up on the idea of their being some changeless and formless ego since such an idea not only gives us a false conception of what it is to be a self but it also inhibits us from forming a solidarity with the world, as well as a 'sympathy' with everything that lives. Bergson, then, wants us to become individuals who are in tune with our deep selves and with the vital impetus of life. The hope is that we will no longer live automatic lives but creative ones, no longer chained to fixed habits and conventions, and also not see ourselves as cut off from the rest of nature and from the evolution of life, and thus capable of experiencing fresh forms of joy.

As I have said, this popular guide is not intended to make a contribution to Bergson studies or to academic scholarship on process philosophy. It achieves well what it sets out to do and obviously there is much more to say about Bergson's philosophy as a guide to living well. I wish to make one point of correction and two criticisms of the book. Foley claims that scientists show no awareness of Bergson's ideas but this is not true: the work of contemporary biologists and complexity theorists such as Brian Goodwin and Mae Wan-Ho draw on his writings in significant ways. With regards to the shortcomings of the book two critical points can be made: the first is that the book would have benefitted in my view from some indication of how Bergson both relates and differs from the great ancient traditions of philosophy as a way of life, and the second is that the book fails to say anything about the political relevance of Bergson's ideas on living well. Here the author could have drawn on Bergson's extensive concluding remarks in his final work, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, where he expresses a deep anxiety over the continuation of the war-instinct in human life and makes specific recommendations for overcoming it. Bergson is also acutely aware of how the human attachment to pleasure, which now expresses itself as a desire for endless consumption, has serious consequences for human health, as well as for the well-being of the planet as a whole, and it is clear that his thinking, along with those of other process philosophers, is relevant to ecological theory and practice. If Foley had attended to this it would have enhanced his presentation of Bergson as a thinker who wants human beings to form a fresh solidarity with the world.

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