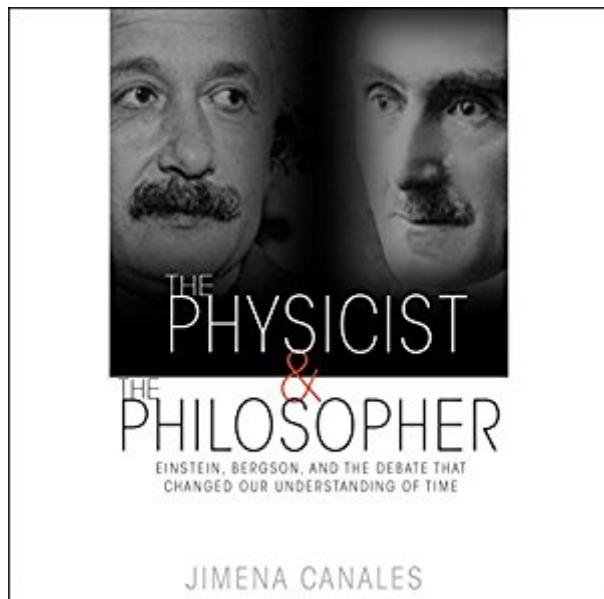


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The Physicist And The Philosopher: Einstein, Bergson, And The Debate That Changed Our Understanding Of Time



Synopsis

On April 6, 1922, in Paris, Albert Einstein and Henri Bergson publicly debated the nature of time. Einstein considered Bergson's theory of time to be a soft, psychological notion, irreconcilable with the quantitative realities of physics. Bergson, who gained fame as a philosopher by arguing that time should not be understood exclusively through the lens of science, criticized Einstein's theory of time for being a metaphysics grafted onto science, one that ignored the intuitive aspects of time. The Physicist and the Philosopher tells the remarkable story of how this explosive debate transformed our understanding of time and drove a rift between science and the humanities that persists today. Jimena Canales introduces listeners to the revolutionary ideas of Einstein and Bergson, describes how they dramatically collided in Paris, and traces how this clash of worldviews reverberated across the 20th century. She shows how it provoked responses from figures such as Bertrand Russell and Martin Heidegger and carried repercussions for American pragmatism, logical positivism, phenomenology, and quantum mechanics. Canales explains how the new technologies of the period - such as wristwatches, radio, and film - helped to shape people's conceptions of time and further polarized the public debate. She also discusses how Bergson and Einstein, toward the ends of their lives, each reflected on his rival's legacy - Bergson during the Nazi occupation of Paris and Einstein in the context of the first hydrogen bomb explosion. The Physicist and the Philosopher reveals how scientific truth was placed on trial in a divided century marked by a new sense of time.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Einstein's block universe takes Time out of the universe. Time after Einstein can be said to be an illusion, time is that which exist so that everything doesn't happen at once. Henri Bergson, probably the most famous 20th century philosopher that most people have never heard of, but almost everyone has heard of his arguments ('elan vital', 'creative evolution', 'intuitive time'), wanted to put man and his intuitive understanding of time back into the center stage of the universe. If I were to write a movie where the protagonist was going to time travel, I would have her reading a copy of this book. Time is not what most of us think it is and by seeing if from the perspective of these two great minds adds to my appreciation for the nuances involved. I have a hard time finding new books in science or philosophy which are not just a rehash of other recent books that I have already read. This author manages to talk about her subject matter in a surprisingly refreshing manner. She gives the reader the connections and the nuances involved in the story. Einstein did make the 'original sin' (his words) of entwining the absolute speed of light with a physical clock. That is the ultimate problem that Bergson has with Einstein, the physical understanding of time with the universe's understanding of Time. Einstein (and as science always does) will mix the concrete (empirical) with the abstract (intellectual) and develops a theory about reality. The author draws the connection with Bergson's view point to Husserl's Phenomenology, to Heidegger's Being (Daisen), and to the start of the Existentialists. I did not realize, for example, that Heidegger's 'Being and Time' was such a strong reaction against Einstein.

This book is an exhaustive, detailed, admirable effort, covering an aspect of scientific debate that originated with the twin paradox and the meaning of relativity, and covering a philosopher involved that should indeed be far more widely known. Dr. Canales seemingly hits every aspect of the relationship between Einstein and Bergson – "their apartments, dress, allies and enemies in the philosophical and scientific world, technological developments, emerging commentaries and actors, the seminal effect of the debate in the academic world, all the way to the present. Even for a student of Bergson, new aspects and facts about this debate are continually being opened. The problem here is that it is a detailed history, but a history with little conceptual penetration of the debate. A one-star reviewer here ("Why was this book written?") notes that after 100 pages, he still has no clue as to the significance of the debate. As far along as page 84, we find the phrase, "Bergson's objections to the theory were disquieting", yet I doubt if any reader could summon any coherence as to what these objections were. It gets no clearer further on.

Bergson's statements sprinkle in throughout; nowhere is there a coherent presentation of his arguments. In other debates – "Bergson versus the physicist Andre Metz, Bergson's treatment

of the physicist Becquerel's arguments – Bergson's actual arguments are somehow completely obscured – the inessential, strangely, is what is reported. I think it safe to say that the book leaves the general impression that, a) Bergson did not believe the time-retardations of relativity were possible, and b) there is a general conflict between the believed – time described by Bergson and the abstract, scientific time of Einstein.

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