

MORAL DUTY AND MORAL FREEDOM IN BERGSON'S *THE TWO SOURCES OF RELIGION AND MORALITY*. THE ROLE OF THE 'GREAT MYSTICS'

VASILEIOS STRATIS

University of Athens, Laboratory of Applied Ethics

vasstrat@hotmail.gr

Abstract

The French philosopher Henri Bergson (1859 – 1941), in his work *Les Deux Sources de la Morale et de la Religion* (1941) draws a distinction between two forms of morality. The basic criterion for this distinction is the psychological basis of morality, that is the motivation behind moral behavior. The question of duty and freedom comes in powerfully in this distinction. The first form of morality is 'closed'. Its source is the necessity of societies to maintain their cohesion. Social duty is imposed by society on individuals through specific rules that are narrowly defined by moral ideas, which are regarded by Bergson as products of the Intellect. In a closed society, such as an ancient Greek city-state, individuals obey social rules and fulfill their moral duty, because they feel obliged to do so by arbitrary representations. This habit of obeying social rules results in a superficial and blind duty towards individual societies, and cannot reach duty towards humanity. People tend to see possibility for the latter in an enlargement of the group and a removal of the distance between the self and humanity. This habit of the human intellect was also adopted by ancient Greek philosophy which deified the social (platonic Idea or Aristotelian Thought of thought) and remained on the level of theoretical intellectualism that could not move the masses. In contrast with the above form of morality, which is based on an 'infra-intellectual' emotion, the 'open' morality, or the morality of 'aspiration', based on a 'supra-intellectual' emotion, is based on the 'complete mystics' action that introduces humanity to a new sort of freedom, a moral action that goes beyond the attachment to a specific society. They have launched an objectless love of humanity into the world. Their new morality also entails a new metaphysics that would even redefine the nature of life and the double meaning of love as a creating force. It has even introduced a revolutionary notion of 'God' as source of incessant freedom and creativity.

Keywords: Bergson, closed and open morality, duty, freedom, love, life, complete mystics, complete mysticism

Introduction

In his later work, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* (Bergson, 1932), the French philosopher Henri Bergson (1859 – 1941) sees 'complete mysticism' as an action that liberates humanity from the fallacies of a 'closed' morality regarding moral obligation. In the present paper, I will deal with how according to Bergson, 'complete mysticism' introduces this new

morality of freedom. I will also discuss how this choice brings about a new metaphysics that liberates philosophy from its misconceptions about the subject.

Freedom in the Bergson's philosophy and its relation with 'life' and 'vital' impetus

In order to proceed to my research, I will first explain how Bergson defines 'freedom' and how this definition elucidates further the key-terms in his philosophy ('life', 'vital impetus', 'action') through the new 'open' morality introduced by the 'great mystics'. In his dissertation, *The Immediate Data of Conscience*, he claims that '[...] we are free when our actions emanate from our entire personality, when they express it, when they have this indefinable resemblance with it, such as the one someone finds between the work and the artist' (Bergson, 1889:129) [1]. Freedom is also linked with the bergsonian concept of 'life', which in turn is related to 'action'. In his work, *L'Évolution Créatrice*, he writes: 'Life is, above all, a tendency to act upon raw matter' (Bergson, 1907: 97). In another instance of his 1907 work, he identifies life as 'conscience launched through matter' (ibid: 183), 'conscience' being seen as the ability to act freely (Worms, 2013: 25). As for the 'impetus of life', he defines it as an 'exigency of creation' – a force which 'seizes matter, which is necessity itself, and has the tendency to introduce into it the largest possible amount of indetermination and freedom' (Bergson, 1889: 252). In his *L'Énergie spirituelle*, he sees life as what makes 'the movement appear unpredictable and free' and identifies it with 'precisely freedom inserting itself into necessity and turning it into its profit' (Bergson, 1919: 13). We can clearly see how 'freedom' and 'life' relate to other bergsonian terms, such as 'creation', 'conscience', 'movement' and above all 'action'.

The 'closed' morality of social duty

Bergson addresses the question of duty when he refers to the 'closed' morality in the first chapter of his 1932 work. He is concerned with the psychological origin of the feeling of duty towards society. Actually, he claims that individuals feel the moral obligation to perform their duty towards society automatically, in the same way that they feel tied to nature as its individual parts. (Bergson, 1932: 2 – 4, 13). In the same way, they feel attached to a group for the sake of their own well-being within the frame of a protective society, and therefore also for the sake of the cohesion of the society they belong to (ibid: 2, 27). Therefore, societies – both

primitive and complex ones (including contemporary societies) – come up with laws that resemble natural laws, which free individuals must obey. Duty comes from an instinct of obedience to certain rules that safeguard the cohesion and the order in the group. This obedience is, therefore, due to social pressure, and it originates from a feeling of subordination to an indefinite authority (ibid: 2, 25). It is tied to the habit of complying with a rule, or, more precisely, to the psychological habit of submission to a commandment that results from the ‘pressure’ of societies on our free will (ibid: 2). This sort of obedience is based on prohibition (ibid: 1). As individuals see duty as part of the feeling of submission to a broader group, the collective is seen as a re-enforcement of the singular, so the duty to comply with a rule is the duty to obey a generalisation, the character of which is imperative (ibid: 4 – 5). The laws individuals must obey are felt as a system of impersonal orders (ibid: 2). Societies imitate the organism of nature, in being artificial organisms with a system of habits that correspond to the needs of the community (ibid: 2, 4). As in nature, ‘we must obey, because we must’ (ibid: 19). Performing our duty towards society is an imperative necessity, since it ensures social cohesion. Such a stance, in the heart of which lies the ‘social instinct’, is characteristic of what Bergson calls a ‘closed’ society. (ibid: 27). However, this sort of empathy cannot encompass all of humanity.

A rationalist approach would try to extend this feeling through a process of ‘enlargement’, in an individual’s conscience, of its object, i.e. by the ‘dilatation’ of the smaller social group one belongs to into the largest (from a feeling of duty towards the family, into a feeling of duty that regards the homeland, but also even humanity). This, according to the philosopher, is based on an illusion of the human intellect, and that is why ‘closed’ societies cannot escape going to war against one another (ibid: 27 – 28), as they primarily aim to protect themselves by only accepting a certain group of individuals (‘our nation’) and excluding another group (‘our enemies’) (ibid: 25). From this perspective, a sense of duty towards humanity seems impossible (ibid: 25). This is explained firstly by the fact that social rules inducing the feeling of duty (‘impersonal obligation’) in ‘closed societies’ are supported in the conscience of individuals by the corresponding intellectual representations of moral ‘ideas’, which are ultimately ‘impersonal’, or ‘formulas’ – that is, words which have been emptied of psychological matter and ignore the distance between our own group and humanity (ibid: 29 – 32). Individuals commit to them without questioning them, this being part of their disciplined

adherence towards a social group which they automatically have to defend (ibid: 31). The problem is that they cannot ‘shake’ (‘ébranler’) our will altogether (ibid: 31). They reflect a ‘closed’ attitude of the soul trapped in the circle of intelligence our species moves in. This attitude is prevalent in ‘closed’ societies (‘bent onto themselves’) (ibid: 34).

In the course of its history, philosophy adopted the same approach of ‘closed’ societies in explaining the question of duty. Philosophers, from ancient Greeks until Kant and his adherents, have discussed the issue of moral duty on the basis of an initial automatized acceptance of moral ideas, with no effort to account for the psychological content behind them. They depended on the words that defined them and followed the process of enlargement of the group caused by the common intellect. For instance, the Stoics used to regard the duty towards the cosmopolis as part of a theoretical debate about bridging distances, which lacked the appropriate level of enthusiasm necessary to awaken the masses (ibid: 59). The methodological error of the Greeks is best portrayed in Zeno’s image of an arrow’s movement as a line of innumerable stops – a representation that ignores the indivisible essence of movement and puts forward the necessity to go from one point to another by overcoming these ‘stops’ as though they were ‘obstacles’. In the same way, an individual has to think of logical ways to gradually overcome all obstacles, one by one, in order to reach global consciousness (ibid: 32, 51, 248). Because absolute reality was regarded as immobile (see immutability of ideas in Plato and immobile ‘Moteur’ in Aristotle, ibid: 256), pure mobility was seen like its degradation and on the contrary, deified the ‘social’ by considering immobile ‘ideas’ as the essence of reality (ibid: 234, see ref. 1 about Plotinus; 257, Aristotle). The same error was inherited by European philosophy. More specifically, Kant’s theory of the ‘categorical imperative’ is founded initially on a pre-determined formula taken for granted (ibid: 19 – 20, 34, 87).

The morality-ontology of freedom of the ‘great mystics’

A new morality of emotion

However, in the ‘complete’ or ‘open’ morality (or ‘morality of aspiration’) introduced by the ‘complete mystics’, pure obligation is superposed above ‘social pressure’, as it is absorbed into something else that transforms it. It is actually incarnated by ‘exceptional men’ (ibid: 29); by ‘privileged personalities’ who set an example to inspire humanity. Thus, it is ‘personal’ morality that is superior to ‘closed morality’, as it does not result from the attachment

or submission to an ‘impersonal formula’ (a representation of our intellect which depends on an isolated social group-object) (ibid: 30, 36 – 37). While duty based on impersonal obligation obliges individuals to the ‘city’ but not to humanity, ‘complete personal morality’ is human and not merely social (ibid: 31). Its psychological root is a kind of love that is different in nature from the abstract ideas of ‘closed’ societies. This time, the human will is fully involved, since individuals are not morally obliged by the pressure of society. Individuals’ wills are converted by the ‘attraction’ of a powerful ‘emotion’ with no specific object. It is a self-sufficient ‘attitude of the soul’ that mobilizes the whole soul (ibid: 30; *Notes on DS* 80/I: 388). Thus, it could be said to result from a free decision of the whole person. It does not stem from passive reception of a rule imposed by the intellect (*Notes on DS*, 80/I: 388) or from blind habitual or instinctive obedience to a moral rule, but is rather based on propulsion and influences the will directly. It has to do with one’s sensitivity (Bergson, 1932: 35). It is free because it is a ‘tranquil’ emotion that allows someone the leisure to freely reflect upon the emotional experience, so it is unlikely that such an emotion will encounter resistance, as is the case with socially-naturally imposed duty (ibid: 36). Like in the case of the ‘musical emotion’, a charismatic initiator in the new morality ‘suggests’ an attitude – he does not ‘cause’ or impose it – and makes one be wholly what he expresses.

In the same way as with music, a ‘privileged personality’ (an ‘initiator in morality’ or ‘complete or great mystic’) does not forcefully introduce moral feelings into us, but rather introduces us as whole persons to his ‘new symphony’, in the same way that one would push passers-by into a dance, so that they ‘translate’ his ‘music’ into movement with their full consent (ibid: 36 – 37). In this original emotion coming from a special place lies the origin of any ‘great creation’ or ‘invention’ (ibid: 40). The effect of such an emotion is indivisible and can be described as an ‘affective shaking of the soul’ or a ‘raising of the depths’, in contrast with obligatory morality which merely causes ‘an agitation of the surface’, an effect which could be regarded as temporary and dispersed (ibid: 40). In fact, Bergson distinguishes two sorts of emotions that correspond to the two kinds of morality. The impact of the mere intellectual representation or moral formula that is prevalent in a ‘closed society’ is an ‘infra-intellectual emotion’ which results in a ‘vague effect’ on the human psyche, whereas the emotion suggested by the superior sort of morality is one that can creatively generate free action and genuine ideas (ibid: 41), and push intelligence forward despite all obstacles, since it is a

unique personal creation (ibid: 42 – 43). Mystics and religious founders involve the world into a fervent contagion of emotion and recruit a new ‘army’ of free-will persons (ibid: 47) who see the distance between themselves and humanity as non-existent (ibid: 51). This liberation of the soul from the obstacles that prevent it from identifying with humanity could be the definition of ‘complete mysticism’ (ibid: 240 – 246). The ‘complete mystics’ were united with the Principle of life, also referred to as ‘God’s effort’ (if we consider ‘God’ in the bergsonian sense, which is a source of incessant creativity)(ibid: 233).

The ontological freedom of the ‘complete mystics’

In order to attain this, their souls have gone through a phase of re-construction in the most painful phase of the ‘dark night of the soul’, when they got rid of the useless parts of themselves and re-discovered their genuine self – that is, ‘pure emotion’ (ibid: 245). They actually got rid of their superficial social moral self which is prone to merely obeying impersonal formulas or observing religious representations and images – that is, ‘doctrines’, out of which no free, creative action can come. They overcome the distant sight of the absolute and, through a process of distancing themselves from fragmentary and immobile images of social duty, allow the ‘impetus of life’ to fill their whole personality (ibid: 243)[2]. They thus attain total freedom of action, since their entire self is tuned into a new attitude of action and moral creation, which according to Bergson is the Absolute or ‘God’ (‘divine activity’)(ibid: 246, 272). Their being is now ready to be filled with all matter (all of Creation). So, their ontological freedom consists in the ‘creation of matter by form’ (ibid: 270). The form of the self acquires its full flexibility and freedom, since it merges into the essence of the bergsonian God, who is best expressed by the double ‘formula’: ‘God is love and he is the object of love’ (ibid: 247). Discovering that life’s origin lies in the complementarity of two forces (life and matter, freedom and restriction) (ibid) enables them to love everything and everyone, regardless of the object this love could contain (ibid: 247, 270).

Bergson’s ‘great’ or ‘complete mystics’ happen to be Christian (‘the Christ of the Gospels’, Paul, Francis of Assisi, Therese of Avila and John of the Cross, even Jeanne d’Arc)(ibid: 241), but their actions are studied independently of their specific religion. They are ‘complete’ because they have been united with ‘God’, the latter being defined by the philosopher not in a ‘grossly anthropomorphic’ way, but as ‘incessant life, action, freedom’

(Bergson, 1907: 249). This radically free energy is what creates life, but was obliged by the resistance of matter to be stationed and to circle around itself, thereby creating the human species, with its organized societies and the ability to create appropriate tools (moral ideas are also seen as such) for sustaining said societies (ibid: 272 – 273; *Notes on DS III* 160: 479). By freeing the ‘form’ (moral action, humanity) from its attachment to matter (the dependence of a moral subject on a specific object), each one of the mystics goes beyond the nature of the species and thus becomes super-human in a sense, because of the originality of his acting by ‘unpredictable leaps’. In this way, he has freed the human form from the conditioning of its matter and has thus explained the mystery of creation as a process of accumulation of ‘potential energy’ and a ‘sudden spending’ of it on ‘free actions’ (ibid: 271). This can be regarded as a major ontological breakthrough, since by means of the mystics’ efforts, the ‘vital impetus’ breaks free and indivisible into forward motion, as creation or unconditional love for everything. That way, the mystics manage to break the circle in which the human species is turning, by breaking the resistance of their own ‘social’ matter (Bergson, 1932: 273-274; *Notes on DS III* 162: 479). They achieve this when they realize that the creative force of life is a self-sufficient emotion that needs vessels to accomplish what it could have accomplished if it had not been prevented by the resistance of matter (‘God’s helpers’, according to Paul of Tarsus) (ibid: 246). The nature of their emotion is best shown in the subversive poetry of Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount, so Bergson considers Jesus as the initiator *par excellence* of ‘open morality’ and ‘dynamic religion’ (ibid: 254).

The liberation of philosophy through mysticism

This ‘contagion’ of mysticism rushed into the world also marks philosophy’s own regarding the ‘mixtures’ of reality and prolonged philosophical ‘probability’ into ‘mystical certitude’ that goes beyond the mere contemplation of Rationalism (Deleuze, 1966: 118 – 119) [3]. The mystics, subsequently, also ‘free’ negative theology from the intellectualist illusions that it inherited from Greek philosophy (Bergson, 1932: 267; *Notes on DS/III*: 148, 477). The abovementioned Christian ‘mystics’ are also considered to be ‘complete’ because they have achieved what the ‘incomplete mystics’ of the pagan Greco-Roman world (or the passive mysticism of Oriental philosophies) have not. The Greeks, such as Socrates, Plato (and even before him, the Pythagoreans or the Orphics) or later Neoplatonism (more specifically

Plotinus), have seen an increasing surge of mystical currents that culminated in the philosophy of Plotinus, but they did not manage to overcome a fundamental tendency of Greek thought: the ‘deification of the social’ through the absolutisation of the immobile Intellect (ibid: 256 – 257). The Idea, which is a mere representation or crystallized energy of life, became the supreme vision of reality, the Absolute, whereas action was deemed as a form of weakening of the experience of the vision of the eternal and unchanging world of Ideas (the same also applies to Aristotle’s *Thought of thought*) (ibid: 257). That is why Greek moral philosophy never manages to break away from the confines of the *Polis* (not even the idea of the *cosmopolis* of the Stoics), or to move the masses – it is because of its complicated and theoretical character, so much unlike the simplicity and the enthusiasm of the ‘hyper-mystic’ ‘Christ of the Gospels’ (ibid: 62; also see Prelorenzios, 2018: 21) [4].

The crucial moment of mystics’ transformation is the phase of pain and darkness, called the ‘dark night of the soul’, when the ‘complete mystic’s’ soul is restructured and many of its parts are replaced by new ones, while other pieces are rejected (ibid: 245). Worms claims (Worms, 2004: 312) that this is the moment when ‘the mystic unites himself as will by denying himself as will, by making himself an instrument for another will’. Worms asserts that the ‘superior will’ the mystic is called to be an instrument of, is ultimately ‘the human will brought to its supreme degree of intensity’ (ibid). In other words, ‘the human will cannot deny itself as an instrument for the divine will, only if it discovers in return that the divine will needs this instrument which is the human will’ (ibid). We can therefore say that the only purpose for the instrumentalization of the human will is the mystic’s discovery of pure freedom (i.e. creation, love) as the quintessence of life.

Conclusion

In conclusion, what is important for a philosopher that adopts the method of intuition, like Bergson, is a process of distinction. He must be able to distinguish the two sources of morality and religion that are associated with two sorts of society. The philosopher’s first task is to ‘remove the ashes’ from the formulas behind social duty, in order to see the force of nature demanding automatized obedience behind it (Bergson, 1932: 51). But more importantly, he needs to discover the ‘complete’ morality of freedom and creativity of the ‘great mystics’ and the new metaphysics entailed by the realization that the mystics have experienced an emotion

intensified to such an extent that it has filled ('occupied') their whole self, such that every act would emanate from their entire personality. This intensification is seen as freedom from the superficial effect (agitation of the surface) to which the intellect is subjected by visual representations or feelings, which are replaced by a powerful will (Bergson, 1932: 244) that takes the mystic as deep as 'the roots of our being and from there, to the principle of life in general' (ibid: 265); the depths of the soul whereof starts an 'exigency of creation' (ibid: 269). This emanation of free action from the totality of the 'great mystics's' self is precisely how Bergson describes free acts – as ones that belong to a person most essentially (Jankélévitch, 1959: 78), thus drawing a link between the free nature and the originality of each mystic's words and actions (also see Bergson's definition of freedom in the introduction of the present paper).

This freedom of action results in the ontological liberation of the human species from the restrictions of its socio-intellectual matter, but also a liberation of Ethics and Metaphysics from the illusions and the false problems of Rationalism. The mystics helped philosophy redefine Life as complete freedom in the creation of form independently of matter. In a sense, freedom in the form of creative love for humanity could be regarded as the bergsonian definition of absolute reality, i.e. God. It would not be exaggerated to state that God, as a philosophical term defining the essence of life, is freedom of moral emotion and action according to Bergson. As Worms explains, in the core Metaphysics of Bergson's 1932 work God is the pure emotion in the origin of all creation, is '[...] at the edge of the intensive scale of the real, life, action, freedom, emotion, duration' (Worms, 2013: 30 – 31). In conclusion, one could say that the notion of the mystic God as free moral action finally explains all fundamental bergsonian concepts, especially the essence of Bergson's most important philosophical term, which is 'life'.

NOTES

[1] The above bibliography was translated from the original French (and Greek) by Vasileios Stratis.

[2] Prelorenzios sees a bergsonian return to the spinozist terminology since Bergson talks about the return of the 'great mystic' to the spinozist 'natura naturans' after having achieved a rupture from his 'naturans naturata'. (Prelorenzios, 2007: 70, from Bergson, 1932: 47).

[3] ‘Duration, Life, is rightfully memory, rightfully conscience, rightfully freedom’ (Deleuze, 1966: 111).

[4] Prelorentzos claims that his philosophy has surpassed it, this meaning, however, that a presupposition for such an achievement is a prior meticulous study of ancient Greek philosophers.

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