Henri Bergson

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born Oct. 18, 1859, Paris, France
died Jan. 4, 1941, Paris

Henri Bergson, 1928.
Archiv fur Kunst und Geschichte, West Berlin

in full ***Henri-Louis Bergson*** French philosopher, the first to elaborate what came to be called a process philosophy, which rejected static values in favour of values of motion, change, and evolution. He was also a master literary stylist, of both academic and popular appeal, and was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1927.

Early years

Through his father, a talented musician, Bergson was descended from a rich Polish Jewish family—the sons of Berek, or Berek-son, from which the name Bergson is derived. His mother came from an English Jewish family. Bergson's upbringing, training, and interests were typically French, and his professional career, as indeed all of his life, was spent in France, most of it in Paris.

He received his early education at the Lycée Condorcet in Paris, where he showed equally great gifts in the sciences and the humanities. From 1878 to 1881 he studied at the École Normale Supérieure in Paris, the institution responsible for training university teachers. The general culture that he received there made him equally at home in reading the Greek and Latin classics, in obtaining what he wanted and needed from the science of his day, and in acquiring a beginning in the career of philosophy, to which he turned upon graduation.

His teaching career began in various lycées outside of Paris, first at Angers (1881–83) and then for the next five years at Clermont-Ferrand. While at the latter place, he had the intuition that provided both the basis and inspiration for his first philosophical books. As he later wrote to the eminent American Pragmatist William James:

> I had remained up to that time wholly imbued with mechanistic theories, to which I had been led at an early date by the reading of Herbert Spencer. . . . It was the analysis of the notion of time, as that enters into mechanics and physics, which overturned all my ideas. I saw, to my great astonishment, that scientific time does not *endure*. . . . that positive science consists essentially in the elimination of duration. This was the point of departure of a series of reflections which brought me, by gradual steps, to reject almost all of what I had hitherto accepted and to change my point of view completely.

The first result of this change was his *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience* (1889; *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*), for which he received the doctorate the same year. This work was primarily an attempt to establish the notion of duration, or lived time, as opposed to what Bergson viewed as the spatialized conception of time, measured by a clock,