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Alexandre Lefebvre and Melanie White, *Bergson, Politics, and Religion*. Durham, N. Carol. and London: Duke University Press, 2012. ix + 337 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$25.95 U.S. (pb) ISBN 978-0-8223-5275-4; \$94.95 U.S. (hb) ISBN 978-0-8223-5256-3.

Review by Paul Douglass, San Jose State University, California.

Much has already been done to ameliorate the stereotype of Henri Bergson as an *irrationalist*, and hope freshens with the appearance of *Bergson, Politics, and Religion*, a beautifully-integrated anthology that collects eight previously published (five of these previously untranslated) and seven new essays focusing on Bergson's late work of political and religious theory, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* (1932). Bergson emerges here as a public intellectual who strove to leave the world a more hopeful place than he found it, in particular by trying to solve the problem of modern war. By reminding readers of how Bergson entered the political and religious life of *l'entre-deux-guerres*, this book helps redeem the power of his legacy. Alexandre Lefebvre's and Melanie White's fine introduction quickly evokes the criticism of Bergson as an anti-intellectual whose ideas made everything worse, codified by Bertrand Russell and epitomized in an essay by Judith Sklar, "Bergson and the Politics of Intuition" (1958). The editors employ Sklar's rejection of Bergson's political principles to sharpen their claim that Bergson was attacked precisely because he "recasts" problems to allow new understandings of democracy, religion, and human freedom (p. 13).

Discussion of Bergson in English has burgeoned and broadened significantly after a resurgence dating from the late 1980s that focused at first on literature and film.^[1] *Bergson, Politics, and Religion* is the first book-length treatment in English of *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* and of Bergson's contributions to political and religious studies. Even those who have familiarized themselves with his ideas on time, free will, memory, intuition, and creative evolution, will probably be surprised to learn that Bergson was the ambassador who persuaded Woodrow Wilson that the United States must enter World War I, who worked with Wilson to found the League of Nations, who served as president of the precursor to UNESCO, and who directly influenced John Humphrey, the principal drafter of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948) (see pp. 113-14, 193). Bergson was politically engaged.

In *Two Sources* Bergson attempted to find a solution to the problem of organized human conflict, though one might not guess it from his title. Bergson takes a characteristic approach: he will reconceive the terms within which the problem has been framed. This leads him to interrogate the idea that human morality comprises a network of "obligations" that can be abstracted from its origins. He rejects the view promoted by Emile Durkheim before World War I that the tribal morays of small groups competing for food and living space can be extrapolated; in other words, that the virtues of loyalty, justice, and self-sacrifice can be extended gradually from family to village, village to city, city to nation--and finally to humanity as a whole. In the first chapter of *Two Sources*, "Moral Obligation," Bergson asserts that moral behavior is a function of group survival. As soon as an enemy appears, the moral system inverts, as Frédéric Worms explains in the first chapter of *Bergson, Politics, and Religion*: outside threats turn murder, rapine, lying, and cheating into "praiseworthy" acts (p. 30). This all-too-human response is not easily overcome; it is too powerfully enmeshed in human evolution, too powerfully reinforced in narrative and cultural training. To reconceptualize this problem of human ethical and moral behavior, Bergson relegates moral obligations to what he calls the "closed" impulse, balancing it with an "open" one that is of a different kind altogether. These are the twin "sources" to which his title alludes: on one hand defensive

reactions to fear, and on the other our aspiration to emulate great and loving souls, particularly mystics. Worms argues that Bergson's distinction "changes everything" by planting seeds that could grow into a human transcendence of the terrifying mechanization of war (pp. 25, 29). And Bergson's groundwork for his problem-solving strategy involves a wide array of other issues, opening the door for the rich responses of the essayists here.

As White and Lefebvre observe in the introduction, reading Bergson means accepting his "orientation to problems" (p. 13). Philippe Soulez echoes in "Bergson as Philosopher of War and Theorist of the Political," "We can't understand Bergson if we do not ask what new, unavoidable problem confronts him" (p. 110). Bergson's insistence that passion and self-interest inform all human behavior reinforced his reputation as an irrationalist. But as Carl Power writes in "The Critique of Practical Reason," Bergson was simply insisting that "our moral and political decisions outstrip the reasons we give ourselves for making them" (p. 187). Morality undoubtedly has a rational basis, but, as Bergson says, "it does not follow that morality has its origin or even its foundation in pure reason."^[2] Acting on this truth becomes, for Bergson, a matter of human survival. Writing in 1932, in the aftermath of the Great War, Bergson sensed, as Soulez notes, "the coming of the atomic bomb" (p. 110). "The day is not far off," Bergson said, "when one of the two adversaries [in a war], through some secret process which he was holding in reserve, will have the means of annihilating his opponent. The vanquished may vanish off the face of the earth."^[3] The consciousness that humanity faces a nightmare born of its own material powers gives an urgency and focus to *Bergson, Politics, and Religion* that is uncommon for academic anthologies.

The first of its three sections, "The Closed and the Open," begins with Frédéric Worms's exposition (beautifully translated by Alexandre Lefebvre and Perri Ravon) of how *Two Sources* argues for the embrace of the "open" society. Closed and open moral and religious imperatives emerge "naturally" in all human cultures, but "closed" systems dominate because of their practical role in survival. Yet in the atomic age survival itself demands a departure from the "closed" and an embrace of the "open" impulse, both politically and in religious practices. Bergson insists that these imperatives are different not in degree, but in *kind*. One cannot reach openness through the principles of a closed system, moral or religious. Suzanne Guerlac also highlights Bergson's point that "there is no rational way to get from the closed society to the open one" (p. 44). Her essay, "Bergson, the Void, and the Politics of Life," contemplates the radical challenge Bergson poses to a "modern" framework of thought. Guerlac cleverly integrates the work of sociologist Bruno Latour (and Bergson's sociologist-contemporary Gabriel Tarde) in her discussion of Bergson's asymmetrical relation to concepts of "modern" and "postmodern" (p. 46). She shows whence came Bergson's belief that a "void" has arisen between the human soul and the "technological body" it has extruded (p. 55). Guerlac sees a relation--and a difference--between Derrida and Bergson, and her contribution is one of the most informed and thought-provoking in the volume, ranging from Bergson's embrace with mysticism to the place of "information" as a mediating term between matter and spirit. John Mullarkey's essay, "Equally Circular: Bergson and the Vague Intentions of Politics," is "equally" enlightening. Mullarkey delineates "circular" definitions of equality offered by three contemporary thinkers. Alain Badiou, John Llewelyn, and Peter Singer are contrasted to Bergson, for whom equality must be constantly recreated: "Equality, to be noncircular," writes Mullarkey, "must be invented (or thought) anew and immanently within each and every situation" (p. 63); to define it once and for all is impossible. We will only know it as what Mullarkey calls a "future anterior," what "will have been possible" after we have provisionally found it (p. 73). Thus, the "vagueness" repeatedly charged against Bergson turns out to be a productive technical idea, not a weakness.

Claire Colebrook's "The Art of the Future" rounds out the first section of the book with the bold assertion that we should consider Bergson as possibly "*the* philosopher of a posthuman future" (p. 75). Colebrook sees Bergsonian aesthetic theory as opposing a "vulgar" modernist one--because Bergson has embraced the destructive, even suicidal aspects of creativity to a greater degree than even his followers often admit. Of all twentieth-century philosophers, Bergson accepts the radical nature of change, and foresees that humanity's evolution may indeed transcend the "human" itself. She describes Kantian and Bergsonian aesthetics as similar in attacking "a humanity of the organism" (p. 88) and in gravitating to the transcendence of "spirit." Colebrook's discussion of

popular culture and Bergsonian aesthetics is sophisticated and densely packed. She ultimately sees Bergson as having described a modern form of human self-consciousness that reveals (to us) a human body and mind as both “self-enclosing forms of suicide by myopia and as self-destructive futurity by creation” (p. 94).

Part two of this volume, titled simply “Politics,” begins with an essay by the late Philippe Soulez, “Bergson as Philosopher of War and Theorist of the Political,” drawn from his superb *Bergson politique* (1989) (finely translated by Melissa McMahon). Soulez rehearses Bergson’s argument on moral obligation, considering Freud’s, Rousseau’s, and Bergson’s understanding of the role of mystics, seers, and law-givers (p. 106). Describing Bergson’s relationship to Woodrow Wilson and the League of Nations (pp. 114-16), Soulez portrays the philosopher’s mind as conservative but “evol[ving] toward ‘the Left’” while criticizing economic liberalism and the “primacy of the market” (pp. 120-21). Bergson eventually converted to Catholicism (despite three of his works having been banned by the Church in 1914). But Soulez believes that Bergson ultimately had more of an impact on the French Catholic Church than vice versa, a political fact we have yet to appreciate (pp. 120-22).

The remaining essays in the second part of *Bergson, Politics, and Religion* enlarge upon their political theme with expositions of issues like anarchy, sexual politics, democratic theory, and human rights. Hisasha Fujita analyzes Sorel’s and Bergson’s views of the violence performed by language, arguing that Sorel seized on Bergson’s assertion that language may destroy thought to renew thinking, but that we should not forget that Sorel interpreted Bergson in a narrowly economic way. Bergson’s influence on economics is extended in a different direction in Leonard Lawlor’s masterful essay on asceticism and sexuality in *Two Sources*. Bergson accepts war’s origins in overpopulation and therefore in sexuality, and thus, Lawlor argues, asceticism “comes on the scene for Bergson as a kind of ‘counterweight’ for what he calls the ‘aphrodisiacal’ nature of our entire civilization” (p. 145). Bergson describes how humanity is “cheating nature” in stealing sexual pleasure while avoiding pregnancy and childbirth (pp. 153ff.),^[4] and Lawlor argues this idea can be extended to cheating the “war-instinct” in order to achieve a love for all humanity. For Lawlor, Bergson’s embrace with mysticism opens the door to a profound revolution in human justice (pp. 156-57). In a related but different focus, Paulina Ochoa Espejo’s essay applies Bergson’s strategy of exposing “false problems,” this time to “the problem of the people” as a principle in democratic theory, and proposes the intriguing term “an opening people” to capture the altered notion of “*demos*” that results (p. 173).

The second part of *Bergson, Politics, and Religion* concludes with two fine essays on human rights. Carl Power explores the parallel between Kant’s and Bergson’s critiques of “reason,” arguing that Bergson “finds in the ethics of human rights the very thing that [Alain] Badiou claims it lacks,” namely a Christian embrace with emancipation and love (p. 190). Alexandre Lefebvre assesses Bergson’s confrontation with the “human rights tradition,” typified in Durkheim, and argues that, though Bergson’s critique is “severe,” he does not give up on human rights as a goal (p. 206). For Lefebvre, Bergson’s “superior empiricism” ultimately accepts flaws in human rights institutions—which must be constantly revised and improved—and Lefebvre believes that human rights ultimately provides an “organizing center” for the philosopher’s political beliefs (p. 194).

The final section of this volume turns to “Religion and Mysticism,” beginning with Vladimir Jankélévitch’s “Bergson and Judaism” (translated skillfully by Melissa McMahon), which compares and contrasts Bergson’s ideas of time to the Hebraic tradition, acknowledging that there are “several Judaisms” and Bergsonism’s concepts of time are complex (p. 217). Jankélévitch asserts that “the Gospel represents for Bergson the regime of open consciousness,” and the Law its opposite (p. 234). The Prophets occupy a middle ground, “ruthlessly faithful” to the imperative of perpetually reopening the moral code in light of a selfless love (pp. 243, 241). Jankélévitch’s essay reminds us of Bergson’s famous rejection of the concept of “Nothingness” in *Creative Evolution*, and it feels remarkably contemporary with Keith Ansell-Pearson and Jim Urpeth’s co-authored “Bergson and Nietzsche on Religion,” which argues convincingly that Nietzsche and Bergson identified a religious affirmation of life with profound joy, with both philosophers developing a notion of religion from a biological foundation while avoiding a reductive “naturalism” (pp. 262-63).

Frédéric Keck deepens the discussion with his sociologically-based interpretation of static versus dynamic religion in *Two Sources*. Keck argues that Bergson's response to Durkheim, Lévy-Bruhl, and Lévi-Strauss affirms an unconscious human drive toward codifying trust (Keck deems it "Assurance and Confidence") in all human institutions, including the religious—and that we should "reconsider Lévi-Strauss's structural anthropology in light of Bergson's philosophy" (p. 279). G. William Barnard's essay, "Tuning into Other Worlds" asserts that the "radio reception" (or "filter") analogy of consciousness Bergson first formulated in *Matter and Memory* (1896) is more radical than we may realize; Bergson believes we are subconsciously connected to the entire universe—and that religious practices like chanting, fasting, and meditation are designed to interfere with the brain's habits of screening us from that reality. Bergson remained open to the possibilities of "paranormal" phenomena (p. 295) and does not rule out transpersonal, transcultural, or even transhistorical "channels" of consciousness (p. 294). Here, and in some other opinions and beliefs in *Two Sources*, Bergson appears as less our contemporary than his advocates contend. For example, when Bergson blithely asserts, "Suffice it to say that woman is as intelligent as man, but that she is less capable of emotion. . . ." [5]

The several authors of *Bergson, Politics, and Religion* put Bergson in conversation with many philosophical figures, from Plato and Aristotle to Spinoza, Kant, Montesquieu, Nietzsche, Derrida, Badiou, and others. Paola Marrati provides a fitting conclusion to this collection with an assessment of the oft-noted but rarely assessed relationship between William James and Henri Bergson. Marrati's key point is that both men suffered unjustified attacks for their supposed belief in "progress." But for James and Bergson "change" by itself guarantees nothing (pp. 300-301). Their radically anti-teleological philosophies embrace the consequences of accepting the constant creation of novelty, and this is "one of the most stimulating aspects of their thought" for our current era, according to Marrati (p. 301), who explains why Bergson has been misread by "so many remarkable philosophers. . . from Heidegger to Adorno, from Merleau-Ponty to Foucault"—because they simply missed the radical aspect of "the new" (p. 308). James and Bergson believed we must give up the idea of mapping our future and accept that we must work to make the world a better place—work, and hope for what Mullarkey calls the "future anterior" (what "will have been possible") (p. 73). Bergson studies have burgeoned despite the low opinions expressed by most philosophers and aestheticians in the decades after Bergson's death in 1941. As this book shows, Bergson still has much to teach us.

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G. William Barnard, "Tuning into Other Worlds: Henri Bergson and the Radio Reception Theory of Consciousness"

Paola Marrati, "James, Bergson, and an Open Universe"

NOTES

[1] The literary/aesthetic approach is exemplified in my *Bergson, Eliot, and American Literature* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1986), Tom Quirk's *Bergson and American Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), Mark Antliff's *Inventing Bergson* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993), and my co-edited volume with Fred Burwick, *The Crisis in Modernism: Bergson and the Vitalist Controversy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), and most recently in Paul Ardoin's, S.E. Gontarski's, and Laci Mattison's *Understanding Bergson, Understanding Modernism* (London: Bloomsburg Publishing, 2013). Broader considerations of Bergson's contributions appear in Leszek Kolakowski's brief *Bergson* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), Andrew C. Papanicolao's and P. A. Y. Gunter's rich edited volume, *Bergson and Modern Thought* (Newark, N.J.: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1987), F. C. T. Moore's *Bergson: Thinking Backwards* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), John Mullarkey's *Bergson and Philosophy* (South Bend, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000) and edited collections *The New Bergson* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999) and (with Charlotte de Mille) *Bergson and the Art of Immanence* (2013), as well as Leonard Lawlor's *The Challenge of Bergsonism* (London: Continuum, 2003), Suzanne Guerlac's *Thinking in Time* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2006), and Keith Ansell-Pearson's and John Mullarkey's *Henri Bergson: Key Writings* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).

[2] Henri Bergson, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, trans. R. Ashley Audra and Cloudesley Brereton (New York: Henry Holt, 1935 [1932]), p. 76.

[3] *ibid.*, p. 276.

[4] Bergson writes of "refrain[ing] from reaping without forgoing the pleasure of sowing." *ibid.*, p. 48.

[5] *ibid.*, p. 36.

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