

# BERGSON AND HIS RELIGIOUS PHILOSOPHY \*

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## FOREWORD

It was mainly in the nineteenth century that the priority of mathematics and mechanics gave to speculation a materialistic impulsion. Spencer's system was the culminating expression of this mechanical interest spread all over the western Europe and the Eastern States, and applied as industrialism. The warfare, however, of physics and psychology went on until the materialistic conception yielded to the biological research and the interest in the movement of life replaced that in the mechanic motions of matter.

Shopenhauer, already, emphasized the concept of life as more fundamental than that of force, but it was Bergson who took up this idea and eloquently as well as sincerely converted to it his contemporary sceptical world. In youth, Bergson was a devotee of Spencer; but the more he studied Spencer, the more keenly conscious he became of an Achillean heel in the materialistic mechanism — its superficial answer to the human needs which are too deep to be measured as matter — and found himself in need of a conception large and deep enough to take under consideration matter, body, and determinism as well as life, mind, and choice.

## I. Bergson's Life.

Henri Louis Bergson was born in Paris, in 1859, of French and Polish-Jewish parentage. Many of his ancestors were artists and scholars and one of his great-grandfathers, distinguished Hasid (pietist, in the Jewish meaning of the word) may have contributed to the mystical construction of his character. He early studied mathematics and physics, but his faculty for analysis soon brought him face to face with the metaphysical problems, so that he turned eagerly to philosophy.

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In 1878, he entered the *École Normale Supérieure*, and on graduating, was appointed to teach philosophy at the *Lycées* of Angers and Clermont. There, in 1888, he wrote his first significant work—the *essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience*. In 1889, he was summoned to Paris to teach philosophy at the *Lycée Henri IV*, where he wrote his second book—*Matière et mémoire*. In 1897, he was called to the *École Normale*, and in 1900 to the *Collège de France*, where he taught until 1921. In 1907, he won international fame with his masterpiece: *L'Évolution créatrice*. In 1914, he became a member of the French Academy and the Institute and a little later he was honored by the Grand Cross. In 1912, he was Gifford lecturer at Edinburgh and later on he visited and taught in the United States. In 1928, Bergson was awarded the 1927 Nobel prize for literature.

In 1932, his last major work appeared — *Les deux sources de la morale et de la religion*. Pursued by ill health he became more and more retiring until the death overcame him, in 1941.

His will contained the following strange request. «My reflections have led me closer and closer to Catholicism, in which I see the complete fulfillment of Judaism. I could have become a convert, had I not seen in preparation for years a formidable wave of anti-Semitism which is to break upon the world. I wanted to remain among those who tomorrow will be persecuted. But I hope that a Catholic priest will consent, if the Cardinal Archbishop of Paris authorizes it, to come to say prayers at my funeral»<sup>1</sup>.

## 2. Bergson's System.

What is central in Bergson's thinking is the notion of duration, or flowing real time. The age-old belief in philosophy that to know reality, time must be an illusion, is revolutionized by Bergson who says that time is the very stuff of which reality is made. It is this accumulation, growth or duration that holds the essence of life and all reality. «Duration is the continuous progress of the past which grows into the future and which swells as it advances». This means that «the past in its entirety is prolonged into the present and abides there actual and acting». Since time is an accumulation, the future can never be the same as the past, for a new accumulation arises at every step. «Each moment is not only something new, but some-

1. See Scharfstein, B. *Roots of Bergson's Philosophy* (1943), p. 99.

thing unforeseeable; change is far more radical than we suppose. For a conscious thing, to exist is to change, to change is to mature, to mature is to go on creating one's self endlessly»<sup>1</sup>.

The geometrical predictability of all things which is the goal of a mechanistic science is only an intellectualistic delusion. In ourselves, memory is the vehicle of duration. Consciousness seems proportionate to the living being's power of choice. Free will is a corollary of consciousness; to say that we are free is merely to mean that we know what we are doing<sup>2</sup>. Chose is creation and creation is labor. Hence the worried features of men and their weary envy of the choiceless routine of animals. In the animal, invention is never anything but a variation of routine<sup>3</sup>. Mind is not identical with brain. It is distinct from it, but it has to undergo its vicissitudes. «In like manner, consciousness in man is unquestionably connected with the brain; but it by no means follows that a brain is indispensable to consciousness. ....In principle, consciousness is co-extensive with life»<sup>4</sup>.

Mind and thought, in man, are treated sometimes in terms which should rather describe matter and brain<sup>5</sup>. This happens on account of the function of the intellect: a constitutional materialist, developed, in the process of evolution, to understand and deal with material and, consequently, spacial objects. The human intellect, although it is intended to secure the perfect fitting of the body to its environment, «to represent the relations of external things among themselves, in short, to think matter», and to see all becoming as being<sup>6</sup>, it misses the connective tissue of things, the flow of duration that constitutes their very life. It is so far from the reality as our eyes are from a series of instantaneous photographs which give them the illusion of a moving-picture. What intellect sees is matter and not energy. And, again, it thinks that it knows what matter is, but when it sees energy, at the heart of the atom, it is bewildered. That is why mathematics should be based on the concepts of time and motion as well as on the traditional geometry of space.

1. Bergson, H. *L' évolution créatrice* (1907, Engl. transl. 1911), pp. 7-15.

2. Bergson, H. *Matière et mémoire* (1896), p. 303.

3. *L' évol. créat.* p. 264 ff.

4. Bergson, H. *L' énergie spirituelle* (transl. as *Mind and Energy*, 1920), p. II.

5. *L' évol. créat.*, p. IX.

6. Cp. Nietzsche: «Being is a fiction invented by those who suffer from becoming». *Birth of Tragedy*, p. XXVII.

It is our own fault if, by insisting on the application of physical concepts in the field of thought, we end in the impasse of determinism, mechanism, and materialism. Life escapes these solid concepts; for life is a matter of time rather than of space; it is not position, it is change; it is not quantity so much as quality; it is not a mere redistribution of matter and motion. «In reality, life is no more made up of physico-chemical elements than a curve is composed of straight lines»<sup>1</sup>. How, then, shall we catch the flow and essence of life if not by thinking and intellect? The intellect is not all. Man is supplied with another ability which is proper for this task. This is what we call intuition, a direct, simple and steady-looking-upon-a-thing perception. In such a case, the function of intellect should only be a dealing with the material and spatial world as well as with the material aspects or spatial expressions of life and mind, whereas that of intuition should be the direct feeling of life and mind, not in their external embodiments but in their inner being. After what is said above, evolution appears to be something quite different from the blind and dreary mechanism of struggle and destruction which Darwin and Spencer described.

Life is that which makes efforts, which pushes upward and outward and on, the always and always «procreant urge of the world»<sup>2</sup>. It is the *Élan Vital* or Bergson's God. How this personal power is moving as well as creating we shall see in the next paragraph.

### 3. Bergson's God.

The persistently creative life, of which every individual and every species is an experiment, is what we mean by God. God and life, or rather God and *Élan Vital* which is life in its essential nature, a universal vital force, are one. The nonmechanical as well as nonteleological<sup>(3)</sup> process or evolution of this power may be conceived as follows. Being a single unceasing movement<sup>4</sup> at its starting, the *Élan Vital* divides into various tendencies which exhibit different directions and rates of change. In the first phase of the process, the one of the ten-

1. *L' évol. créat.*, p. 31.

2. *L' évol. créat.* p. 89.

3. See Androutsos, C. Tolstoi, Nietzsche, Bergson (1930, in Greek), pp. 72 ff.

4. Cp. the similar idea in Wundt's *System der Philosophie*, p. 315: «Spiritual energy tends to increase».

dencies has preserved the essence of the impetus itself, while the other has abandoned the urge of novelty in the interest of achieving stability and order in the products which had been accumulated at the time the cleavage took place. In the last case, we have a relaxation of the creative effort, the product of which is matter. So far as life allows itself this relaxation, it falls backward and outward from that part of itself which preserves the full force of the original impetus, just as the spent and dying embers of a rocket fall out and away from the flaming center which shoots onward. Thus arises matter inert and expended in space, in a stable geometrical order. But the creative momentum is still preserved in the Élan Vital, which in a second phase of process divides into the two kingdoms (vegetable and animal) of the organic world. This cleavage is analogous to the deviation from which the distinction between life and matter arose.

Here, again, we have two tendencies: the one preserving the essence of the original impetus is expressed in the form of free locomotion and a higher capacity for continued growth; the other one, forsaking to a large extent the vigor of creative novelty, is expressed in the somnolent security of being rooted in physical matter.

Further, in a third phase of process, the Élan Vital is checked again and a new cleavage arises in the animal world. This time, the one tendency surrenders part of the creative momentum of life in favor of ordered security, while preserving the characteristics of the animal world. The insects, mainly, represent this tendency of fixed instinct. The other one is expressed in the evolutionary development of the vertebrates. This development is culminating in man, who with his free conscious intelligence, marks the apex of the creative advance so far accomplished in the universe. Man's intelligence has not only the capacity to use physical matter and the lower forms of life to serve man's practical ends, but it contains a fringe of intuitive instinct through which further creative progress beyond the limitations of the intellect is possible. Man is free and though he is faced with suffering, enjoys an empirical optimism. The mind, which has been found to survive the brain's death, is probably immortal (cp. Bergson's approval of spiritualistic research).

The following passage glows with optimism as to the future possibilities of humanity. «Life as a whole, from the initial impulsion that thrusts it into the world, appears as a wave which rises, and which is opposed by the descending movement of matter. On the greater part of its surface, at different heights, the current is converted by matter

into a vortex. At one point alone it passes freely, dragging with it the obstacle which will weigh on its progress, but will not stop it. At that point is humanity: it is our privileged situation»<sup>1</sup>.

Bergson's God identified with the only reality, the *Élan Vital*, is like Spinoza's pantheistic. He is creative energy, «unceasing life, action, freedom»<sup>2</sup>; moreover, He is creative Love, present and «acting through the soul in the soul»<sup>3</sup>. Creation appears as God's undertaking to create creators, that He may have beside Himself beings worthy of His love.

To the question whether a progressive God preserves His existence in the receding past, the following answer is given by one of Bergson's devotees. «We might answer mathematically that such a recessive process would make Him nothing only at infinity, that is never. But we say that our problem is not one of origins but only of existence. Whether He was always progressive in the manner and at the rate of the present, or will always continue thus to progress, we do not know»<sup>4</sup>.

Bergson's insistence on freedom and on God's creation of human beings as creators is what distinguishes his view from pantheism. His concepts of the reality of time, the waste in the onward movement of the *Élan Vital*, the importance of freedom, novelty and struggle, and God as good but not omnipotent give him the character of a monistic realist in religion, or religious naturalist<sup>5</sup>.

#### 4. Bergson's Religion.

In the life of mankind, there also appear the two tendencies referred to above. There are two moralities, closed and open; two religions, static and dynamic.

The one, i. e., is favoring a stable condition and the other preserving the original momentum of the *Élan Vital*. Take them in the society. The former is exhibited in the social groups, such as family, state etc. These groups or communities do not lack the capacity of

1. *L' évol. créat.*, p. 269.

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 265—266.

3. Bergson, H. *Les deux sources de la morale et de la religion* (1932, Engl. transl. 1935), pp. 209, 219 f., 240, 243.

4. See Foster, F. H. «Some Theistic Implications of Bergson's Philosophy» (in *Amer. Jour. Theol.*, 22 [1918], pp. 274—299), p. 290.

5. So Macintosh, D. C. *The Problem of Religious knowledge* (1940, pp. 181 ff.), p. 180.

growth which is characteristic of man, but what they mainly do is to preserve the culture of the past. Their members are compelled to conform to the established rules necessary for group survival. The latter is exhibited in the few privileged men, geniuses in science, art, morals and religion who by intuition create something new, proper to contribute to the promotion of the society<sup>1</sup>.

The most significant contribution is the one coming from the religious geniuses. It is because of their nearness to the original impetus through an advanced intuition that these personalities know God, and, consequently, truth. That is why to be a philosopher is to have followed the way of the mystical intuition. A great religious leader, like Christ, may be said to constitute a species, created by the vital impulse in a supreme break through matter. In religion, the institutional form, or church, is used to preserve the fundamental principles, which are indispensable for a further advance. The conservative element is always used by the free *Élan Vital* for a new creation. In religion, the mythical pictures of the gods, although they are irrational, are used to check the human abuse and selfishness and prepare man's intuitive unity with God. In this unity, man enjoys the creations of a loving God and finds the solution of all his problems. Moreover, he helps to write his own part in the drama of creation. United in love with the Love, he also learns to appreciate the contribution of any of his fellow-men to the divine work which is a continued progress. Only when the contemplation of the mystic becomes action, will the human become divine. The Hebrew prophets are examples of such a co-operation with God. «But the Christians are the greatest mystics. Christ is the continuator of the prophets and Christianity is a profound transformation of Judaism»<sup>2</sup>.

#### CONCLUSION

Bergson's reaction against the extremes of rationalism and ultra-intellectualism and determinism of the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century must be deeply appreciated. This, however, does not mean that Bergson's epistemology is the one we should exclusively follow. We appraise

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1. *Les deux sources etc.*, pp. 18-27, 33-39. One may easily find out that Bergson's conception of intuition represents a fusion of scientific objectivity and artistic directness.

2. See *Les deux sources etc.*, pp. 249-251. Cp. *The Univ. Jewish Encycl.* (1940, vol. 2, p. 201 ff.), p. 201.

his contribution to philosophy and we recognize it as the most precious among the others in our times, but we should not forget his dogmatic introspective intuition which is as fallible as external sense. Perhaps Bergson would have been wiser to base his criticism of the intellect on the ground of a broader intelligence rather than on the intuition as an exclusive mystical instrument of knowledge, so that irrationalism and anticonceptualism were not almost constituting the other extreme where Bergson stands<sup>1</sup>. But this, again, has its positive side in the philosophy of history: two opposite movements in thought and life are later found as the sources of a «media and basilica via».

His influence, otherwise, on many a contemporary thinker is indisputable and it will be such for many years to come. As to the question of Bergson's originality, one might say that he is largely drawing from earlier sources to the point of being considered by the critics as not very original. Crumbs of originality, however, along with a systematic assimilation of the approved part of tradition are what an ambitious man needs to make up his own system. To agree with Emerson that «Plato is philosophy and philosophy is Plato» and repulse Bergson by saying «Heraclitus came before you» is to deny any further development in the human thought<sup>2</sup>.

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1. In theory, however, Bergson accepts a wider perception of intuition, similar to Spinoza's *intuitio*: a completion rather than a rejection of reason. See Runes' Dictionary of Philosophy, p. 37 f.

2. See Scharfstein, *op. cit.*, pp. 137 f. Cp. Androutsos C., *op. cit.* p. 95.