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BERGSON ON THE EMOTIONS

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Bergson's most important contribution to philosophy clearly resides in his thinking about the nature of time. In this essay I want to show that he also has an important contribution to make to the philosophy of the emotions, which is a neglected topic in the appreciation of Bergson.¹ We can pose two basic questions. First, just what is Bergson saying about the emotions? Second, in what way is his characterisation of them important and philosophically significant? In the essay I will examine Bergson on the emotions by focusing on his treatments of the emotions in two of his books, *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness* (1889), and *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* (1932). My appreciation of the ideas he presents in these texts by no means exhausts the topic and is not intended to do so.

A principle concern of *Time and Free Will* is states of consciousness such as sensations, feelings, passions or emotions, and efforts. Although the opening part of the book conducts a critical engagement with Gustav Fechner's psycho-physics, Bergson is also taking stock of, and engaging with, the new 'science' of the emotions that begins to emerge in the second half of the nineteenth century. Bergson frequently cites from, and refers the reader to, William James's now classic 1882 "What is an Emotion?" and Darwin's 1872 *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*. The specific and innovative character of Bergson's thinking about the emotions can perhaps be best brought to light when conceived in the context of the refinements he makes to James's views about them. It is with William James on the emotions, then, that I shall begin.

11.1 James on the emotions

Whatever the limits of William James's approach in his analysis of what an emotion is – and his ideas have been subject to a great deal of critical scrutiny over the decades (see Deigh 2001 and Robinson 2005; see also the astute appreciation of James in Ratcliffe 2011) – he is to be applauded for highlighting some essential features of an emotion. As he himself laments in the opening pages of his essay, a great deal of the literature that constitutes what we can call "the psychology of the emotions" operates on a merely descriptive level, cataloguing the different emotions without penetrating into the deeper levels of understanding that are required. He gives Descartes and his *Passions of the Soul* as an example of this literature (James 2004: 351).

James's approach is to question the wisdom of treating the emotions as "absolutely individual things", as if they could be regarded as "so many eternal and sacred psychic entities", just like natural history has conceived immutable species (James 2004: 351–2). He is after an understanding of the general causes that give rise to the emotions, and to begin with he wants to focus on the nature of what he calls the "coarse emotions", by which he means emotions that are strongly felt, such as anger, fear, love, hate, grief, shame, and pride. He contrasts these with the "subtle emotions" associated with moral, aesthetic, and intellectual feelings, and that command so much of Bergson's attention in *Time and Free Will*. James makes a particular claim at the outset of his inquiry. Typically, he thinks, we conceive the strong or coarse emotions as involving the mental perception of a fact or state of affairs that excites a mental affection that we then call "the emotion". On this understanding, it is the mental affection that generates a bodily expression. James wishes to revise this theory by suggesting that, on the contrary, "bodily changes follow directly the perception of the exciting fact, and that our feeling of the same changes as they occur is the emotion" (James 2004: 352).

In other words, he is suggesting that we do not weep because we feel sorry or are sad, or that we see a bear and this makes us fearful so we run; rather, we feel sorry because we cry and we are afraid because we tremble. The important point he is making in carrying out the inversion of the way theorists have typically conceived the emotions, is to stress that we must *feel* these things in order to have any appreciation of what it is to experience emotions and to be an emotional being.

Without the bodily states following on the perception, the latter would be purely cognitive in form, pale, colourless, destitute of emotional warmth.

(2004: 352)

In fact, for James the relationship between mind and body is never simply one way; rather, there is a feedback mechanism by which the body can affect the mind just as much as the mind affects the body, and a process of amplification then takes place. Indeed, James suggests that we can construe the body as the sounding board of the mind, one that allows an emotional signal to resonate just like the soundbox of a guitar amplifies the sound of the strings (2004: 352). This, he thinks, is how we can explain our capacity for 'working ourselves up' into an emotional state. Everyone knows, he suggests, how giving way to, for example, the symptoms of profound sadness, such as the experience of grief, increases these passions themselves in which each fit of sobbing makes the sorrow more acute, calling forth another fit even stronger until repose ensues only with lassitude and with the apparent exhaustion of our nervous machinery.

Let's now see how James seeks to give some justification or legitimacy to his fundamental claims about the emotions. He provides his reader with some striking situations or scenarios to consider. In accordance with his training in psychology, James proposes that we focus our attention on cases of human pathology as a better way of getting a hold on normal human behaviour, so that we bring both cases, the pathological and the normal, under a common measure. His claim is that, when we observe and study pathological cases, what we find is that an emotion can be *objectless*. He elaborates: "In every asylum we find examples of absolutely unmotivated fear, anger, melancholy..." (James 2004: 353). James especially draws our attention to the physicality of an emotion, of how we can feel something like chronic anxiety or dread (morbid fear) that completely overwhelms us precisely because of its powerful physical, visceral effects: the drawing of deep breaths, the fluttering of the heart, panic attacks, and so on: "The emotion is nothing but the feeling of a bodily state and it has a purely bodily cause" (2004: 354).

In even stronger term he writes: “Our whole cubic capacity is sensibly alive; and each morsel of it contributes its pulsations of feeling, dim or sharp, pleasant, painful, or dubious, to that sense of personality that each one of us unfailingly carries with him” (2004: 354).

I think what James is trying to get us to appreciate is how emotions can assume a life of their own and indeed do have such a life. He thus arrives at his main insight, which he states as an emphatic one:

If we fancy some strong emotion, and then try to abstract from our consciousness of it all the feelings of its bodily symptoms, we find we have nothing left behind, no “mind-stuff” out of which the emotion can be constituted, and that a cold and neutral state of intellectual perception is all that remains.

(James 2004: 355)

In short, he is claiming that unless there is a physical component we are not undergoing or experiencing an emotion. Imagine, he asks us, an emotion of fear without a quickened heart-beat or shallow breathing, without trembling lips and weakened limbs. Or, imagine a state of rage without a flushing of the face, a dilatation of the nostrils, a clenching of the teeth, and an impulse to vigorous action; the same applies to the emotion of grief which is nothing without the suffocation of the heart and pangs in one’s breast bone: “A disembodied human emotion is a sheer nonentity” (2004: 356).

James thinks he is able to make an important contribution to an understanding of the emotions by showing their variability and individuality. This is because he has offered not simply a description and classification of the emotions but a causal account of them, one that goes deep. For James, there is no limit to the number of possible different emotions human beings can experience; in addition, he holds that the emotions of different individuals may vary indefinitely. He holds to this view because he claims that in a reflex action there is nothing sacramental or eternally fixed. Thus, when we ask the question, “What is the real or typical expression of anger or fear?”, we need to appreciate that we can give no objective meaning to it. On the one hand, there is shown to be a physiological mechanics at work in the undergoing of an emotion, which shows variation amongst individuals, and on the other hand there is *history*.

James’s insistence on the corporeal and visceral character of the emotions is important to his thinking about them since it leads him to advocate particular solutions as to how we can, in some actual practice, *moderate* the strong emotions and gain some degree of control and mastery over them.

First, we have to recognise, as I have already highlighted, that emotions can assume a life of their own and feed on their own energy, no matter how negative and even destructive this energy is. This is true, for example, of emotions such as grief, sadness, and anger. To combat this tendency of emotions to assume a negative and destructive form, James proposes that we (1) seek to resist the expression of a passion and (2) practice a moral education in which we put into play what he calls “the outward movements of those contrary dispositions which we prefer to cultivate” (James 2004: 358). His insight and claim strike me as important: he is saying here that it is insufficient to simply deploy reason and rational modes of thinking. Although these are important and have a role to play, James is placing the emphasis on the need for us to practise actual movements of our embodied existence that will serve to counter the lingering effects of those emotions that can profoundly debilitate us, so he speaks of smoothing the brow, brightening the eye, contracting the dorsal rather than the ventral aspects of our frame, and so on.

11.2 Bergson on the emotions in *Time and Free Will*

The importance of the emotions to Bergson is evident in *Time and Free Will*. Here Bergson explains the emotions in very different terms to how they are construed in the science and psychology of his time. The dominant model was a mechanistic and associationist one in which the emotions are treated in terms of discrete states susceptible to increases or decreases in intensity, states which thus can be treated as magnitudes. We typically say, for example, that we feel more or less sad or more or less happy, but this is to overlook the fact that our mental states are unique qualities of experience implicated in durational time. Our psychic states, then, are not discrete things or objects set side by side; rather, they are part of processes and they evolve, e.g. an obscure desire can become a great passion; or a feeling of pity can develop from a feeling of repugnance to feelings of empathy and humility. So, Bergson wants to know: how can we best explain this? His answer is to have recourse to a thinking of time as duration that, on the level of the individual self, involves a becoming of the personality. I will soon endeavour to illuminate this key dimension of his thinking that can be seen as an extension and refinement of James's insight. For now, let me note that Bergson is contesting the idea that an affective state is nothing but the conscious expression of an organic disturbance and the inward echo of an outward cause, which is the thinking of both common sense and science. He writes:

If the more intense sensation seems to us to contain the less intense, if it assumes for us, like the physical impression, the form of a magnitude, the reason probably is that it retains something of the physical impression to which it corresponds. And it will retain nothing of it if it is merely the conscious translation of a movement of molecules; for, just because this movement is translated into the sensation of pleasure or pain, it remains unconscious as molecular movement... But it might be asked whether pleasure or pain, instead of expressing only what has just occurred, or what is actually occurring, in the organism, as is usually believed, *could not also point out what is going to take place.*

(TFW 32–3)

In the last sentence that I have italicised, we see Bergson indicating the importance of the need to think, when it comes to ourselves as human agents, in durational terms. If we take together the durational self and the movement of time we can properly think the nature of human emotions.

The German scientist Gustav Fechner sought in his book *The Elements of Psychophysics* (1860) to invent the theory and techniques of psychometrics, claiming to be able to measure the intensity of mental states. On this model we say: I feel more or less hot or cold, or I feel more or less jealous at any given time. Bergson is critically responding to Fechner's ideas in his book, *Time and Free Will*. He concedes that whilst it makes sense to compare two physical objects (say in terms of their length, size, weight) – e.g. two tables or two pieces of string – does it make sense for me to say: “today I feel *twice* as jealous as I did yesterday?” When we approach matters in this way we are treating the human being in mechanistic terms, that is, terms that are quantifiable in which actions and emotions are held to be calculable and predictable. Human beings are reduced to being little more than predictable automatons, and when we think like this we become phantoms to ourselves. Bergson acknowledges that we are creatures of habit and of socialisation, in which we often do behave like automatons; but we are also, in special moments – they may be rare and privileged – agents of freedom, that is, of voluntary action;

when we act freely we do not function predictably like billiard balls subject to a set of mechanical laws.

For Bergson, our feelings, sensations, and emotions exist as pure qualities, and they exist as such by being bound up with our singular personalities. Bergson's main focus is on "deep-seated feelings", rather than the "violent emotions". Here we can consider the example of the experience of inner joy, which might be the result of an astonishment at simply feeling that one is alive. For Bergson, there is a level of experience that is immediate and not mediated either by socialised language or quantitative measurement. The feeling of inner joy does not increase or decrease quantitatively, but rather involves a series of qualitative changes. When we say our joy has increased what we mean is that it has changed and become richer; it does not really become more and more intense in the sense that it displays only differences of degree, rather it changes and yields a difference in kind, e.g. its difference from mere sensory pleasure (for more on this, see Guerlac 2006: 46–7).

We can introduce an idea of temporality into this experience of an emotion: the feeling of joy often involves a positive orientation toward the future, accompanied by a quickening of our psychic activity in which our ideas and feelings flow more rapidly. We can contrast this with sadness, which often involves an orientation toward the past and a slowing down of mental activity, and in which we become sluggish; we may even "aspire to nothingness" (TFW 11), Bergson observes. On the future, though, he speculates as follows:

The idea of the future, pregnant with an infinity of possibilities, is thus more fruitful than the future itself, and this is why we find more charm in hope than in possession, in dreams than in reality.

(TFW 10)

Here he is saying that some of our most important emotions are bound up with horizons of *possibility* and that such emotions, such as hope, play a vital important role in providing our lives with a sense of existential meaning and direction.

11.3 Bergson on aesthetic and moral feelings

I now want to look in more detail at Bergson's reflections on the emotions and attempt to show what is especially novel about them. He is especially interested in aesthetic and moral feelings, and also, as we have just seen, with temporally-oriented emotions such as hope and sadness. Bergson is interested in the emotions as "pure intensities": "pure" in the sense that they seem to enjoy a self-sufficiency, such as a deep joy, a profound sadness, a reflective passion, or an aesthetic feeling. For Bergson, such phenomena cannot be simply reduced to being the expression of the (muscular) sensations that underpin them; rather, they indicate "states of the soul", and by "soul" he simply means one's entire being in the world (TFW 7).

Bergson is after what he calls a "dynamic" way of looking at things in our field of experience. For example, we can observe how an obscure desire becomes a deep passion that comes to permeate our whole being, and which then can dramatically influence how we view our entire surroundings and even our sense of being in the world. He asks:

How do you become aware of a deep passion, once it has taken hold of you, if not by perceiving that the same objects no longer impress you in the same manner? All your sensations and all your ideas seem to brighten up: it is like childhood back again.

(TFW 8)

Just why Bergson invokes childhood here should be clear: it is the time in life when we are most alive to our sensations and emotions. On this understanding, then, we cannot treat psychic phenomena, including emotional states, simply as discrete items set side by side since they permeate one another, and they evolve and grow. We are always undergoing changes of qualities. He further writes:

...in cases of extreme joy, our perceptions and memories become tinged with an indefinable quality, as with a kind of heat or light, so novel that now and then, as we stare at our own self, we wonder how it can really exist. Thus there are several characteristic forms of purely inward joy, all of which are successive stages corresponding to qualitative alterations in the whole of our psychic states.

(TFW 10)

Bergson selects aesthetic feelings as an example where he thinks we see at work a progressive enrichment of feeling that is irreducible to a magnitude. He gives one specific example to illustrate his thinking, that of grace.

Grace, expressed either in dance or in a person's comportment, obviously contrasts to a state in which we observe jerky movements and that are wanting in grace. Here each movement exists as isolated and does not announce the movements that are to follow. In the case of graceful movement, however, we find that: "the perception of ease in motion passes over into the pleasure of mastering the flow of time and of holding the future in the present" (TFW 12). In grace we find that "a kind of physical sympathy enters" into the feeling, in that, as we might say, we feel we are in contact with "life" itself. Bergson also entertains the idea that when we analyse the charm of sympathy, we may find that it pleases or delights us on account of it having an affinity with moral sympathy: this, he says, is an idea that it subtly suggests to us and may serve to explain the irresistible attractiveness that grace holds for us; and by 'moral' here is meant an enlargement and enrichment of one's personality.

Bergson is keen to contest the idea, which he finds in the work of Herbert Spencer, that grace is to be valued on account of the fact that it is said to involve a saving of effort. Instead, Bergson argues as follows:

...the truth is that in anything which we call very graceful we imagine ourselves able to detect, besides the lightness which is a sign of mobility, some suggestion of a possible movement towards ourselves, of a virtual and even nascent sympathy. It is just this mobile sympathy, always ready to offer itself, which is just the essence of higher grace.

(TFW 13)

Sympathy, we might say, draws us in, into ourselves and into others, and puts us in contact in a way that is moving and alive, as opposed to mechanical and inert. Bergson applies his insights into our moral feelings, noting, for example, that the increasing intensity of an emotion like pity consists in a qualitative progress, such as involving a transition from repugnance to fear, from fear to sympathy, and from sympathy itself to humility (TFW 19).

Perhaps Bergson's main claim is that we need to construe our inner lives, our emotional lives, in terms of a thinking of time as duration. Inner emotional states are like the flow of time (duration) in that they overflow into one another and interpenetrate one another. For human subjects, time is never simply given since it is always marked by a becoming, and this insight can inform how we construe the present: my experience of any present is interlaced with memories

and is bound up with a sense of the future and its possibilities. One way to think this temporal synthesis is in terms of musical melody. When we listen to a piece of music, we do not simply experience a series of isolated successive notes, but rather perceive them as if they were inside one another.

What of the notion of “intensity”? The notion presents itself to us in terms of a double aspect: (1) mental and emotional states that are held to be understood in terms of external causes; (2) mental states that can be held to be self-sufficient. Here we are dealing with either an “acquired perception” or a “confused perception”. Thus, the idea of intensity can be placed at the junction of two streams: on the one hand, an extensive magnitude from without; on the other hand, an “inner multiplicity” bound up with “the depths of our consciousness” (TFW 73). Bergson cites Herbert Spencer on fear that is said to express itself in cries, efforts to flee, palpitations and tremblings, etc. Bergson goes further and maintains that such movements form part of the terror itself: “by their means the terror becomes an emotion capable of passing through different degrees of intensity” (TFW 30). If these movements are extracted we are left only with an “idea of terror”, which is a mere “intellectual representation”. So, Bergson is close to James but stresses movement. But he also adds richer elements to our appreciation of what an emotion is.

For Bergson, emotional states, as they evolve or develop, lose their initial violence and become deeper, with peripheral sensations giving way to “inner states”. When this takes place, it is not simply the outward movement that characterises an emotion, but rather “our ideas, our memories, our states of consciousness of every description” (TFW 31). Bergson has both agreed with James (e.g. with respect to acknowledging the embodied and situated character of an emotion), and added to his theory with the claim that emotions are bound up with ‘states of the soul’. Bergson accepts much of what James says, but also wants to show and to stress that emotions are bound up with such states, such as the experience of a profound joy or profound grief. This involves, as he says, “memories” and “ideas”, and furthermore, supposes time or temporality: either experienced positively – as in hope – or negatively – e.g. loss and disappearance.

11.4 Bergson on creative emotion and the open soul

In *Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, Bergson endeavours to get his readers to appreciate a significant difference in types of emotions. The key difference he draws attention to is between an emotion that can be represented in images and objects and a creative emotion that is beyond representation. States of emotion caused by certain things are ordained by nature and are finite or limited in number; we recognise them quite easily because their destiny is to spur us on to acts that answer to our needs. By contrast, a truly ‘creative’ emotion belongs to a different dimension of our existence.

Bergson is especially interested in states of emotion that lead to genuine inventions in the realm of thoughts and ideas. In addition to musical emotion, an example he gives to illustrate his insight is Rousseau’s creation of a new emotion that he experienced when walking in mountains. Although mountains may have always had the capacity to arouse in those who looked upon them certain feelings or sensations, it is only with Rousseau’s invention that a distinctly new feeling is given articulation and expression, and that subsequent thought has attached the notion of the sublime to this experience. Another example is that of romantic love which has a definite date, emerging during the Middle Ages and on the day when someone conceived the idea of absorbing love into a kind of supernatural feeling. Here love plagiarises mysticism, “borrowing from it its fervour, its raptures, its ecstasies...” (TS 42). One might

also wish to reflect upon the example of the emotion of *caritas* introduced into the world by Christianity (TS 49).

It seems obvious to us that an emotion is a stimulus that incites intelligence to undertake adventures, as well as the will to persevere with them. For Bergson, however, we need to think of an emotion that is genuinely creative. Here an emotion can beget new thoughts, in which invention, whilst belonging to the category of the intellect, may partake of sensibility in its substance. To appreciate this we need, Bergson says, to agree on the meaning of the words “emotion” (*émotion*), “feeling” (*sentiment*), and “sensibility” (*sensibilité*), and he suggests that although we recognise an emotion as some affective stirring of the soul, a surface agitation is one thing and an upheaval that involves our depths is another: “[t]he effect is in the first case diffused, in the second it remains undivided. In the one it is an oscillation of the parts without any displacement of the whole; in the other the whole is driven forward” (TS 43).

Bergson’s most important claim about the emotions, in 1932, is that there are emotional states distinct from sensation, states which cannot be reduced to being a psychological transposition of a physical stimulus. This was an idea already implicit, and in fact more than implicit, in the argument and demonstrations attempted in *Time and Free Will*. Here we can distinguish between two kinds of emotion, two varieties of feeling, and two manifestations of sensibility, both distinct from the level of sensation:

- (1) where the emotion is a consequence of an idea or a mental picture and in which the “feeling” is the result of an intellectual state that owes nothing to it and is self-sufficient: “[i]t is the stirring of sensibility by a representation, as it were, dropped into it” (TS 43).
- (2) where the emotion is not produced by a representation that it follows and from which it maintains a distinctness. In relation to the intellectual states that are to supervene it can be construed as cause and not an effect, and so we can say this kind of emotion is pregnant with representations and is truly productive of ideas.

For Bergson, then, creation is bound up with emotion. Indeed, when it comes to reflecting on philosophical activity itself Bergson claims that there are *felt truths* and not simply “conceived” ones (CM 218). With respect to his argument, in 1932, about creative emotion, he accepts the definition of genius as having an infinite capacity for taking pains, and argues against the idea of an abstract intelligence at work in the creations of art, literature, and science. We tend to think of intelligence as a general faculty of attention that is held to produce a greater or less concentration of intelligence. But then, as he asks: “...how could this indeterminate attention, extraneous to intelligence, bring out of intelligence something which is not there?” (TS 46). For good reason, then, Bergson places the emphasis on the power of emotion since it is emotion that “vivifies” and “vitalizes” the intellectual elements of our modes of attention and perception. Indeed, he maintains that a work of genius “is in most cases the outcome of an emotion, unique of its kind, which seemed to baffle expression, and yet which *had* to express itself” (TS 46).

A creative emotion, then, is a unique kind of emotion that informs the creations not only of art but of science and civilisation itself. The position Bergson upholds is not equivalent to a moral philosophy of sentiment simply because we are dealing with an emotion that is capable of crystallising into representations, even into an ethical doctrine. It concerns the new. In addition, then, to the emotion that is the result of a representation and that is added to it, we can appreciate that there is an emotion that precedes the image, that virtually contains it, and is its cause.

Let me note that in highlighting the importance of creative emotion, Bergson in no way wishes to devalue reason and intelligence:

[t]hat reason is the distinguishing mark of man no one will deny. That it is a thing of superior value, in the sense in which a fine work of art is indeed valuable, will also be granted. But we must explain how it is that its orders are absolute and why they are obeyed. Reason can only put forward reasons, which we are apparently always at liberty to counter with other reasons. Let us not then merely assert that reason, present in each one of us, compels our respect and commands our obedience by virtue of its paramount value. We must add that there are, behind reason, the human beings who have made mankind divine, and who have thus stamped a divine character on reason, which is the essential attribute of man.

(TS 68)

Bergson is keen to share in philosophy's promotion of reason: "the rational alone is self-consistent" and cannot be devalued; in civilised society morality is essentially rational (TS 81). The danger of reason, however, must equally be recognised: it can give us only a diagram of action and in so doing it runs the risk of rendering our decisions and deliberations automatic and mechanical. As part of living a vital life we need the joy and exuberance of moral inventions and transformations, and these aspects of our existence need to inform the conception we have of emotional intelligence.

In the 1911 "Life and Consciousness", Bergson had already argued that the destination of nature lies in "joy" (pleasure is too tied to preservation; it is not superhuman, we might say). Joy is a sign that life has been successful and conquered: "[a]ll great joy has a triumphant note". Moreover, wherever there is joy there is creation. This "creation" is the highest life the human can attain. It is attained by the artist, the philosopher, the saint, but also for Bergson by every human being that engages in what he calls "the creation of self by self" (ME 23). For Bergson, it is the moral human being who is a creator in the highest degree simply because his or her action, which is intense, is also capable of intensifying the action and lives of other human beings.

For us today, moral life means rational life. Bergson affirms this development but once again insists that although the rational character of moral conduct has become established, it does not follow that morality has its origin or foundation in pure reason. The important question is to discover why we are obliged in cases where following our inclination does not suffice to ensure our duty is done. What he is criticising is the idea of a *self-sufficient* reason. Any morality which claims reason as its basis in the guise of a pure form without matter is deluding itself, it is "metaphysical" in the bad sense of this term (TS 87).

A key argument is presented by Bergson as follows:

...a system of ethics which imagines it is founding obligation on purely rational considerations, unwittingly reintroduces...forces of a different order. That is exactly why it succeeds so easily. Real obligation is already there, and whatever reason impresses upon it assumes naturally an obligatory character. Society, with all that holds it together and drives it forward, is already there, and that is why reason can adopt as a principle of morality one or the other of the ends towards which social man is striving; by building up a thoroughly consistent system of means destined to attain this end, reason will more or less rediscover morality, such as common sense conceives it, such as humanity in general practises, or claims to practise it. For each of these objectives, culled by reason from society, has been socialized and, by that very fact, impregnated with all the other aims to be found there.

(TS 89–90)

Even selfishness can be approached in these terms: it comprises legitimate pride, the craving for praise, and so on, with the result that personal interest becomes difficult to define, so large is the element of public interest it contains. Our vices are not without certain implications of virtue, indeed all are saturated with vanity, and vanity means sociability: “[s]till easier will it be, then, to draw all moral maxims, or nearly all, from feelings such as honour, or sympathy, or pity” (TS 90).

For Bergson, it is the ease with which philosophical theories of ethics can be built up that is what should make us suspicious:

...if the most varied aims can thus be transmuted by philosophers into moral aims, we may surmise, seeing that they have not yet found the philosopher’s stone, that they had started by putting gold in the bottom of their crucible. Similarly, it is obvious that none of these doctrines will account for obligation. For we may be obliged to adopt certain means in order to attain such and such ends; but if we choose to renounce the end, how can the means be forced upon us? And yet, by adopting any one of these ends as the principle of morality, philosophers have evolved from it whole systems of maxims, which, without going so far as to assume an imperative form, come near enough to it to afford satisfaction. The reason is quite simple. They have considered the pursuit of these ends...in a society in where there are peremptory pressures, together with aspirations to match them and also to extend them...Each of these systems then already exists in the social atmosphere when the philosopher arrives on the scene...

(TS 90-1)

The critical point Bergson is making is that moral philosophers take for granted, or as simply given, society and the two forces to which it owes its stability and mobility, namely, pressure and aspiration. At the same time, they take for granted the matter of morality and its form, all it contains, and the entire obligation with which it is clothed.

In chapter one of the *Two Sources*, Bergson also reflects on the nature of the open soul. He argues that we need to stop thinking of such a soul in terms of a process of expansion of the self. When we think of such a soul in these terms we are relying on a purely intellectualist psychology that defines feelings in relation to the things with which they are typically associated, such as love for one’s family, love for one’s country, and then extending this to include the love of humanity. In this psychology, we see in all these inclinations one single feeling, one that grows ever larger and embraces an increasing number of persons. Bergson writes:

[t]he fact that these feelings are outwardly expressed by the same attitude or the same sort of motion, that all three *incline* us to something, enables us to group them under the concept ‘love’, and to express them by one and the same word; we then distinguish them by naming three objects, each larger than the other, to which they are supposed to apply. This does in fact suffice to distinguish them. But does it describe them? Or analyse them?

(TS 38)

Bergson’s interest is in the nature of “feeling” (*sentiment*) and he is especially interested in the feelings radiated to others by the open soul. Much in our lives has been ordained by nature, such as we find in instinct and in habit. But beyond instinct and habit there is “feeling” that has

a direct action on the will. The impulse that is given by feeling does indeed closely resemble obligation. To illuminate this, but also to mark the difference, Bergson offers the example of the passion of love in its early stages. Is pleasure the aim of passionate love, or might pain be equally involved? Is it not evident that in cases of passionate love a tragedy lies ahead, with a whole life possibly being wrecked and ruined? And yet, as Bergson notes, “we feel it, no matter, we must because we must” (TS 39). As he astutely notes, the worst perfidy of a nascent passion is that it counterfeits duty. But even here there is no need to go as far as passion simply because even in the case of the most peaceful emotion there can enter a certain demand for action. This demand differs from obligation as he has defined it in that it does not meet with resistance and because it imposes only what has already been acquiesced in, but which nonetheless resembles obligation in that it imposes something on us. Bergson compares this ‘free’ state of being to what occurs in the case of musical emotion in which we feel, as we listen, as if we don’t desire anything else except what the music suggests to us. Moreover:

[I]et the music express joy or grief, pity or love, every moment we are what it expresses. Not only ourselves, but many others, nay, all the others too. When music weeps, all humanity, all nature weeps with it. In point of fact it does not introduce these feelings into us; it introduces us into them, as passers-by are forced into a street dance. Thus, do pioneers in morality proceed. Life holds for them unsuspected tones of feeling (*résonances de sentiment*) like those of some new symphony, and they draw us after them into this music that we may express it in action.

(TS 40)

Does Bergson show himself to be an irrationalist here, as he is so often taken to be? His argument is against intellectualism: “It is through an excess of intellectualism that feeling is made to hinge on an object and that all emotion is held to be the reaction of our sensory faculties to an intellectual representation” (TS 40).

11.5 Conclusion

The emotions are important for Bergson in his first published book since they provide for him evidence of “immediate consciousness” in which a tempestuous love or profound melancholy “takes possession of our soul” (TFW 132). His approach to the emotions should also impress us, since their mode of being provides testimony of his tremendous insight into the character of time conceived as duration, which is to be understood in terms of his conception of a continuous and confused multiplicity in which “a thousand different elements” dissolve into and permeate one another without precise outlines (TFW 132). It is this element that for Bergson constitutes the original element of the emotions. A deep emotion “lives” on account of its implication in our durational existence and it is only when we artificially separate the moments from one another, “spreading out time in space”, that we cause a feeling “to lose its life and its colour” (TFW 133). When we do so we stand before a mere shadow of ourselves:

...we believe that we have analysed our feeling, while we have really replaced it by a juxtaposition of lifeless states which can be translated into words, and each of which constitutes the common element, the impersonal residue, of the impressions felt in a given case by the whole society.

(TFW 133)

Bergson, then, makes a number of innovations after James with respect to the emotions, making central to an appreciation of them a set of insights into the character of duration and the nature of our personalities. But what about developments after Bergson? I wish to consider in conclusion one theory, which is that of Sartre and his existential-phenomenological approach to the emotions.

At one point in the argument Sartre presents in his *Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions* (1939), and in a critical reception of the ideas of James, he seems to refer to Bergson when he argues that an emotion cannot be presented simply or only as a ‘pure quality’. This is because, he maintains, it “arises as a certain relation between our psychic being and the world”, and, furthermore, that the relation of the self to the universe is not a chaotic one, but rather “an organized and describable structure” (Sartre 2015: 17). Sartre, then, is laying stress on the *intentionality* of the emotions: “[t]he emotional consciousness is primarily consciousness of the world” (2015: 34), in which emotion “is a specific manner of apprehending the world” (2015: 35). Moreover, for Sartre, during an emotion our consciousness “transmutes the deterministic world in which we live, into a magical world”, and this existential structure of the world that emotions disclose for us is “magical” (2015: 56).

It seems to me that James, Bergson, and Sartre are all making an important contribution to the understanding of the emotions. It is not necessary to pit them against each other; rather, the wiser strategy is to synthesise their different contributions in which we would appreciate the different constitutive features that make up the emotions: the physiological (highlighted by James), the durational (highlighted by Bergson), and the existential (highlighted by Sartre). Bergson and Sartre, in particular, are keen to show that emotions are not accidental features of our conscious existence but an important way in which we exist in the world and in which we can understand our being in the world. Emotions thus have tremendous meaning and significance for us, and Bergson is an exemplary thinker about the emotions in two main respects: first, in demonstrating in clear and precise terms the durational quality of our emotions, and, second, in seeking to show the unique character of a creative emotion.

Let me add: if Sartre is criticising Bergson’s account of the emotions in his *Sketch* he gives an impoverished appreciation of it simply because Bergson does not seek in *Time and Free Will* to isolate “pure qualities” as a key feature of the emotions; rather, he wants these qualities to be understood dynamically as the expressions of “states of the soul” and an entire personality, and neither “soul” nor “personality” can be understood apart from the relation with, and response to, a “world”. If feelings or emotions go deep enough, Bergson argues, then each one can be said to make up our ‘whole soul’ since the content of the soul is reflected in each one (TFW 165). For him, therefore, only on the model of an “inaccurate psychology” can it be claimed that we are all determined by emotions – sympathy, aversion, hate, love, and so on – in terms of forces that simply press upon us. Rather, “each of us has his own way of loving and hating; and this love or hatred reflects his whole personality” (TFW 164). With these far-reaching insights Bergson is led to question of the scientific correctness, as well as the wisdom, of approaching the self as something wholly determined and mechanical.

Finally, it should perhaps be noted that key aspects of Bergson’s thinking about the emotions are not unique to him, but refer back to a set of insights that we encounter in Montaigne, an early modern figure. Montaigne had the great insight that human experience is not scalable, and hence it is inappropriate to seek to establish some inner scale for the emotions in which we would measure in quantitative terms the intensity of each feeling and experience.² Montaigne, in fact, anticipates Bergson’s most important insights when he notes that a number of our emotions, giving examples of fear, desire, and hope, ‘project us toward the future’, and that in the experience of a deep emotion, such as grief, for example, it is our whole soul that

is expressed and made manifest to us.³ What Bergson adds to Montaigne, though, is significant, and it includes new concepts and fresh insights, as well as elaborate demonstrations of real power and profundity.

Notes

- 1 Recent literature on Bergson, however, suggests that this neglect is being corrected; see François and Riquier 2017 and Lapoujade 2018, especially the Introduction on “Time and Affect”.
- 2 For a highly illuminating account of Montaigne on the emotions see Perler 2018, chapter three.
- 3 See, for example, the essays on sadness and on anger in Montaigne 2003: 6–9; 655–61.

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