

Winter 2015 Seminar

PHIL 580: Problems in Philosophy

SEMINAR: BERGSON'S CREATIVE EVOLUTION

Thursdays 4:05 – 6:25 PM (Leacock 927)

Professor Alia Al-Saji
alia.al-saji@mcgill.ca

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course will involve a close reading of Henri Bergson's *Creative Evolution* (*L'évolution créatrice*, 1907). We will aim to read most of this book, taking our time to unravel the central ideas that Bergson puts forward in the text.

Creative Evolution articulates a philosophy of life in temporal terms and presents this as an alternative to contemporary evolutionary theories, whether teleological or mechanistic. In this course, we will question the meaning of Bergson's famous "élan vital." We will examine the connections between duration and life, between life and matter, and among different "tendencies" within life (animality, plant life, human life, etc.). We will investigate the role of Bergsonian "intuition" as a philosophical method and as a means of attunement to difference. And we will scrutinize Bergson's critiques of the idea of nothingness and of the "cinematographic" illusion in perception and thought.

While Bergson himself rejected vitalism (where life would be a transcendent and pure principle apart from matter), he has often been described in these terms by followers and critics alike. Bergson's *Creative Evolution*, probably more than any of his books, has inspired quite divergent appropriations and influenced aesthetic, political and philosophical movements of the 20th century. Today, thinkers who might be inscribed in the renewal of "immanent vitalism" (Deleuze, Colebrook), or in "new materialism" (Connolly) and materialist feminism (Grosz), return to Bergson and read him, again, but differently. Our close reading of *Creative Evolution* should allow us to see how different philosophical possibilities are opened up, or closed down, by the book.

TEXTS

The English translation of *Creative Evolution* (Dover Publications, 1998 [1911]) is available at **Paragraphe Bookstore**. Students with reading knowledge of French are encouraged to read Bergson in the original (*L'évolution créatrice*, Presses Universitaires de France, 1996 [1907]).

Prerequisite for undergraduate students: PHIL 474, 475, or written permission of the instructor.

Seminars are open only to graduate students and final year Philosophy Majors, Honours and Joint Honours students, except by written permission of the Department.