

Morality and the philosophy of life in Guyau and Bergson

Keith Ansell-Pearson

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Abstract In this essay I examine the contribution a philosophy of life is able to make to our understanding of morality, including our appreciation of its evolution or development and its future. I focus on two contributions, namely, those of Jean-Marie Guyau and Henri Bergson. In the case of Guyau I show that he pioneers the naturalistic study of morality through a conception of life; for him the moral progress of humanity is bound up with an increasing sociability, involving both the intensification of life and its expansion. In the case of Bergson I show that he also pioneers a novel naturalistic appreciation of morality, one that is keen to demonstrate morality's two sources and so as to give us a firm grasp of the chances of a moral progress on the part of humanity. I suggest that of the two appreciations of morality Bergson's is the richer since it contains a set of critical reflections on humanity's condition that is lacking in Guyau. I conclude by suggesting that Bergson's idea that modern humanity is confronted with the decision whether it wishes to continue living or not has lost none of its relevance today.

Keywords Morality · Life · Obligation · Pleasure · Moral progress · Closed and open moralities · Biology and phenomenology · The War-Instinct

1 Introduction

This essay is an exploration of the contribution the philosophy of life is able to make to our understanding of morality. In what follows I focus on two important contributors to the philosophy of life and examine their approaches to morality. The two figures I focus on are both French philosophers: Jean-Marie Guyau (1854–1888) and Henri Bergson (1859–1941). I show that both thinkers work

K. Ansell-Pearson (✉)
Department of Philosophy, University of Warwick, Coventry, UK
e-mail: k.j.ansell-pearson@warwick.ac.uk

against idealism in ethics and outline a fresh and novel approach to morality that shows its naturalistic, even ‘biological,’ roots. However, they also show that morality is not only that: It is also expansion (Guyau) or aspiration (Bergson) as well as convention or pressure. Bergson’s approach, I argue, is the more satisfactory of the two on account of him being able to demonstrate the two sources of morality in life. He thus overcomes the optimistic naiveté we can identify in Guyau’s approach. This does not mean that Bergson is a pessimist when it comes to humankind’s moral progress, only that his optimism is tempered by a spirit of critical realism. Guyau and Bergson are both neglected thinkers in the tradition of continental philosophy and rarely brought into rapport with one another.¹ Their contributions to core philosophical topics, such as questions of morality, merit a wide audience. I shall begin with an examination of the distinctive features of Guyau’s approach to morality through a conception of life, and then turn my attention to Bergson and whose approach is much more substantial.

To a certain extent both Guyau and Bergson can be interpreted as philosophers who are keen to naturalize Kant on ethics and so as to render less mysterious the nature of obligation. As we shall see, for Guyau questions of duty and obligation cannot be placed in a region above that in which science and nature move, whilst for Bergson obligation is no unique fact incommensurate with the rest of nature in the case of the human animal. However, neither Guyau nor Bergson is reductive in pursuing a naturalistic approach. Guyau locates progress in morality taking place through the evolution of human sociability. Bergson, as we shall see, is prepared to acknowledge the fact of moral progress in human evolution but also holds that humanity carries with it a dark secret in the form of the war-instinct and for him this necessitates that today humanity needs to make a decision about its future existence. Following an insight developed by Frédéric Worms, I shall suggest that on the question of life and its relation to morality Bergson has the superior philosophy since he recognizes that both the biological *and* phenomenological realms need to be taken into account if we are to develop a satisfactory conception of human ethical life and its possibilities of transformation.

2 Guyau on morality and life

Guyau remains an unjustifiably forgotten figure in modern European philosophy. His major work on ethics was published in 1885 and is entitled in English *Sketch of Morality Independent of Obligation or Sanction* (*Esquisse d’une morale sans obligation, ni sanction*). Prior to this work Guyau had published studies of ancient and modern ethics, being especially concerned with Epictetus and Epicurus with regards to the ancients and with Darwin and Spencer with regards to the moderns. Nietzsche called him ‘brave Guyau,’ and regarded him as a courageous thinker who

¹ A notable exception is an essay by a young Vladimir Jankélévitch from 1924, that is, prior to the publication of Bergson’s *Two Sources of Morality and Religion* in 1932. In it he brings Bergson and Guyau into rapport with respect to the notions of life and duration, aesthetics, and the method of intuition. See Jankélévitch (1994). For recent appreciation of Bergson and morality see Lawlor (2003), Lefebvre and White (2012) and Lefebvre (2013).

had written one of the few genuinely interesting books on ethics of modern times.² Guyau's appeal at the time was as the Spinoza of France.³ His aim was to promote a renewal of ethics in the face of the rise of mechanical materialism to a position of intellectual dominance in which there would be a focus on emotional and reflective activity in contrast to the exclusive attention paid to physical and external phenomena. As one commentator on Guyau has noted, his goal is to provide a satisfactory holistic approach to modern ethics since positivists and idealists consider only one aspect, either the factual or the ideal, at the expense of the other. Thus a proper account of the dynamics of moral life must account for both moral ideas and moral actions.⁴ For Guyau the reign of the absolute is over in the domain of ethics, so that whatever comes within the order of facts is not universal, and whatever is universal is a speculative hypothesis. For Guyau, a chief characteristic of the future conception of morality will be 'moral variability': 'In many respects this conception will not only be *autonomous* but *anomos*.'⁵ The absolute has changed its abode, passing from the domain of religion to that of ethics. Although this absolute may call forth a generous enthusiasm, it may also give rise to a certain kind of fanaticism, and whilst less dangerous than the religious kind it will not be without its menaces and inconveniences. According to Guyau, we are witnessing today the decline of religious faith and this faith is being replaced by a dogmatic faith in morality. The new voice is conscience and the new god is duty:

The great Pan, the nature-god, is dead; Jesus, the humanity-god, is dead. There remains the inward and ideal god, Duty, whose destiny it is, perhaps, also to die some day.⁶

The belief in duty is so questionable because it is placed above the region in which both science and nature move. Guyau maintains that all philosophies of duty and of conscience are, in effect, philosophies of common sense and are thus unscientific, be it the Scottish school of 'common sense' derived from Thomas Reid or neo-Kantianism with its assumption that the impulse of duty is of a different order to all other natural impulses. Phrases such as 'conscience proclaims,' 'evidence proves,' 'common sense requires' are as unconvincing as 'duty commands,' 'the moral law demands.'

At this point it will be worthwhile to devote some attention to Guyau's critical reception of Kant. That Guyau wishes to naturalize Kant on ethics is evident from the following citation:

² Nietzsche (1987, 35 [34], p. 525).

³ Subsequently, and as a result of the contribution of Bergson and Alfred Fouillée, he was to become known misleadingly as 'the French Nietzsche'. For a correctly critical consideration of this issue, including an instructive comparison of Guyau and Nietzsche, see Onfray (2011, pp. 107–111). Onfray interprets Guyau as a 'republican vitalist' of the left (2011, p. 118).

⁴ Orru (1983, pp. 503–504).

⁵ Guyau (1896, p. 6, 1898, p. 4). In the French original Guyau employs the Greek for both terms. Guyau's conception of 'anomos' was of course taken up by Emile Durkheim and put to quite different ends in his well-known theory of 'pathological anomie'. For further insight see Miller (1996).

⁶ Guyau (pp. 54, 63). The first page reference given is to the French edition (2006, based on the edition of 1896), the second is to the English translation.

The *feeling* of obligation, if exclusively considered from the point of view of mental dynamics, is brought back to a feeling of resistance.... This resistance, being of such a nature as to be apprehended by the senses, cannot arise from our relation to a *moral* law, which hypothetically would be quite intelligible and independent of time. It arises from our relation to natural and empiric laws.⁷

Guyau points out that the feeling of obligation is not moral but sensible, that is, the moral sentiment is, as Kant himself concedes, *pathological*. Kant's position is distinctive in holding this sentiment to be aroused by the mere form of the moral law and not its subject matter. This generates a mystery, as Kant fully acknowledges: an intelligible and supra-natural law generates a pathological and natural sentiment, namely, respect. How does a pure idea that contains nothing sensible produce within us a sensation of pleasure and pain? Kant acknowledges that he cannot explain why and how the universality of a maxim, and consequently morality, interests us.⁸

Guyau cannot see any reason a priori why we should connect sensible pleasure or pain to a law that would, hypothetically, be supra-sensible. Equally, can duty be detached from the character and qualities of the things we have to do to and the actual people to whom we have obligations? Like Hegel, Guyau appeals to social life or *Sittlichkeit* as the context in which duties and obligations find their sense. The moral law can only be a social law; just as we are not free to get outside the universe, so we are not free in our thinking to get outside society.⁹ Moreover, even if we were to suppose that the universal, qua universal, produces in us a logical satisfaction this itself remains 'a satisfaction of the logical instinct in man' and 'is a *natural* tendency' because it is 'an expression of life in its higher form...favourable to order, to symmetry, to similitude, to unity in variety...'¹⁰ Moreover, the will cannot be indifferent to the aims it is seeking to pursue or promote. Guyau contends that a purely formal practice of morality, as Kant's ethics demands, would ironically prove demoralizing to an agent: 'it is the analogy of the labour which the prisoners in English prisons are obliged to do, and which is without aim—to turn a handle for the sake of turning it!'¹¹ Guyau questions the performance of duty for the sake of duty, which he regards as pure tautology and a vicious circle. We might as well say be religious for the sake of religion, or be moral for the sake of morality.¹²

Guyau, it needs to be made clear, does not dispute that Kant's thinking on ethics is without importance or merit; indeed, he holds the theory of the categorical imperative to be 'psychologically exact and deep' and the expression of a 'fact of consciousness.' What cannot be upheld, however, is the attempt to develop it without the requisite naturalistic insight in which what we take to be a practical, internal necessity will be demonstrated to be an instinctive, even mechanical,

⁷ Guyau (pp. 48, 57).

⁸ Kant (1964, p. 128).

⁹ Guyau (pp. 198, 232–233).

¹⁰ Guyau (pp. 50, 59).

¹¹ Guyau (pp. 50, 59).

¹² Guyau (pp. 57, 67).

necessity. In short, Guyau holds that there is within us a primitive, impersonal impulse to obey that is prior to philosophical reasoning on ‘goodness’, but our understanding of this needs to be opened up to naturalistic and critical inquiry. This inquiry into the sentiment of obligation is to take the form of a ‘dynamic genesis’ in which we come to appreciate that we do not follow our conscience but are driven by it and in terms of a ‘psycho-mechanical power.’¹³ In addition questions of evolution—the evolution of the species and of societies—also need to be taken into account. What kind of ‘impulse’ is duty? How has it evolved? And why has it become for us a ‘sublime obsession’?¹⁴

Let me now examine the notion of ‘life’ Guyau operates with. His aim is to inquire into the ends pursued by living creatures, including humankind. The unique and profound goal of action cannot, he argues, be ‘the good’ since this is a vague conception which, when opened up to analysis, dissolves into a metaphysical hypotheses. He also rules out duty and happiness: the former cannot be regarded as a primitive and irreducible principle, whilst the latter presupposes an advanced development of an intelligent being. Guyau, then, is in search of a natural aim of human action. The principle of hedonism, which argues for a minimum of pain and a maximum of pleasure, can be explained in evolutionary terms in which conscious life is shown to follow the line of the least suffering. To a certain extent Guyau accepts this thesis but finds it too narrow as a definition since it applies only to conscious life and voluntary acts, not to unconscious and automatic acts. To believe that most of our movements spring from consciousness, and that a scientific analysis of the springs of conduct has only to reckon with conscious motives, would mean being the dupe of an illusion. Although he does not enter into the debate regarding the epiphenomenalism of consciousness, except to note it as a great debate in England (he refers to the likes of Henry Maudsley and T. H. Huxley), he holds that consciousness embraces a restricted portion of life and action; acts of consciousness have their origins in dumb instincts and reflex movements. Thus, the ‘constant end of action must primarily have been a *constant cause* of more or less unconscious movements. In reality, the ends are but *habitual motive causes become conscious of themselves*.’¹⁵

For Guyau the cause operating within us before any attraction of pleasure is ‘life.’ Pleasure is but the consequence of an instinctive effort to maintain and enlarge life. For Guyau, Epicurus, along with his faulty thinking about evolution, in which pleasure is said to create an organ’s function, needs correcting on this point. Contra Bentham he argues that ‘to live is not to calculate, it is to act.’¹⁶ An essentially Spinozist position is deduced in which the tendency to persist in life is construed as the necessary law of life. Guyau takes this tendency to be one that goes beyond and envelops conscious life, so it is ‘both the most radical of realities and the inevitable ideal.’¹⁷ Therefore, Guyau reaches the conclusion that the part of

¹³ Guyau (pp. 98, 117).

¹⁴ Guyau (pp. 101, 121).

¹⁵ Guyau (pp. 74, 87).

¹⁶ Guyau (pp. 211, 247).

¹⁷ Guyau (pp. 75, 88).

morality that can be founded on positive facts can be defined as, ‘the science which has for its object all the means of *preserving* and *enlarging* material and intellectual life.’¹⁸ His ethics centre, then, on a desire to increase ‘the intensity of life’ which consists in enlarging the range of activity under all its forms and that is compatible with the renewal of force. Like Spinoza and Nietzsche, Guyau thinks that ‘becoming-active’ is the cure to many of life’s ills and to passive pessimism.¹⁹ A superior being is one that practises a variety of action; thought itself is nothing other than condensed action and life at its maximum development. He defines this superior being as one which ‘unites the most delicate sensibility with the strongest will.’²⁰

It is clear, then, that Guyau’s evolutionary approach to ethics has its basis in a philosophy of life. For him this rules out any appeal to a supernatural principle to explain morality:

There is no supernatural principle whatever in our morality; it is from life itself, and from the force inherent in life, that it all springs. Life makes its own law by its aspiration towards incessant development; it makes its own obligation to act by its very power of action.²¹

Guyau’s approach to morality is clearly naturalistic and rooted in a conception of the evolution of human life. But how does he envisage the future development of morality? He identifies a new kind of obligation to be derived from the nature of sensibility itself and the transformation it has undergone in the course of evolution. In short, he argues that the ‘higher pleasures’ contain a highly sociable character that provides a fertile ground for new ethical connections between individuals. Thus, the superior pleasures, including the pleasures of art, the pleasures of reasoning, and the pleasures of learning and understanding, require less when it comes to external conditions and are much more accessible to all than the selfish pleasures: the origin of a great many of our pleasures ascend from the outward to the inward. However, although the evolved human being possesses a source of varied enjoyment in its own activity, this does not mean that such a human being will decide to shut itself up in itself, establishing an autarchic realm of self-sufficiency, like some Stoic sage. For Guyau, intellectual pleasures are both the most inward pleasures and also the most communicative, being both individual and social. The bonds that the sharing of the higher pleasures can generate create a particular kind of obligation: ‘an emotional bond—a union produced by the complete, or partial, harmony of sentiments or thoughts.’²² Guyau does not, of course, deny that there is often conflict and disagreement over values and ideals, but at the same he insists new bonds between individuals arise from the sharing of the higher pleasures.

¹⁸ Guyau (pp. 75, 88).

¹⁹ There is an extended treatment on pessimism by Guyau in his *Non Religion of the Future*, first published in 1887, where he treats the same figures that occupy Nietzsche’s attention: Leopardi, Schopenhauer, and von Hartmann (Guyau 1962, pp. 457–466).

²⁰ Guyau (pp. 35, 42).

²¹ Guyau (pp. 211, 248).

²² Guyau (pp. 94–95, 113).

Indeed, he maintains that the higher we rise in the scale of evolution, the more we see the highly social and sociable character of the pleasures of humankind. We moderns are becoming more intellectual in our enjoyments and tastes, and with this arises a 'universal consciousness,' in which consciousness becomes easier of penetration.²³ It's on this point that Guyau thinks we are going beyond the life of pleasures envisaged by Epicurean philosophy. In modern conditions of human social evolution we find that the self distinguishes itself less and less from other selves and, in fact, has more in need of them so as to form itself and flourish. Here Guyau locates an important principle of human evolution: Although the point of departure is selfishness, it is such 'by virtue of the very fecundity of all life,' and it is 'obliged to enlarge itself, to create outside of itself new centres of its own action.'²⁴

For Guyau, then, human evolution is on the way to an epoch in which primitive selfishness will more and more recede. Compared to the selfish component of our existence, the sphere of altruism is becoming considerably larger and even the so-called purely physical pleasures, such as eating and drinking, only acquire their full charm when one shares them with others. The social sentiments are, then, of crucial importance for understanding the character of our enjoyments *and* pains: 'Neither my sufferings nor my pleasures are absolutely my own.'²⁵

There is for Guyau an abundance of life that motivates us to care and work not only for ourselves but for others. This is, in large part, what he means when he seeks to locate 'morality'—the sphere of the social expansion of the human animal and of other-regarding actions—within life itself. Life has two main aspects: nutrition and assimilation, on the one hand, and, production and fecundity on the other. The more a life form takes in, the more it needs to give out. He maintains:

Thus, the expenditure for other which social life demands is not...a loss for the individual; it is a desirable enlargement, and even a necessity. Man wishes to become a social and moral being; he remains constantly agitated by that idea. The delicate cells of his mind and his heart aspire to live and to develop in the same way as those 'homunculi' of which M. Renan somewhere speaks, every one of us feels in himself a kind of pushing of moral life, like that of the physical sap. Life is fecundity, and, reciprocally, fecundity is abundance of life; that is true existence.²⁶

Even in the life of the cell we can locate a principle of expansion and one that prevents any individual being sufficient unto itself. Moreover, the 'richest life' is to be found in the life that lavishly spends itself, sacrificing itself within certain limits, and sharing itself with others. The most perfect organism will also be the most sociable being: not simply because this carries with it certain evolutionary advantages but also because it is part of the higher moral development of life itself. It's on this point that Guyau sharply distinguishes himself from the likes of Bentham and the school of utilitarianism. It is within 'the very depths of our being' that the

²³ Guyau (pp. 95, 114).

²⁴ Guyau (pp. 95, 114).

²⁵ Guyau (pp. 96, 115).

²⁶ Guyau (pp. 86–87, 101).

instincts of sympathy and sociability emerge and that the English school has shown us to be more or less artificially acquired in the course of human evolution, so being little more than adventitious in consequence.

For Guyau the higher life is that which expands beyond the narrow horizon of the individual self. We have, he thinks, a need to go out of ourselves to others: 'we want to multiply ourselves by communion of thoughts and sentiments.'²⁷ We enjoy others knowing that we exist, feel, suffer, and love. In this respect, then, 'we tear the veil of individuality,' and this is not simple vanity but a fecund desire to 'burst the narrow shell of the self.'²⁸ Guyau, however, is not utterly naïve in his appreciation of 'life': He draws our attention to the phenomenon of 'affective debauchery' in which ones lives too much for others and neglects a healthy care of self.²⁹ So, although he is keen to attack what he sees as the dogmatism of egoism,³⁰ he also appreciates the need for a healthy form of egoism consisting in the cultivation of a care of self.

Guyau is inspired by the idea, which he partly derives from his stepfather Alfred Fouillée, of making the moral ideal strictly immanent, for example, that it is derived from experience. He puts it in his own philosophical language as follows: 'It is from *life* that we will demand the principle of morality.'³¹ By this he means that although the communicability of emotions of thoughts can be explained on its psychological side as a phenomenon of nervous contagion, it can also be explained as an integral feature of the evolution of life itself, that is, 'by the fecundity of *life*, the expansion of which is almost in direct ratio to its intensity.'³² Guyau is attempting to explain phenomena of morality, such as sympathy and altruism, including intellectual altruism, in terms of this conception of the development of life. If sympathy of feeling can be regarded as 'the germ of the extension of consciousness,' in which to understand is also to feel, and to understand others is to feel ourselves in harmony with them, then this can be explained by the fecund character of life itself.

Guyau's overriding aim is to establish the foundations of an understanding of moral development through a philosophy of life. Its moral ideal is 'activity' and in all its variety of manifestations; to increase the intensity of life means to enlarge the range of activity in all its forms.³³ There is a *culture* of human activity in this principle of 'to act is to live,' in which, from its point of view, the worst of all vices is laziness and inertia. But what is its relation to hedonism or the moral philosophy of pleasure? Here Guyau is very delicate in his thinking. He argues that there are two principal kinds of pleasure: first, the kind that corresponds with a particular and superficial form of activity, such as eating and drinking, and this is the pleasure of the senses; second, the kind that is connected with the very root of that activity such as the pleasure of living, willing, and thinking. The latter is the more deeply 'vital' and the more independent of exterior objects for its fulfilment and expression, indeed, 'it

²⁷ Guyau (pp. 84, 98).

²⁸ Guyau (pp. 84, 98).

²⁹ Guyau (pp. 85, 99).

³⁰ Guyau (pp. 65, 76).

³¹ Guyau (pp. 70, 81).

³² Guyau (pp. 70, 81).

³³ Guyau (pp. 76, 89).

is one with the very consciousness of life.’³⁴ The hedonists and utilitarians grant too much importance to the first kind of pleasure, and Guyau insists that we do not always act with the view of seeking the satisfaction of a particular pleasure. Rather, we act on occasion for the pleasure of acting and we live for the pleasure of living. Here, there ‘is in us an accumulated force which demands to be used.’³⁵ Indeed, he maintains that where the expenditure of this force is impeded it becomes desire or aversion: pleasure where the desire is ultimately satisfied and pain where the contrary takes place. The key point is this: from this it does not at all follow that the stored-up activity unfolds itself solely or largely for the sake of pleasure and with pleasure as the motive: ‘Life unfolds and expresses itself in activity because it is life...Before all we must live; enjoyment comes after.’³⁶ If there is pleasure then this is something that accompanies the search after life and does not provoke it. The basic idea is that nature is self-moving and self-governing, and as such it becomes superfluous to appeal to a particular motive, such as any special pleasure.³⁷ Whilst it can be acknowledged, in accordance with the English school, that consciousness only comes into being with some sensation of pleasure or pain, and in which to act and react is always to enjoy or to suffer, to desire or to fear, it does not follow that this can explain the movement of life: Instead of being the deliberate end of action, enjoyment is, like consciousness, merely an attribute of it. Only the distinction between consciousness and the unconscious can make this fact of life intelligible: ‘Action springs naturally from the working of life, which is, to a considerable extent, unconscious.’³⁸ Guyau is ultimately a Spinozist and re-works Spinoza on this point: ‘The tendency of the creature to continue in existence is at the root of all desire, without forming in itself a determinate desire.’³⁹ In short, Guyau is giving priority to a philosophy of ‘life’ over a philosophy of ‘pleasure.’ Here a ‘science’ of morals replaces a ‘metaphysics’ of morals, with morality being placed at the limit between the unconscious and conscious spheres, that is, of instincts, habits, and dumb perceptions on the one hand and of reasoning and thoughtful will on the other.

3 Guyau’s achievement

Guyau contends that when conceived as the systematization of moral evolution in humanity the science of ethics will come to exert an influence on this very evolution and alter the human animal in the process: ‘The gradual and necessary disappearance of religion and absolute morality has many...surprises in store for us. If there is nothing in this to terrify us, at least we must try to foresee them in the interest of science.’⁴⁰ Although Kant begins a revolution in moral philosophy by

³⁴ Guyau (pp. 77, 90).

³⁵ Guyau (pp. 77, 90).

³⁶ Guyau (pp. 77, 90).

³⁷ Guyau (pp. 78, 91).

³⁸ Guyau (pp. 79, 92).

³⁹ Guyau (pp. 79, 92).

⁴⁰ Guyau (pp. 114, 135).

seeking to make the will autonomous, as opposed to bowing before a law external to itself, he stops halfway with the constraint of universality of the law. This supposes ‘that everyone must conform to a fixed type; that the ideal “reign” of liberty would be a regular and methodical government.’⁴¹ In contrast to this Guyau argues that true autonomy must produce individual originality and not universal uniformity.

His achievement, then, is to provide a naturalistic and evolutionary explanation of morality and to indicate a future for morality that places the emphasis on an allowance for moral variability. In this respect, he is a pioneer who merits being ranked alongside the great ‘immoralist,’ Nietzsche. However, it is clear that Guyau departs from the core principles and assumptions of Nietzsche’s thinking, notably the latter’s emphasis on the will to power as the core principle of a philosophy of life and the emphasis on an Epicurean-styled egoism that involves social withdrawal and isolation from others, even a contempt for humanity.⁴² For Guyau life is expansive in the sense of a need to share: ‘It is as impossible to shut up the intelligence as to shut up flame.’⁴³ This means that human nature is sociable and cannot be entirely selfish even if it wished to be: ‘We are open on all sides, on all side encroaching and encroached upon...*Life is not only nutrition*; it is *production and fecundity*.’⁴⁴ It is this fecundity of life that reconciles egoism and altruism for Guyau. He thinks that an evolutionary growth can be located in the development of human nature in which from a growing fusion of sensibilities and the increasingly sociable character of elevated pleasures there arises a superior necessity that moves us towards others and does so naturally and rationally: ‘We cannot enjoy ourselves in ourselves as on an isolated island...Pure selfishness...instead of being a real affirmation of self, is a *mutilation of self*.’⁴⁵ In his appreciation of Epicurus, published in 1878, Guyau is sympathetic to Epicurus but thinks that ethics is now moving in a different direction to pure egoism:

We cannot mutilate ourselves, and pure egoism would be meaningless, an impossibility. In the same way that the ego is considered an illusion by contemporary psychology, that there is no personality, that we are composed of an infinite number of beings and tiny consciousnesses, in the same way we might say that egoist pleasure is an illusion: my pleasure does not exist without the pleasure of others...My pleasure, in order to lose nothing of its intensity, must maintain all of its extension.⁴⁶

⁴¹ Guyau (pp. 114, 135).

⁴² In *The Gay Science* (1882) Nietzsche recommends the following to his readers: ‘Live in seclusion so that you can live for yourself. Live in *ignorance* about what seems most important to your age...the clamor of today, the noise of wars and revolutions should be a mere murmur for you. You will also wish to help—but only those whose distress you *understand* entirely because they share with you one suffering and one hope—your friends—and only in the manner in which you help yourself. I want to make them bolder, more persevering, simpler, gayer.’ He praises Epicurus for his teaching of ethical egoism as early as his ‘untimely meditations’ from the period 1873–1875 and continues to extol the virtues of Epicurean-style egoism well into his middle period and later writings.

⁴³ Guyau (pp. 210, 247).

⁴⁴ Guyau (pp. 210, 247).

⁴⁵ Guyau (pp. 212, 249).

⁴⁶ Guyau (1878, p. 283).

Guyau regards morality, conceived as *caritas*, as the great ‘flower of life’:

There is a certain generosity which is inseparable from existence and without which we die – we shrivel up internally. We must put forth blossoms...in reality, charity is but one with overflowing fecundity; it is like a maternity too large to be confined within the family...⁴⁷

This is an aspect of Guyau’s thinking that the anti-Christian Nietzsche found ‘incredible.’ I shall not examine the relation between the two here since my focus is on Guyau and Bergson.⁴⁸ Here it can be noted that although Guyau’s approach to morality contains a number of novel features, and amounts to a genuine innovation, with a superior appreciation of the character of life than what we find in the English school or utilitarianism, it is naïve in its conception of the moral development of humankind. Guyau provides what is ultimately a freethinking evolutionism and this results in a lack of critical realism and critical reflection in his conception of the future development of morality. For this, I now seek to show, we need to turn to Bergson. Let me state my concern perhaps a little too bluntly: It is not that Guyau lacks insight into some hard truths or facts of reality (as Nietzsche claimed), such as the will to power, but that his picture of the evolution of morality fails to take into account the problems raised by the closed morality and the threats this poses to moral progress.

4 Bergson and morality

Towards the end of the opening long chapter of his final work, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* (1932), Bergson makes the striking claim that all morality is in essence biological. On the face of it, and taken out of context, such a statement may strike us as decidedly odd, if not downright mystifying. And yet we know that throughout the book Bergson’s aim is one of demystification. He wants, at least in part, to reduce our conception of morality whilst at the same time enriching our appreciation of another source of morality. On its initial reception Bergson’s text was read as an attempt to show the importance of the release of dynamic moral energies, smashing, as it were, the narrow framework of the rationalist and idealist ethics, and outlining ‘an ethics which does not shut man in on himself, but reveals and respects in it the well-springs of moral experience and of moral life.’⁴⁹ Furthermore, Maritain claimed that against the idealist attitude Bergson’s text belonged to the cosmic attitude that shows the human being to be situated in a universe that spreads beyond itself in every direction, seeing in the moral life a particular case of universal life. Bergson, Maritain claimed, has recognized the dependence of moral philosophy on the philosophy of nature, linking the destinies of the philosophy of human action to a philosophy of the universe.⁵⁰ However, in

⁴⁷ Guyau (pp. 87, 101).

⁴⁸ For insight into the relation between Guyau and Nietzsche see Ansell-Pearson (2009).

⁴⁹ Maritain (1943, p. 76).

⁵⁰ Maritain (1943, p. 80).

more recent readings Bergson's emphasis on the philosophy of life and nature as a foundation for ethics has been called into question and a different picture has emerged as to what might be going on in the text. Frédéric Worms, for example, has strongly argued against a straightforward vitalistic reading of Bergson on ethics and the double source of morality. The danger, as he sees it is one of giving an overly simplistic meaning to Bergson's statement that all morality is in essence biological. More specifically, the danger is one of attributing to Bergson a substantialist metaphysics of life—of the *élan vital*—from which the sources of morality can be derived and reduced to. What this neglects is the fact that morality is a specifically human experience and has a specific place in human life.⁵¹

In what follows I want to illuminate the meaning of Bergson's statement that in essence all morality—by which he means the two main sources of morality in pressure and aspiration—is biological and examine the issue of biologism in the case of Bergson on ethics.⁵² Bergson's contribution to ethics, I show, is essentially twofold: first, he shows that obligation is not a unique fact incommensurate with others, and second, he shows the importance of moral creativity in human life and that enables agents to escape the threat of nihilism or a meaningless universe.

5 Bergson on the origins of morality and the character of obligation

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). In the case of human life 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 need of a community, 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.'⁵³ Bergson is not claiming that society is nature, or that the regularity established in the two orders is of the same kind: for a start, society is a collection of 'free wills'; rather, then, there is an analogy to the inflexible order of the phenomena of life. The law which enunciates facts is one thing, and the law which commands is another; it is possible to evade the latter, so we have obligation and not necessity. And yet 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 and discipline),

⁵¹ Worms (2004, p. 84).

⁵² Although the issue of 'biologism' is associated with Heidegger and his 'confrontation' with Nietzsche in the 1930s, it is a prominent feature of Jankélévitch's interpretation of Guyau and Bergson as philosophers of life in the 1920s. See Jankélévitch (1994, pp. 17, 22).

⁵³ Bergson (1959, p. 983, 1977, p. 11).

and the possible immorality that is behind the exterior 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 mankind: 'The human nature from which we then turn away is the human nature we have discovered in the depths of our own being.'⁵⁴

There is not simply the duty to obey social commands, but also the awareness that it is possible to evade the social imperative and yet one feels the debt. The important point is this: obligation comes as much from 'within' as from 'without.' Bergson thinks there is a point reached where it becomes virtually impossible to distinguish between the 'individual' and 'society.' 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.' The social ego is a form of self-recognition:

Were there not some part of society in us, it would have no hold on us...no-one could cut himself off from it completely...[the individual] is perfectly aware that the greater part of his strength comes from this source, and that he owes to the ever-recurring demands of social life that unbroken tension of energy, that steadiness of aim in effort, which ensures the greatest return for his activity. But he could not do so, even if wished to, because his memory and his imagination live on what society has implanted in them, because the soul of society is inherent in the language he speaks...⁵⁵

The verdict of conscience is that given by the social self (it is not the only kind of conscience: as we shall see, there are deeper sources for our moral feelings). 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. As Bergson says, I cannot cut myself off from society simply because the 'soul' of society inheres in the language I speak and in which I think, my memory and imagination live on what society has implanted in me, and so on. 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, does not know who he is anymore, such is the nature of his transgression; and this is generated by himself, by his own conscience. His desire is not so much to evade punishment but 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. He could re-join society if he confessed to his crime and became the author of his own condemnation.

All kinds of intermediaries exist that ensure that relation of individuals to society is smooth, easy, natural, and effortless: family, a trade or profession, the parish or district we belong to, etc. These are sources of fulfilling our obligations and paying our debts to society. Here duty, therefore, can be defined as a form of non-exertion, passive acquiescence. There are two cases when the ease of it all is broken: from the

⁵⁴ Bergson (1959, p. 983, 1977, p. 11).

⁵⁵ Bergson (1959, p. 987, 1977, p. 15).

perspective of the individual's moral distress and from the perspective of society (e.g. war and the excessive demand it places on individuals, such as self-sacrifice).

Can we say that duty implies an overcoming of self: 'obedience to duty means resistance to self'?⁵⁶ Can we not readily see this in cases of the natural disobedience of the child and the necessity of its education; by acts of rebellion in one's normal ties that bind (extra-marital flings, school truancy, and days off work)? Bergson has a problem with this way of thinking about morals: '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.'⁵⁷ 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. In a highly innovative move contra Kant, Bergson maintains that, 'Obligation is in no sense a unique fact, incommensurate with others, looming above them like a mysterious apparition.'⁵⁸ Moreover: 'We have any number of particular obligations, each calling for a separate explanation. It is natural...a matter of habit to obey them all. Suppose that exceptionally we deviate from one of them, there would be resistance; 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.'⁵⁹ Bergson appreciates that when we resist resistance—temptations, passions, and desires—we need to give ourselves reasons. There is the call of an idea, and autonomy or the exertion of self-control takes place through the medium of intelligence. However, 'from the fact that we get back to obligation by rational ways it does not follow that obligation was of a rational order.'⁶⁰ He says that he will come back to this point in a fuller discussion of ethical theories. For now, a distinction is made between a tendency, natural or acquired, and the rational method that a reasonable being uses to restore to it its force and to combat what is being opposed. What's the point being made?

Bergson's stress is on the social origins of obligation. Without this we posit an abstract conception of our conformity to duty (such as: we fulfil the moral law for the sake of duty). The 'totality of obligation' represents a force that, if it could speak, would utter 'You must because you must.'⁶¹ Intelligence introduces greater logical consistency into our lines of conduct. However, is it not the case that we never sacrifice our vanity, passions, and interests to the need for such consistency? We go wrong not when we ascribes a spurious independent existence to reason but when we ascribe to it the controlling power or agency of action: 'We might as well believe that the fly-wheel drives the machinery.'⁶² Bergson is not denying that reason intervenes as a regulator to assure consistency between rules and maxims but

⁵⁶ Bergson (1959, p. 991, 1977, p. 20).

⁵⁷ Bergson (1959, p. 991, 1977, p. 20).

⁵⁸ Bergson (1959, p. 991, 1977, p. 20).

⁵⁹ Bergson (1959: p. 992, 1977, p. 21).

⁶⁰ Bergson (1959, p. 992, 1977, p. 22).

⁶¹ Bergson (1959, pp. 993–994, 1977, p. 23).

⁶² Bergson (1959, pp. 993–994, 1977, p. 23).

claiming that it over-simplifies what is actually taking place in the becoming of a moral agent. Reason is at work everywhere in moral behaviour. Thus, an individual whose respectable behaviour is the least based on reasoning (sheepish conformity, for example) introduces a rational order into his conduct from the mere fact of obeying rules that are logically connected to one another. This may require social evolution and the refinement of mores. This is because a principle of economy governs logical co-ordination (extraction and selection). By contrast, nature is lavish, and the closer a community stands to nature we will find greater the proportion of unaccountable and inconsistent rules. The point, then, is that the essence of obligation is something different from the requirement of reason. Why stress this point? It is to show the natural sources of obligation and duty. The extraordinary conclusion is reached: 'an absolutely categorical imperative is instinctive or somnambulistic, enacted as such in a normal state...' ⁶³ The totality of obligation is, in fact, the *habit of contracting habits*; this is a specifically human instinct of intelligence. How do we arrive at this insight?

Let's imagine evolution has proceeded along two divergent lines with societies at the extremities of each. On the one hand, the more natural will be the instinctive type (such as ants or the bee hive). On the other hand, there is the society where a degree of latitude has been left to individual choice or waywardness. For nature to be effective in this case, that is, to achieve a comparable regularity, there is recourse to habit in place of instinct. Now comes the key part of Bergson's argument:

Each of these habits, which may be called 'moral', would be incidental. But the aggregate of them, I mean the habit of contracting these habits, being at the very basis of societies and a necessary condition of their existence, would have a force comparable to that of instinct in respect of both intensity and regularity. ⁶⁴

However much society progresses (in terms of its refinement, social complexity, and spiritualization) this original design will remain. For Bergson social life is immanent, if only as a vague ideal, in instinct and intelligence. The difference in human societies is that it is only the necessity of a rule that is the only natural thing (and rules are not laid down by nature). 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. Obligation is the form assumed by necessity in the realm of human social life.

How can we say that this source of morality is still active in civilized societies? Bergson has a number of reasons. His principal one is to claim that both primitive and civilized societies are, in essence, closed societies. To appreciate the necessary insight or point we need to turn away from any kind of moral idealism. It is this idealism that would give us civilized society from the start. We cannot, however, begin by assuming that society is an accomplished fact, as when we lay down as a duty the respect of life and property of others as a fundamental demand of social

⁶³ Bergson (1959, p. 996, 1977, p. 26).

⁶⁴ Bergson (1959, pp. 996–997, 1977, pp. 26–27).

life; for what society do we have in mind? What if we look at the matter through more realistic lens? We know that in times of war murder, pillage, perfidy, and cheating are deemed to be not only lawful but also praiseworthy: “Fair is foul, and foul is fair” (Macbeth’s witches). Instead of listening to what society says of itself, to know what it thinks and wants we need to look at what it does.⁶⁵ Surely war and vice are exceptions and abnormalities? But then, as Bergson points out, disease is as normal as health, and peace is often a preparation for war. However much society endows man, whom it has trained to discipline, with all it has acquired during centuries of civilization, it still has need of the primitive instincts that it coats with a thick varnish. The concern is never with ‘humanity’; for this we need to uncover the sources of another morality and society, the open kind. This is what we find difficult to adequately think:

...between the nation, however big, and humanity there lies the whole distance from the finite to the indefinite, from the closed to the open....Our sympathies are supposed to broaden out in an unbroken progression, to expand while remaining identical, and to end by embracing all humanity. This is a priori reasoning, the result of a purely intellectualist conception of the soul.⁶⁶

The primitive instinct, hidden under the accretions of civilization, is love of our community or tribe: ‘it is primarily as against as all other men that we love then men with whom we live...’⁶⁷ To proclaim that one loves humanity, and to decree that each human being qua human being possesses an inviolable dignity—both religion through God and philosophy through Reason do this—is take a (spiritual) leap: we don’t come to such ideas by degrees, say in the manner of ‘the expanding circle.’⁶⁸ Let me now explore the nature of this second morality, or what Bergson calls ‘complete morality’.

6 The open soul and creative emotion

Bergson maintains that morality comprises two different parts. The first part follows from the original structure of human society and the second part finds its explanation in a principle which explains this structure. In the case of the first morality it is obligation that represents the pressure exerted by the elements of society upon one another and as a way of maintaining the shape of the whole, and this pressure has an effect that is prefigured in each one of us by a system of habits that go to meet it. Here the whole is comparable to an instinct and has been prepared by nature, so we have human social life. In the case of the second morality obligation remains but takes the form of an aspiration or an impetus, ‘of the very impetus which culminated in the human species, in social life, in a system of habits which bears a resemblance more or less to instinct.’⁶⁹ Here the primitive impetus

⁶⁵ For excellent insight into Bergson on this point see Lefebvre (2013), especially chapter two.

⁶⁶ Bergson (1959 p. 1001, 1977, p. 32).

⁶⁷ Bergson (1959, p. 1002, 1977, p. 33).

⁶⁸ See Peter Singer (1981).

⁶⁹ Bergson (1959, p. 1021, 1977, p. 55).

comes into play directly, Bergson says, and no longer simply through the medium of the mechanisms it had set up and at which it had provisionally halted. On the one hand, then, nature has set down the human along a particular path of evolution (sociability); on the other hand, the human animal has gone beyond what is prescribed for it in nature and here it follows the activity of an impetus, which is a model for creation and invention. Bergson will speak of this new aspect of morality as a coincidence with the generative effort of *life*, or in terms of a contact with the generative principle of the *human species*.

We need to mark the difference between the two moralities as a difference in kind since the tendency in each case is quite different (closed and open): the first consists in impersonal rules and formulae; the second incarnates itself in a privileged personality who becomes an example. These are exceptional human beings and include Christian saints, the sages of Greece, the prophets of Israel, and the Arahants of Buddhism. The first morality works as a pressure or propulsive force, the second has the effect of an appeal. New life and a new morality are proclaimed: loyalty, sacrifice of self, spirit of renunciation, charity. Are these not all at work in closed morality? Of course; what changes is the ‘spirit’ animating these notions. For Bergson it is not simply a question of replacing egoism with altruism; it is not simply a question of the self now saying to itself, I am working for the benefit of mankind since the idea is too vast and the effect too diffuse. In the closed morality the individual and social are barely distinguishable: it is both at once and at this level that the ‘spirit’ moves around a circle that is closed on itself. 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, and all nature. 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.”⁷⁰ It is a psychic attitude that, strictly speaking, does not have an object. 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 lays 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 that 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.’⁷¹ We obey the call or appeal of love, and this shows us the passion of love or a great emotion, for good or ill.

Does Bergson show himself to be an irrationalist here? 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.’⁷² Take the example of music: are the emotions expressed linked to any *specific* objects of joy, of sorrow, compassion, and

⁷⁰ Bergson (1959, p. 1007, 1977, p. 38).

⁷¹ Bergson (1959, p. 1008, 1977, p. 40).

⁷² Bergson (1959, p. 1008, 1977, p. 40).

love, or is not the case that in listening to music we feel as though we desire only what the music is suggesting to us and in which we become what the music expresses, be it joy or grief, pity or love? 'When music weeps, all humanity, all nature, weeps with it.'⁷³ The difference Bergson is getting at is a radical one and it is between an emotion that can be represented (in images and objects) and the creative emotion that is beyond representation and is a real invention. States of emotion caused by certain things are ordained by nature and are finite or limited in number; we recognize them quite easily because their destiny is to spur us on to acts that answer to our needs.

Bergson is not blind to the illusions of love and to the psychological deceptions that may be at work. He maintains, however, that the effect of creative emotion is not reducible to this. This is because 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 (Bergson calls them *infra* and *supra-intellectual* respectively). A creative emotion 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. This 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. It concerns the new.

Bergson acknowledges that many will find this account of the second morality difficult to accept but maintains that there is no need to resort to metaphysics to explain the relation between the two moralities. Neither exists in a pure state today: the first has handed on to the second something of its compulsive force, whilst the latter has diffused over the former something of its perfume. Nevertheless, there are some important differences to be maintained: the former is fixed to self-preservation, and the circular movement in which it carries round with it individuals, as if revolving on the same spot, is a vague imitation, through habit, of the immobility of instinct. The latter is a self-overcoming or the conquest of life. In the first morality we attain pleasure (centred on the well-being of individual and society), but not joy. By contrast, in the open morality we experience progress that 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 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. More concretely:

⁷³ Bergson (1959, p. 1008, 1977, p. 40).

Nature surely intended that men should beget men endlessly, 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; hence she had not foreseen, when bestowing on us intelligence, that intelligence would at once 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 in quite another sense that man outwits nature when he extends social solidarity into the brotherhood of man; but he is deceiving her nevertheless, for those societies whose design was prefigured in the original structure of the human soul, and of which we can still perceive the plan in the innate and fundamental tendencies of modern man, required that the group be closely united, but that between group and group there should be virtual hostility...⁷⁴

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*.'⁷⁵ The circle of a closed existence is broken not through preaching love of one's neighbour since we do not embrace humanity by a mere expansion of our narrower feelings. The understanding of the open soul discloses Bergson's commitment to real movement. This cannot take place by a series of discrete stages, as in Zeno's paradoxes, which cannot produce real movement, but via an action in which we find the impression of a coincidence, real or imaginary, with the generative effort of life. When this takes place the obligation felt has the force of an aspiration in the sense of the vital impetus.

Why do we have such a problem in recognizing and speaking about this other morality? Bergson thinks it is because we are Zenoists and do not know how to think real or genuine movement. We can stop short of action in making the transition from the closed and the open, or immobility and movement or e-motion. There can be a waning of the vitality of impetus. We can halt at the point of intelligence. In leaving the closed the sentiment most likely to be adopted is the ataraxia of the Epicureans and the apatheia of the Stoics. Here we are moving from a detachment from the old life to a new attachment to life, but we reach only the point of contemplation. Perhaps we end up affirming contemplation as the highest ideal. Bergson thinks the development of Platonism (Plotinus, for example) exemplifies this ideal. Indeed Bergson's worry is that there remains too much contemplation in philosophy and one of the reasons why he privileges religion over philosophy is because he sees it as a domain of action and creation. As Deleuze writes, 'If man accedes to the open creative totality, it is therefore by acting, by creating rather than by contemplating.'⁷⁶ Bergson may accord a privileged field of vision to the great mystics but for him they are not quietists but harbingers of a new humanity. Mystics for Bergson are not simply humans of vision, raptures, and

⁷⁴ Bergson (1959, p. 1022–1023, 1977, pp. 56–57).

⁷⁵ Bergson (1959, p. 1024, 1977, p. 58).

⁷⁶ Deleuze (1991, p. 111).

ecstasies, but figures of action. Is there not, he asks, a mystic dormant within each one of us, responding to a call?

7 Bergson between biology and phenomenology

For Bergson the two forces he has been tracing are fundamental data and not strictly or exclusively moral. Rather, they are the sources of the twin tendencies of life (preservation and enhancement or overcoming). There are two ways of teaching and the attempt to get hold of the will: by training and by the mystic way. The former inculcates impersonal habits, the second takes place through the imitation of a personality, even a spiritual union. Social life cannot be taken as a fact we begin with but it needs an explanation in terms of life. A radical challenge is presented with 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 static and the dynamic, 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.⁷⁷

This, at least on the face of it, seems to be Bergson's argument. This account, however, raises important questions about the nature of his conception of ethics. These centre on the extent to which Bergson is guilty of the charge of biologism, that is, of reducing the ethical to the biological. Let me now deal explicitly with this issue.

Frédéric Worms has raised doubts about the wisdom of a straightforward vitalistic reading of Bergson's statement that in essence all morality is biological. For him it is important to appreciate that ethics is a decidedly human affair and this means, in part, that ethics is inseparable from phenomenology. For example, obligation is 'the experience of something that necessitates in us as if coming from life, but still implies an elementary consciousness at least to be felt, which is the beginning of reflection and discussion, if not of complete liberty.'⁷⁸ In short, then, we can say that Bergson's account of ethics refers to a quasi-biological experience of the human being that also presupposes a phenomenology of ethical life:

...our life is, via obligation, present to our consciousness and takes the moral aspect of duty, specific to humanity. Even if 'closed', even if incapable of leading to the open society of humanity as such...this first kind of ethics is nevertheless not grounded on metaphysical presupposition, but on the contrary on a conscious and quasi-phenomenological experience.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Bergson (1959, p. 1061, 1977, p. 101).

⁷⁸ Worms (2004, p. 84).

⁷⁹ Worms (2004, p. 84).

We are not, Worms claims, to be seen as prisoners of a life that is exterior to our lives (for example, life as a metaphysical substance and of which we are the mere vehicles). Whilst there is most definitely a contact with life's energy, we also 'remain...on the strict level of human experience and immanence.'⁸⁰ Our actual lives are lived in terms of a double meaning corresponding to the double experience of obligation, and this duality 'means that we cannot reach a primitive and absolute unity by taking "life" as a general and infinite substance, and annihilating our own life as such within it.'⁸¹ Bergson makes it clear that he regards dynamic morality to be essentially the work of human genius. Whilst the first kind of morality, the static kind, is characteristic of a group of habits that can be seen as the counterpart of certain instincts in animals, the second kind of morality involves individual initiative, intuition, and emotion, 'susceptible of analysis into ideas which furnish intellectual notations of it and branch out into infinite detail.'⁸² True, Bergson does say that the inventive efforts that characterize the domain of human life, and that have resulted in the creation of new species, has found in humanity, and humanity alone, 'the means of continuing its activity through individuals, on whom there has devolved, along with intelligence, the faculty of initiative, independence and liberty.'⁸³ This suggests that humanity is a representative of life conceived as an inventive vital impetus, but, at the same time, there is no suggestion that in the field of ethical life we are not dealing with specifically historical problems faced by humanity and that have required the constitution of new legal codes and invention of new political ideals and orders.

Is Bergson thinking in terms of analogy when he attempts to conceive morality in terms of biology and a notion of life? Although Bergson's text can be read as an anticipation of socio-biology,⁸⁴ in which it is held that nature has set down the human species along a particular path of evolution, he specifically states the obligations laid down by a human community introduce a regularity that has 'merely *some analogy* to the inflexible order of the phenomena of life.'⁸⁵ The situation is more complex with respect to the second morality since here Bergson seems to conceive it in terms of a realization of the vital impetus of life. However, at one point in the text Bergson says that the leaders of humanity, the ones who have broken down the gates of the city, '*seem* indeed thereby to have placed themselves

⁸⁰ Worms (2004, p. 86).

⁸¹ Worms (2004, p. 87).

⁸² Bergson (1959, p. 1029, 1977, p. 64).

⁸³ Bergson (1959, p. 1076, 1977, p. 119).

⁸⁴ See Gunter (1993, p. 146). Mullarkey (1999) is especially good on the kind of socio-biology we find at work in Bergson's text. As he ably puts it, Bergson's socio-biology is not conformist: it does not seek to legitimise natural essences but rather aims at the continual creation of new social forms (p. 89). Nevertheless, I think Bergson's neglected text can connect in pertinent ways with work in this field. Consider Bergson's key claim that morality has two sources and then consider the following from an essay entitled "Darwinian Evolutionary Ethics: Between Patriotism and Sympathy" by Peter Richerson and Robert Boyd: 'The great moral problem of our time is how to grow larger-scale loyalties to fit the fact that the world is now so famously a global village, while at the same time creating tribal-scale units that reassure us that we belong to a social system with a human face. The existence of weapons of mass destruction and the need to manage important aspects of the environment as a global commons threaten catastrophe if we fail in this project' (Richerson and Boyd 2004, p. 71).

⁸⁵ Bergson (1959, p. 983, 1977, p. 11). My emphasis.

again in the current of the vital impetus.⁸⁶ Moreover, the break with nature, which is what these figures represent, takes place through a *genius of the will*: ‘Through these geniuses of the will, the impetus of life, traversing matter, wrests from it, for the future of the species, promises such as were out of the question when the species was being constituted.’⁸⁷ He argues that although there is a break with one nature, that of the closed and the *natura naturata*, there is not a break with all nature, with the *natura naturans*. The path of evolution, whether natural or human, cannot be anticipated and Bergson is not, I think, positing teleology; it has happened that humanity has broken with animal closure and gone beyond what nature prescribed for it.⁸⁸ Whilst this process can be likened to an impetus of life, the change has been brought about by human action and emotion that resembles the always-forward movement of the vital impetus. Humanity continues the vital movement but it does so through its own actions and inventions.⁸⁹

The emphasis in Bergson is on the need for moral creativity, which he sees operating in human existence in terms of an analogy with the vital impetus of life itself. We can say, therefore, that thinking in terms of analogy can help us understand some core aspects of morality, but we are not reducing the ethical to the biological, especially where biology is taken to denote an order of nature beyond social transmutation. In order to address the tremendous social, political, and international problems of the planet Bergson argues that we need to refine the spirit of invention that to date has been cultivated largely on the basis of mechanism. It is not more and more reserves of potential physico-chemical energy that need releasing but those of a moral energy: ‘...the body, now larger, calls for a bigger soul’ and ‘mechanism should mean mysticism.’⁹⁰ Bergson has been criticized for neglecting the possessive and destructive death wish,⁹¹ and indeed he claims that the vital impetus, which knows nothing of death, is fundamentally optimistic.⁹² He asks whether underlying the need for stability within life, and that contributes to the preservation of the species, there is not also a ‘demand for a forward movement, some remnant of an impulse, a vital impetus.’⁹³ It is not only religion that works against the dissolvent power of intelligence and science—for example, against the disclosure of the inevitability of death and the depressive effects of this and the realization that all that exists is destined to pass away—but perhaps the concept of the *élan vital* too.⁹⁴ Intelligence, says Bergson, is constituted to act mechanically on

⁸⁶ Bergson (1959, p. 1023, 1977, p. 57). My emphasis.

⁸⁷ Bergson (1959, p. 1023, 1977, p. 58).

⁸⁸ Bergson argues: ‘...if there were really a pre-existent direction along which man had simply to advance, moral renovation would be foreseeable; there would be no need, on each occasion, for a creative effort’ (1959, p. 1202, 1977, p. 267).

⁸⁹ Bergson (1959, p. 1127, 1977, p. 179).

⁹⁰ Bergson (1959, p. 1238, 1977, p. 310).

⁹¹ Emmet makes this criticism of Bergson (1972, p. 151).

⁹² Bergson (1959, p. 1094, 1977, p. 140; see also pp. 260–261 on ‘empirical optimism’).

⁹³ Bergson (1959, p. 1069, 1977, p. 111).

⁹⁴ As John Mullarkey has noted, ‘From hermeneutical thesis to epistemological corrective to poetic expression: in such ways one can read Bergsonian vitalism as a philosophy concerning the *representation* of life as much as being one directly about life’ (Mullarkey 2007, p. 54).

matter and even postulates a universal mechanism and determinism: ‘and conceives virtually a complete science which would make it possible to foresee, at the very instant when the action is launched, everything it is likely to come up against before reaching its goal.’⁹⁵ Intelligence always falls short of this model, however, not only because there is always the discovery of new scientific objects that give science a new impetus, but also because it must confine itself to limited action on a material about which it does not know everything. For Bergson, it would seem, it is not simply the case that we embody the vital impetus, which then works its way through us as some kind of alien life drive, but more that we are to derive inspiration from our reflection on its character within evolution, chiefly that novelty and invention are real features of life, be it biological or ethical. For Bergson all is not given and certainly not everything is given in advance: the time of evolutionary life and of ethical life is a creative one. In the case of ethics his concern is with the obstacles that stand in the way of humanity’s moral progress, chiefly, the war-instinct, and to this issue I now turn.

8 Obstacles to humanity’s moral progress

In the long conclusion to his text, Bergson asks whether the distinction between the closed and the open is able to help us practically.⁹⁶ The object of the work was to investigate the origins of morality and religion. However, Bergson thinks we cannot simply rest content in our inquiry with developing only certain conclusions, since we still suffer historically from what has been uncovered as constituting the beginnings of human existence, namely, the tendencies of the closed society. Bergson insists that the closed mentality still persists, ‘ineradicable, in the society that is on the way to becoming an open one.’⁹⁷ Moreover, and this is his key insight: ‘since all these instincts of discipline originally converged towards the war-instinct, we are bound to ask to what extent the primitive instinct can be repressed or circumvented...’⁹⁸ I concur with the editors of a recent volume of essays on Bergson’s *Two Sources* when they argue that war is, ultimately, the co-ordinating problem of the book.⁹⁹

What Bergson has shown in his text on morality is that there are strata of human evolution and civilized nations and communities are by no means open societies: they are still largely determined by nature and necessity, and rely for the existence on sentiments that have their basis in earliest humanity. It is thus an error to locate progress naively in a simple transformation from the antique to the modern, from pre-science to science, from unreason to reason and enlightenment. Bergson has sought to show in the book that modern humanity remains as irrational and superstitious as ancient humanity. This does not mean that there has not been

⁹⁵ Bergson (1959, p. 1093, 1977, p. 139).

⁹⁶ Bergson (1959, p. 1206, 1977, p. 271).

⁹⁷ Bergson (1959, p. 1220, 1977, p. 288).

⁹⁸ Bergson (1959, p. 1220, 1977, p. 288).

⁹⁹ See Lefebvre and White (2012, p. 5).

progress; rather, there is the need to recognize that genuinely new social and moral inventions are rare and frequently get overtaken again, or subsumed, within the closed. Bergson thinks that it is possible to get back in thought to a fundamental human nature, and this is some original closed society. He holds that the general plan of such a society fitted the pattern of our species as the ant-heap fits the ant, with one crucial difference: the actual detail of the social organization is not given in the case of the human and there is scope for genuine social and moral invention. Now, he acknowledges that a knowledge of nature's plan, which is a way of speaking since nature has not consciously designed anything, would be of 'mere historical interest'¹⁰⁰ were it not for the fact that today humanity finds itself 'groaning, half crushed beneath the weight of its own progress.'¹⁰¹

For all his alleged vitalistic optimism Bergson is locating within the heart of civilized humanity a dark past and a terrible secret, namely, the war-instinct. He holds that war is natural since humanity is an animal species like any other and so driven by a need of self-preservation. In history this instinct has taken the form of establishing small, tribal communities, and under certain conditions each community takes what it needs and protects itself from other tribes that threaten it. This war instinct, then, in its origins, is 'the egoism of the tribe.'¹⁰² Humans differ from animal species in the extent of their tool-making intelligence, and humanity has the property of its instruments. While the war-instinct exists independently, it nevertheless hinges on rational motives and history teaches us that these have been extremely varied. Property is the necessary condition for war, whilst the sufficient condition is contact between communities. Bergson notes that the motivations for war become increasingly few as it becomes more terrible. He notes that the last war—the First World War, of course—as well as the future wars that can be dimly foreseen, are bound up with the industrial character of our civilization. The main causes of modern war are: 'increase in population, closing off of markets, cutting off of fuel and raw materials.'¹⁰³ The most serious cause of war today is over-population and the need for luxury.

Bergson admits to not believing in the fatality of history since there is no obstacle, he thinks, that cannot be broken down where there are wills sufficiently keyed up to deal with it in time. Thus, he is adamant that, there is 'no unescapable historic law.' There are, however, 'biological laws' that need acknowledging.¹⁰⁴ This is important if we are to adequately understand the evolution of the human and negotiate the challenges that confront it in its present state. What, then, is the way forward for humanity? Bergson wants to show us what must be given if war is to be abolished. As he says, humanity will change only if it is intent upon changing, but such a change would be dramatic. It would involve, for example, a new ascetic ideal in the form of a commitment to a simpler life, to renouncing the frenzy of consumption that holds us in its grip. As he says, 'should not this very frenzy open

¹⁰⁰ Bergson (1959, p. 1207, 1977, p. 272).

¹⁰¹ Bergson (1959, p. 1245, 1977, p. 317).

¹⁰² Bergson (1959, p. 1211, 1977, p. 277).

¹⁰³ Bergson (1959, p. 1221, 1977, p. 289).

¹⁰⁴ Bergson (1959, p. 1225, 1977, p. 293).

our eyes?’ Is there not a need for a new frenzy to come into being?: ‘humanity must set about simplifying its existence with as much frenzy as it devoted to complicating it.’¹⁰⁵ Now, Bergson does not think that such an epic transformation means jettisoning either the machine or science. In the first instance, it is a question of co-ordinating industry and agriculture so that the machine is allotted its ‘proper place,’ that is, the place where it can best serve humanity and where millions do not every year go unfed or are malnourished;¹⁰⁶ in the second, of recognizing that certain sciences—Bergson mentions physiology and medical science—have the potential to disclose to us the dangers of the multiplication of our needs, including ‘all the disappointments which accompany the majority of our satisfactions.’¹⁰⁷ In short, in addition to mystical intuition, Bergson also calls upon reason, science, and political will and organizations if the necessary transformation is to come about. He gives privilege to moral energy and leadership simply because he thinks we have need of visionaries who serve as exemplars, showing humanity the way forward in the direction of the open and the creation of new ways of feeling and thinking.

9 Conclusion

Bergson’s approach to morality through an understanding of life is superior to that we find in Guyau owing to the picture of human complexity he presents us with in the text. He is in favour of a moral transformation of the human being. However, it is mistaken to think that he is overly sanguine about the chances of this transformation actually taking place. As we have seen, he is not blind to the realities of the closed; he has, furthermore, identified the war-instinct as humanity’s dark secret. Bergson has been criticized for neglecting the possessive and destructive death wish, as well as for providing what is seen to be a highly romanticized account of both the *élan* of life and of the charismatic character.¹⁰⁸ Such a criticism strikes me as unfair and for reasons I have outlined in this essay. Although Bergson appeals to the potentialities of the dynamic impetus of life, and that endeavours to transcend the closed in all its manifestations, he neither neglects political realities nor underestimates the moral effort involved in seeking to bring about substantial change. For Bergson there is no pre-existent direction and no natural advance; progress is not written in earth or heaven, land or sky. If it was there would be no need of creative effort. Changes are qualitative, not quantitative, defying anticipation, and thus only in retrospect that we can construct a narrative in which each event is but a stage along the way towards a point of realization or renovation. All these efforts were not the progressive realization of an ideal since the idea is brought into existence in an act of creation. Ethical creation is important for Bergson because it conquers nihilism and provides us with an environment in which life is worth living, the possibility of a society which, if we tried it, would make us

¹⁰⁵ Bergson (1959, p. 1237, 1977, p. 307).

¹⁰⁶ Bergson (1959, p. 1236, 1977, p. 306).

¹⁰⁷ Bergson (1959, p. 1231, 1977, p. 300).

¹⁰⁸ Emmet makes this criticism of Bergson (1972, p. 151).

refuse to go back to the old state of things. Only in these terms can we define moral progress.

It is clear from Bergson's account that such progress is highly precarious. However, it is also clear that humanity today continues to face the decision that Bergson sought to confront it with in his text of 1932, namely, whether it wishes to carry on living or not. Bergson's invitation to humanity, it seems to me, remains of vital contemporary relevance: not simply to decide in favour of mere living or survival but to also make the extra effort to fulfil on their refractory planet the function of the universe, which is a machine for the making of gods. As Michael Naas has noted, Bergson is entertaining at the end of his book the terrible hypothesis that humanity may not simply be able to destroy itself but may actually desire to. He is entertaining the idea not simply of the destruction of the enemy but rather the extinction of humanity, in which the thermodynamics of death reaches its limit point.¹⁰⁹ Indeed, according to one commentator, he is anticipating the creation of the atomic bomb.¹¹⁰ The significance of this is that it means that Kant's teleology is over: nature does not know better than man what humanity needs and war cannot any longer be said to be a ruse of reason.¹¹¹ It is for this reason that Bergson holds that humanity is confronted with the need to make a fundamental decision. What he means by our becoming gods is not an equation of human beings with supernatural omnipotence but rather an emphasis on individuals who have become 'divinities in their own right' and, through their love of life, 'a people of gods *who are love*.'¹¹²

The choice Bergson is presenting his readers with at the end of the book is a choice between mere living and all this now entails for us, such as the submission to more and more numerous and vexatious regulations that are designed to provide a means of circumventing the successive obstacles that our 'nature' sets up against our 'civilization', and making real our potential for going beyond the limits of natural necessity, including a liberation from the compulsion of infinite consumption and its devastating ecological consequences, to say nothing of the shameful injustices and wars this compulsion subjects us all to. This is what it ultimately means for us to become 'gods' and to lead an existence in which pleasure would be eclipsed by joy.

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¹⁰⁹ Naas (2011, p. 316).

¹¹⁰ Soulez (2012, p. 110).

¹¹¹ On this point see Soulez (2012, pp. 110–111).

¹¹² Naas (2011, p. 318).

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