

Heidegger and Bergson between Time, Experience, and Knowledge as an End in Itself

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Abstract: When Heidegger and Bergson are compared (which is not often), it is through their concepts of time. These are, however, more dissimilar than one might initially think—in Bergson, time gradually advances to the processual principle of the cosmos; for Heidegger, it is profoundly hermeneutic, the structure of understanding of being. Bergson remains partly stuck in a linear conception of time, while Heidegger, following Husserl's tradition, shifts to a horizontal model that nevertheless struggles to explain the intrinsic movement of time and its tense character. A fruitful alternative could be the conception of a bidirectional model, which understands time as the incessant collision of two movements of time in the present, one coming from the past, the other from the future. Similarities between both thinkers can rather be found in unusual places: In their historical break with Aristotle, both suggest that knowledge of its own end, as the highest, ontological, knowledge, is to be sought not in the abstract, but in the meaning-saturated, temporal context of experience.

Keywords: Bergson, Heidegger, bidirectional time, linear vs. horizontal time

Why compare Heidegger and Bergson?

The simplest and at the same time most obvious reason may be that both thinkers accord time a special significance. Time, which could certainly be called a 'box office hit of philosophy,' since its paradoxical nature has always offered philosophers both preoccupation and despair,¹ made it into the title of Heidegger's epochal work, *Being and Time*; for

¹ Just think of Augustine's famous quote in his *Confessions*, trans. by Maria Boulding (New York: New City Press, 1997), 295: "What, then, is time? If no one asks me, I know; if I want to explain it to someone who asks me, I do not know."

Bergson, it forms the pivotal point of his entire thought. Both thinkers can be considered, for good reason, the central thinkers of time in 20th-century Europe. This is supported not only by the depth of their engagement with time, but also and above all by the fact that Heidegger and Bergson, with their philosophies of time, offer innovative responses to the specific intellectual-historical situation we find in the 20th, or more precisely, in the transition from the 19th to the 20th century. Both thinkers find themselves in an intellectual climate that is at odds with the systematic philosophy of German Idealism—above all, Hegel’s system in its holistic and historicist claim to provide a seamless, speculative explanation of reality in its entirety and its historical fulfillment. Perhaps this overload of speculative concepts of reality, for which coherence is more important than correspondence with empirical experience, has led to a kind of longing for the empirical, for experience, which perhaps can serve us as something like the slogan or leitmotif of European philosophy during the transition from the 19th to the 20th century.

Bergson’s and Heidegger’s philosophies of time as reactions to the intellectual situation of 20th-century Europe

The reactions to this intellectual mood are, in turn, as diverse as one can imagine—with Auguste Comte as the founding father of positivism, measurable, indeed abstract experience moves to the forefront of consideration; the philosophical-historical tendency of *Lebensphilosophie*, in turn, opposes systems philosophy and positivism equally. Both would fail to grasp the quality of experience, the former in its speculative metaphysical categories, the latter in the application of quantitative logics to the quality of the experiential context. Bergson’s ‘French’ response to this problem primarily concerns so-called physiological psychology, which was in its infancy at the end of the 19th century and, especially in the person of Théodule Ribot, sought to reduce the psyche to physiological-material processes and began to dominate discussions about the psyche in this way.² Bergson attempted to rehabilitate subjective experience in its autonomy and temporality and defend it against this reductionism. He did this by declaring time, in *Time and Free Will*, to be the category of the subjective per se—as duration, it signifies the succession or transition of our experiential qualities. In the course of his work, this principle of temporality as duration undergoes a gradual process of ‘ontologization.’ Thus, in his middle work *Matter and Memory*, duration becomes a process of remembering that carries the past into the present. In *Creative Evolution* it becomes, as the so-called *élan vital*, the

² Especially in his main work *Diseases of Memory: An Essay in the Positive Psychology*, trans. by William Huntington Smith (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, 1885).

processual principle of the cosmos and the energetic motive force behind every differentiation of form. Heidegger's 'German' reaction in *Being and Time* aims less at a rehabilitation of the subjective. It applies the question of time to a systematic investigation of existence and the way in which fundamental horizons of understanding of being are exposed in its interpretation of self and world—thus, the hermeneutic aspect of temporality is emphasized here in the context of a fundamentally ontological investigation of existence. The transcendental also resonates more strongly here, as Heidegger replaces Kant's project of spelling out the rational enabling conditions of knowledge with a spelling out of the existential enabling conditions of disclosing being which are rooted in what Heidegger calls *Stimmung* or *Befindlichkeit*.³

And herein perhaps lies the core of Heidegger's critique of Bergson, whom Heidegger read and absorbed intensively. Heidegger does not mention Bergson often, and when he does, it is usually only marginally, for example in a brief mention at the beginning of *Being and Time*, which, however, is quite significant in content:

We have already intimated that Dasein has a pre-ontological Being as its ontically constitutive state. Dasein is in such a way as to be something which understands something like Being. Keeping this interconnection firmly in mind, we shall show that whenever Dasein tacitly understands and interprets something like Being, it does so with time as its standpoint. Time must be brought to light—and genuinely conceived—as the horizon for all understanding of Being and for any way of interpreting it. In order for us to discern this, time needs to be explicated primordially as the horizon for the understanding of Being, and in terms of temporality as the Being of Dasein, which understands Being. This task as a whole requires that the conception of time thus obtained shall be distinguished from the way in which it is ordinarily understood. This ordinary way of understanding it has become explicit in an interpretation precipitated in the traditional concept of time, which has persisted from Aristotle to Bergson and even later. Here we must make clear that this conception of time and, in

³ See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford and Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1962), §29.

general, the ordinary way of understanding it, have sprung from temporality, and we must show how this has come about. We shall thereby restore to the ordinary conception the autonomy which is its rightful due, as against Bergson's thesis that the time one has in mind in this conception is space.⁴

One of the central insights of Bergson's early philosophy in *Time and Free Will* is that measurable time is not time, but merely space. This idea is roughly developed as follows: Every counting process already contains the notion of a simultaneity or contemporaneity of elements. This notion of contemporaneity abstracts from the essentially successive nature of time, i.e., when time is measured or counted, it is treated as a simultaneous constellation or juxtaposition of points in time, thereby dissolving its temporality. Here, time is opposed to spacetime, which is ultimately only space.⁵ However, the dualism between time and space that becomes apparent here gradually dissolves as Bergson's thinking progresses. As we have seen, in *Matter and Memory*⁶ it enters into physical actions and thus into space as the principle of the process of memory; in *Creative Evolution*⁷ it becomes the principle of the cosmos. At this point, at the latest, Heidegger's criticism of the duality in Bergson's thinking can no longer be upheld. Here, space and time have long since merged into a universal process that permeates the cosmos.

Nevertheless, a fundamental difference between Bergson's and Heidegger's notions of time remains: For Heidegger spacetime has its roots in time itself. He encounters temporality as the existential per se, meaning: as the fundamental horizon of understanding within which Dasein interprets being and from which spacetime or what he calls vulgar time emanates.⁸ In this existential interpretation of time lies the most central difference between Bergson's and Heidegger's philosophies of time: While both view time ontologically, for Bergson as *élan vital* in the sense of a universal process of reality that continually produces contrasts and qualitative differentiations, for Heidegger it is a horizon in which being is active and expresses itself in Dasein, i.e., the existence of the individual, in its various interpretations, references, and reactions. Thus, for Heidegger, Dasein is hermeneutic in an

⁴ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁵ See Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*, trans. by F. L. Pogson (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1910), 75–91.

⁶ See Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, trans. by Nancy Margaret Paul and W. Scott Palmer (New York: Zone Books, 1991).

⁷ See Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, trans. by Arthur Mitchell (New York: Routledge, 2023).

⁸ See Heidegger, *Being and Time*, §81.

ontological sense, or rather, a compulsion to interpret oneself and the world. Being is meaningful, significant and a context of interpretation. Interpretation here is integrated into the deep structure of being and thus not something that must first be 'performed' in dealing with being. In this sense, being is always already inscribed with an existential semantics, indeed what Heidegger calls *Vorerschlossenheit*, or the fact that Dasein has always already understood its being in terms of its possibilities of participation (which means *Seinkönnen*).⁹ For Heidegger, all specific modes of expression of time can be derived from this ontological horizon of understanding: the historicity of Dasein and also world-time (including its radicalization as measurable time or vulgar time), which is determined by merely existing things. Future-orientation has also repeatedly been prominently cited (by Ernst Tugendhat, among others)¹⁰ as a difference between Bergson's and Heidegger's thinking about time—Bergson, he says, is a past-oriented thinker of time who specifically emphasizes the influence of past experience on the qualitative coloring of the present and the perceptions of possibility interwoven with it; Heidegger, with his being-toward-death,¹¹ directs his gaze toward the project of the future. This criticism is not particularly valid, because it fails to take into account that, as written above, the ontological status of duration fluctuates in Bergson's thought: in *Time and Free Will*, it is merely subjective; in *Matter and Memory*, it actually extends the past into the present as a process of remembering; in *Creative Evolution*, however, it is future-oriented, creating novelty and unpredictability. Tugendhat, in a sense, merely compares *Matter and Memory* with Heidegger's thinking about time and is making an arbitrary cut in Bergson's work.

Linear vs. horizontal time

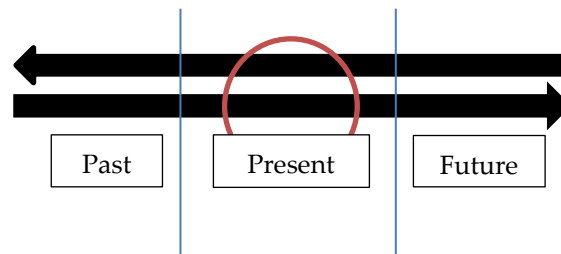
Another difference between the two thinkers lies in their relationship to linear time. What Bergson lacks in awareness is that, in one way or another, he adheres, at least implicitly, to a traditional view of the phenomenon of time, namely one in which time moves in one direction. Although he distances himself from the idea of measurable time as a sequence of points in time and replaces it with the idea of time as a succession of moments of experience, thus attempting to understand it as a pure process, his concept of time still remains linear or at least unidirectional in this respect, insofar as time remains a succession running into the future, with present experience at its forefront. But time, it seems to me, is not merely *one* movement, but

⁹ See *Ibid.*, §§62–64 and 68.

¹⁰ See Ernst Tugendhat, "Heidegger and Bergson on Time," in *Das Argument*, 194 (1992), 578.

¹¹ See Heidegger, *Being and Time*, §§46–53.

precisely consists of *two* opposed movements, confronted with each other. It is not linear, but rather the continuous and infinite convergence of two opposing temporal movements in the present: the one that, in form of opportunities, comes from the future into the present and becomes the past, and the one that, in form of memories, actualizes itself from the past into the present and, through physical action, already has one foot in the future. The present is thus the continuous clash of two opposing timelines, from the future and from the past, and the friction of both movements in the present is what creates the individual quality and coloring of the present through the continually new constellations that result from the tension of the opposing temporal movements.



This proposal is similar to Husserl's conception of time, or what might be called a horizontal structure of time. For Husserl, time is not a directional, linear succession of moments or events in the narrow sense of the word, but rather a constitutive structure of our consciousness. As such, it allows us to continuously experience objects and focus on them intentionally by integrating what has just been (*retention*) and anticipating what is about to come (*protention*) into the unity of living present experience.¹²

Heidegger also conceives of time as a horizontal structure in terms of the temporal ecstasies of *having-been*, *presence*, and *future*. The three ecstasies of time are not to be understood as distinct, successive stages, but as meaningful contexts in which Dasein interprets itself in relation to itself and the world.¹³ As the etymology of the term *ecstasis* suggests, it denotes a standing out into a context rather than a linear sequence of events. Heidegger identifies the future as the privileged horizon of temporality, since Dasein is a being-toward-death that is always read in the horizon of its finitude and mortality. Günter Figal also points this out: "[E]kstatikós means to be able to separate oneself from something, to be able to go beyond oneself, and this can indeed be said of the forms of time—each of them is such only inasmuch as it

¹² See Edmund Husserl, *On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time*, trans. by John B. Brough (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991), 379–396.

¹³ See Heidegger, *Being and Time*, §§65–71.

simultaneously goes beyond itself, 'overflowing' into the other forms of time."¹⁴

However, Husserl's and Heidegger's concepts of time face problems. Both Husserl and Heidegger attempt to sharply distinguish themselves from a linear model of time by locating time beyond the linear, in the horizontal, and thus rightly elevating it into the sphere of meaning and continuity, but also into that of indeterminable directionality. For Heidegger, the ecstasies of time are rather spaces of meaning for the interpretation of the self and the world, in which being reveals itself, and as such they constitute themselves as equiprimordial¹⁵ and transcendent in a multilateral way. This does not allow you to describe the contradictory, tense character of time, especially the present, because for this we must remain within the conceptual framework of the linear, but not the unidirectional linear, rather the bidirectional linear, which makes time understandable as a collision of two movements (following on from the illustration above). In this way, the past and future do not remain passive moments, as they do in Husserl, but are given their own right to movement, coming from their own direction and thus becoming active, which allows for a more phenomenologically accurate description of the fragile character of the present, its torn nature.

The present can thus be understood as the tension between past experiences, which are actualized in the present as memories, either spontaneously or when they become useful, and influence my future actions, and an open, unexpected future of possibilities that lies ahead of me and befalls me. One movement comes from the past, the other from the future, and these two lines continue to run into each other infinitely. Husserl and Heidegger do not recognize this independent activity and movement of the past *and* the future, whereby the present ultimately remains the spearhead of time or exists in a privileged position and thus remains implicitly linear. Once you completely leave the linear horizon behind, the movement of time, its dynamics and processuality become difficult to explain.

Knowledge as an experience for its own sake in Bergson's and Heidegger's thought

So much for the problems with Bergson's and Heidegger's approaches. We can therefore conclude that Bergson remains attached to the idea of linear or at least unidirectional time, even though he processes time, and that Heidegger, with his horizontal conception of time, (supposedly)

¹⁴ Günter Figal, *Heidegger zur Einführung* (Hamburg: Junius Verlag, 1992), 87. My translation.

¹⁵ For a further investigation of this aspect, see Heath Massey, *The Origin of Time: Heidegger and Bergson* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2015).

shifts time to a place beyond linearity, but finds it difficult to explain the intrinsic dynamics and activity of time, as well as its tension. So far, the differences between the two thinkers have become clear. However, there is a fundamental dimension of temporality that connects both thinkers. Both assume that the experience of time has a kind of ontological valence, that time is the place where being manifests itself under certain conditions. This happens when the experience of time becomes an end in itself. Not only thinking, but the experience of time itself is subject to practical constraints—as soon as it frees itself from these and becomes a non-instrumental experience of time, being reveals itself. I will suggest another attempt to bring Bergson's and Heidegger's concepts of time together on quite unfamiliar ground—namely, in their emphasis on the possibility of knowledge as an end in itself in experience, which represents a significant break with Western intellectual history: The root of end-in-itself thinking can be explicitly found in Aristotle. He already writes in the first book of his *Metaphysics* about metaphysics as the highest of all sciences:

So if it was by fleeing ignorance that they philosophized, it is clear that by means of knowing they were in pursuit of knowing, and not for the sake of any kind of use. And the following testifies to the same thing: for it was when just about all the necessities were present, as well as things directed toward the greatest ease and recreation, that this kind of understanding began to be sought. It is clear then that we seek it for no other use at all, but just as that human being is free, we say, who has his being for his own sake and not for the sake of someone else, so also do we seek it as being the only one of the kinds of knowledge that is free, since it alone is for its own sake.¹⁶

In this, Bergson and Heidegger certainly agree with Aristotle: Being reveals itself in its own end, but they take a different, yet essentially different, branch in their thought process: While Aristotle locates knowledge of its own end in abstract thinking, at the highest level of knowledge, which stands at the greatest distance from empirical knowledge or the knowledge of the useful, Bergson and Heidegger repeatedly suggest that being alienates itself not only in the abstract, but already in the experiential context of being. Knowledge of its own end is not to be found here outside of experience and living, but precisely within the meaning-saturated context of living. This has

¹⁶ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, trans. by Joe Sachs (Santa Fe, NM: Green Lion Press, 1999), 982b20–28.

a lot to do with Heidegger's, but also Bergson's, understanding of knowledge and, in particular, ontological knowledge. In his *Introduction to Metaphysics*, Bergson mentions that he wants to establish a metaphysics that does not rely on abstract symbols and grasps the absolute nature of an object in experience. This is achieved by resisting the tendency of the intellect to categorize objects, break them down, and ultimately dissociate them into relative points of view. Bergson also brings the artist into play here, who is a teacher in making the useless experiential when one develops an attitude of resistance to the urge to dissect, schematize, and analyze. Elsewhere, Bergson refers to these perceptions as pure perceptions.¹⁷ The form of knowledge that Heidegger calls the *experience of thinking* fits in with this point of view. Thinking here does not mean theoretical contemplation, but rather the experience of being held in the truth of being, which occurs when I withdraw from the urge to technically define being in terms of what exists. Consequently, we are no longer dealing with traditional metaphysics, but with a new, performative type of insight into being.¹⁸

Conclusion: Unexpected common ground outside the traditional discussions about time

I can only hint at other evidence here: The central horizons of understanding of Dasein in *Being and Time* are moods that are always already situated in the state of being, and are characterized by their pre-reflexivity, their objectless-ness and their withdrawal from analysis.¹⁹ They come closer to me as soon as I withdraw from specific reference to something. Perhaps it can also be described as a way to let the nothing nothing or in Heidegger's words to let the *'Nichts nichten.'*²⁰ For here, it is precisely the renunciation of specific references to something through technology, analysis and concentration (which Heidegger calls *Gelassenheit* or releasement)²¹ that enables being to be revealed and experienced as itself. It enables being to be. It is not surprising that Heidegger later in his essay on art—in line with Bergson's characterization of the artist—would consider the artist predestined to experience being. He stands apart from technology and the

¹⁷ See especially Henri Bergson, *L'intuition philosophique* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2011); and Henri Bergson, *The Creative Mind: An Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. by Mabelle L. Andison (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2007).

¹⁸ See Martin Heidegger, *What Is Called Thinking?*, trans. by Fred D. Wieck and J. Glenn Gray (New York: Harper & Row, 1968).

¹⁹ See Heidegger, *Being and Time*, §§29–31.

²⁰ See Martin Heidegger, "What is Metaphysics?," in *Basic Writings*, trans. by David Farrell Krell (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), 103.

²¹ See Martin Heidegger, *Discourse on Thinking*, trans. by John M. Anderson and E. Hans Freund (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 41–90.

focus on the useful, exposing an enigmatic third, indeed aspects of being and connections in his creative processes: “Artist and work *are* each, in themselves and in their reciprocal relation, on account of a third thing, which is prior to both; on account, that is, of that from which both artist and artwork take their names, on account of art.”²² These issues call for further investigation.

It becomes clear that Heidegger and Bergson have many things in common, but perhaps not what one would expect. Both ‘ontologize’ time and grasp it in its genuine being as a process. For Heidegger, however, it is an horizon of understanding, and every reference to time that takes place within this horizon of understanding, including measurable time, is encountered as a derivative of it. For Bergson, however, spacetime is precisely the negation of time, because it imagines time within the framework of simultaneity and juxtaposition. But in their ontological claims, they share many things: knowledge as an end in itself is one of experience, not of pure abstraction — here, being is revealed.

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²² Martin Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art,” in *Off the Beaten Track*, trans. by Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002), I.

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