

Bergson, Henri

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Henri Bergson's (1859–1941) most sustained contribution to ethics is to be found in his final main book, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* (TSMR), which was published in 1932. Prior to the appearance of this work his commentators could only speculate on the “ethical implications” of his philosophy, linking his critique of scientific and psychological determinism and championing of unforeseeable novelty in the world – as espoused in his three previous main books, *Time and Free Will* (1889), *Matter and Memory* (1896), and *Creative Evolution* (1907) – with the concerns of ethics, especially questions of freedom (for one such attempt, see the study by Sait 1914). As one commentator notes, for several years Bergson had expressed doubts whether he would publish a book on ethics or morals simply because he doubted whether he could attain conclusions as demonstrable as those of his other texts. Philosophy proceeds by a definite method and can legitimately claim as much objectivity as the positive sciences, though of a different kind (Lacey 1989: 197). Bergson was, therefore, in search of an approach to ethics that would satisfy the ambition he had set for philosophy: that of achieving precision (Bergson 1965: 11). In what follows I will outline the contribution to ethics Bergson makes in the opening chapter of the TSMR and focus on illuminating the two sources morality has in his account. At the end of the opening chapter of the book Bergson states that all morality is in essence “biological,” though he does say we need to give the word “biology” the wide meaning it should have. Bergson is often construed, along with Nietzsche, as an irrationalist and a philosopher of life (see NIETZSCHE, FRIEDRICH). However, what Bergson criticizes is the idea of self-sufficient reason and so he is better seen as being anti-intellectualist rather than advocating irrationalism (William James [1909] said it was Bergson who liberated him from intellectualism; see JAMES, WILLIAM). This has two main aspects: first, a rejection of the view that we can be moved by ideas or intelligence alone; and, second, criticism of Kant's conception of an ethics of duty (see KANT, IMMANUEL).

Obligation

One of the main aims of Bergson's opening first chapter is to indicate in what obligation consists and, in the process, significantly narrow down our conception of what morality is (see DUTY AND OBLIGATION). Morality is a discipline demanded by nature and the task is to reintegrate the human back into nature as a whole (see NATURALISM, ETHICAL). Bergson wants to expose the weakness of a strictly intellectualist system of morality, which covers, he thinks, the majority of the philosophical theories of duty. There are two forces acting upon us and to which we

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respond: impulsion and attraction. Without this attention to forces, moral philosophy has great problems in explaining how a moral motive could take over our being and impel it to action (Bergson 1977: 66–7).

Bergson acknowledges that the rational alone is self-consistent and cannot be devalued (1977: 81). In civilized society morality is essentially rational. Reason carries a danger, however: it gives us a diagram of action and can render our decisions and deliberations automatic. As part of a vital life Bergson thinks we need the joy and exuberance of moral inventions and transformations. In an essay of 1911 entitled “Life and Consciousness” Bergson had already argued that the destination of nature lies in joy (pleasure is too tied to preservation). Joy is a sign that life has been successful and conquered: “All great joy has a triumphant note.” Moreover, wherever there is joy there is creation and 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.” 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: “The men of moral grandeur, particularly those whose inventive and simple heroism has opened new paths to virtue, are revealers of metaphysical truth” (2007: 24). Already here we see Bergson anticipating a key aspect of his approach to ethics in the TSMR.

For us today, moral life means rational life (Bergson 1977: 85). Bergson affirms this development but 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 criticizing is the idea of a self-sufficient reason. What is obligatory in obligation does not come from intelligence and cannot; intelligence supplies the element of hesitation in obligation, but obligation is a necessity of life. In part the problem lies with intelligence: its pride will not admit its original subordination to biological necessities. The illusion is that intelligence is unrelated to either nature or life, with no correspondence to vital needs. Intelligence wants man to be superior to his actual origins, higher than nature; yet intelligence, in the form of science, shows man to be part of nature.

In its origins morality is the pressure of prohibition that we are habituated to, in the same way that necessity works in nature. Although analogous, these are not the same. As Bergson notes, an organism subject to laws it must obey is one thing, a society composed of “free wills” is another (we have inflexibility in one case, flexibility in the other) (*see* FREE WILL). There is a habit of obligation. From an initial standpoint, then, social life can be defined as a system of more or less deeply rooted habits that correspond to the needs of a community; these are habits of command and obedience in the form of an impersonal social imperative. As with all habits we feel a sense of obligation. Social obligation is a special kind of pressure and habit: “Society, present within each of its members, has claims which, whether great or small, each express the sum-total of its vitality” (Bergson 1977: 11).

The law which enunciates facts is one thing, the law which commands is another; it is possible to evade the latter, so we have obligation and not necessity. The commands of society have all the appearance of laws of nature, so that a breach of the social order strikes us as anti-natural, with the lawbreaker compared to a freak of nature (the misfit, the parasite, etc.). Morality is a “screen” (of order, discipline), and the possible immorality that lies behind the exterior with which humanity presents itself to the world is not seen under normal circumstances. As Bergson notes, we don’t become misanthropes by observing others but on account of a feeling of discontent with ourselves; only then do we come to pity or despise humankind: “The human nature from which we then turn away is the human nature we have discovered in the depths of our own being” (1977: 11). Obligation first binds us to ourselves, or rather to the superficial or surface self, the social self: “To cultivate this social ego is the essence of our obligation to society” (1977: 15). The verdict of conscience is that given by the social self (*see* CONSCIENCE). Our debt or obligation to society is to cultivate our social ego: unless some part of society was “within” us it could have no hold on us. I cannot cut myself off from society simply because the “soul” of society inheres in the language I speak, and my memory and imagination live on what society has implanted in me. It can take a violent break to reveal clearly the extent of the nexus of the individual to society, e.g., the remorse of the criminal. The criminal loses his identity, he does not know who he is anymore, such is the nature of his transgression, and this is generated by his own conscience. His desire is not so much to evade punishment as to wipe out the past, to deny the knowledge of what he has done, as though the crime had not really taken place. The criminal thus feels more isolated than does someone waking up to find themselves stranded on a desert island.

Can we say that duty implies an overcoming of self: “obedience to duty means resistance to self” (Bergson 1977: 20)? Can we not readily see this in cases of the natural disobedience of the child and the necessity of its education and by acts of rebellion in one’s normal ties that bind? Bergson has a problem with this way of thinking about ethics: “When, in order to define obligation, its essence and its origin, we lay down that obedience is primarily a struggle with self, a state of tension or contraction, we make a psychological error which has vitiated many theories of ethics” (Bergson 1977: 20). This is because we are encouraging confusion over the sense of obligation – “a tranquil state akin to inclination” – with the violent effort we exert on ourselves now and again to break down possible obstacles to obligation. Kant’s ethics rest on an absolute distinction between the nature of inclination and duty, between heteronomy and autonomy. Contra this, Bergson maintains: “Obligation is in no sense a unique fact, incommensurate with others, looming above them like a mysterious apparition” (1977: 20). We have any number of particular obligations and each one calls for a separate explanation. It is a matter of habit to obey them all. Suppose that we deviate from one of them, there would then be resistance, and if we resist this resistance a state of tension or contraction is likely to result: “It is this rigidity which we objectify when we attribute so stern an aspect to duty” (1977: 21).

It is the ease with which philosophical theories of ethics can be built up which 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 philosophers’ stone, that they had started by putting gold in the bottom of their crucible.” Bergson argues that where philosophers have gone wrong is in positing the grounds of morality in abstraction from the social context where they have their “source”: “They have considered the pursuit of these ends ... in a society 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” (1977: 90–1). Bergson’s stress, then, is on the social origins of obligation. The conclusion reached is that obligation is a kind of “virtual instinct,” similar to that which lies behind the habit of speech. Obligation needs to lose its specific character so we recognize it as “among the most general phenomena of life” (1977: 29). Obligation is the form assumed by necessity in the realm of human life. This means for Bergson that there is no “is–ought” problem in ethics: obligation is a social fact of human existence and his pioneering sociobiological approach seeks to show this (*see IS–OUGHT GAP*).

The Open Morality

We need to mark a difference in kind between two moralities: the former consists in impersonal rules and formulae; the latter incarnates itself in a privileged personality who becomes an example such as found in exceptional human beings (Christian saints, sages of Greece, prophets of Israel, the Arahants of Buddhism; *see RELIGIOUS SAINTS; BUDDHIST ETHICS*). The first morality works as a pressure or propulsive force, the second has the effect of an appeal. Here new life and a new morality are proclaimed: loyalty, sacrifice of self, the spirit of renunciation, and charity.

For Bergson it is not simply a question of replacing egoism with altruism: it is not simply a question of self now saying to itself, “I am working for the benefit of humankind,” as the idea is too vast and the effect too diffuse. So what is taking place and being asked of the self? Can we say that operative in the open soul is the love of all humanity? This does not go far enough since it can be extended to animals, plants, all nature. But it could even do without them since its form is not dependent on any specific content: “‘Charity’ would persist in him who possesses ‘charity,’ though there be no other living creature on earth” (Bergson 1977: 38; *see CHARITY*). It is a “psychic attitude” which, strictly speaking, does not have an object (Bergson 1977: 39). It is not acquired by nature but requires an effort. It transmits itself through feeling; think of the attraction or appeal of love, of its passion, in its early stages and which resembles an obligation (we must because we must): perhaps a tragedy waits ahead, a whole life wrecked, wasted, and ruined. This does not stop our responding to its call or appeal. We are entranced, as in cases of musical emotion which introduces us into new feelings, “as passers-by are forced into a street dance.” The pioneers in morality proceed in a similar fashion: “Life holds for them unsuspected tones of feeling like those of some new symphony,

and they draw us after them into this music that we may express it in action” (Bergson 1977: 40).

Does Bergson show himself to be an irrationalist here? His argument is, in fact, against intellectualism since 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. Take the example of music: Are the emotions expressed linked to any specific objects of joy, of sorrow, of compassion, or of love? The difference Bergson is getting at is a radical one and it is between an emotion that can be represented (images, objects) and the creative emotion which is beyond representation; it is a real invention. Bergson is not blind to the illusions of love and to the psychological deceptions that may be at work, but he insists that the effect of creative emotion is not reducible to this. There are emotional states that are distinct from sensation, that is, they cannot be reduced to being a psychical transposition of a physical stimulus. There are two kinds: (a) where the emotion is a consequence of an idea or mental picture; (b) where the emotion is not produced by a representation but is productive of ideas. It informs the creations not only of art but of science and civilization itself. It is a unique kind of emotion, one that precedes the image; it virtually contains it, and is its cause (Bergson 1977: 47). His position is not equivalent, Bergson insists, to a moral philosophy of sentiment, simply because we are dealing with an emotion that is capable of crystallizing into representations, even into an ethical doctrine.

In the first morality we attain pleasure (centered on the well-being of individual and society), but not joy. By contrast, in the open morality we experience progress which is experienced in the enthusiasm of a forward movement. There is no need, Bergson insists, to resort to a metaphysical theory to account for this: it is not an issue of picturing a goal we are trying to achieve or envisaging some perfection we wish to approximate. It is an opening out of the soul, a breaking with nature, a moving of the boundaries of itself and the (closed) city. Whereas the first morality has its source in nature, the other kind has no place in nature’s design. Nature may have foreseen a certain expansion of social life through intelligence, but only of a limited kind. But it has gone so far as to endanger the original structure. While nature has made it possible for human beings to beget themselves endlessly, and according to the rule followed by all other living creatures (“she took the most minute precautions to ensure the preservation of the species by the multiplication of individuals”), what nature did not foresee is that the intelligence it bestowed on us would find a way of divorcing the sexual act from its consequences, and “that man might refrain from reaping without forgoing the pleasure of sowing.” It is, Bergson adds, “in quite another sense that man outwits nature when he extends social solidarity into the brotherhood of man” (1977: 56–7).

However, an absolute break with nature is never possible or even conceivable: “It might be said, by slightly distorting Spinoza, that it is to get back to *natura naturans* that we break away from *natura naturata*” (Bergson 1977: 58; *see* SPINOZA, BARUCH). If man is part of nature, a form of life, then it is not so far fetched to claim that man’s moral inventions amount to an expressive nature.

Conclusion

For Bergson the two forces he has been tracing are fundamental data and not exclusively moral; rather, they are the sources of the twin tendencies of life. There are two ways of teaching in an effort to get hold of the will: by training and by the mystic way. The former inculcates impersonal habits, the latter takes place through the imitation of a personality, even a spiritual union. Mystics for Bergson are not simply humans of vision, raptures, and ecstasies, but figures of action. Is there not, Bergson asks, a mystic dormant within each one of us, responding to a call (1977: 97; *see* MYSTICISM AND ETHICS)?

Social life can be taken as a fact we begin with but it needs an explanation in terms of life. A challenge is presented with this emphasis on two sources of morality: society is not self-sufficient and is not therefore the supreme authority. If we pursue matters of morality purely in intellectualist terms we reach a transcendental dead end; if we place the emphasis on life, we can explain both the closed and the open: “Let us then give to the word biology the very wide meaning it should have, and will perhaps have one day, and let us say in conclusion that all morality, be it pressure or aspiration, is in essence biological” (Bergson 1977: 101).

Like unadorned obligation, pure aspiration is an *ideal* limit. A mystic society which would embrace all humanity, animated by a common will, working toward the continually renewed creation of a more complete humanity, is no more possible of realization than the existence in the past of human societies functioning automatically on the model of animal ones. Nevertheless, it is the mystic souls who will continue to draw civilized societies in their wake. They provide us with a “memory of humanity.” The sublime figures of the past and present exert on us a “virtual attraction.” Civilized humanity remains, Bergson thinks, under the grip of two moralities: a system of order dictated by impersonal social requirements and a series of appeals made to the conscience of each individual by personalities who represent the best that there is in humanity.

See also: BUDDHIST ETHICS; CHARITY; CONSCIENCE; DUTY AND OBLIGATION; FREE WILL; IS-ought GAP; JAMES, WILLIAM; KANT, IMMANUEL; MYSTICISM AND ETHICS; NATURALISM, ETHICAL; NIETZSCHE, FRIEDRICH; RELIGIOUS SAINTS; SPINOZA, BARUCH

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