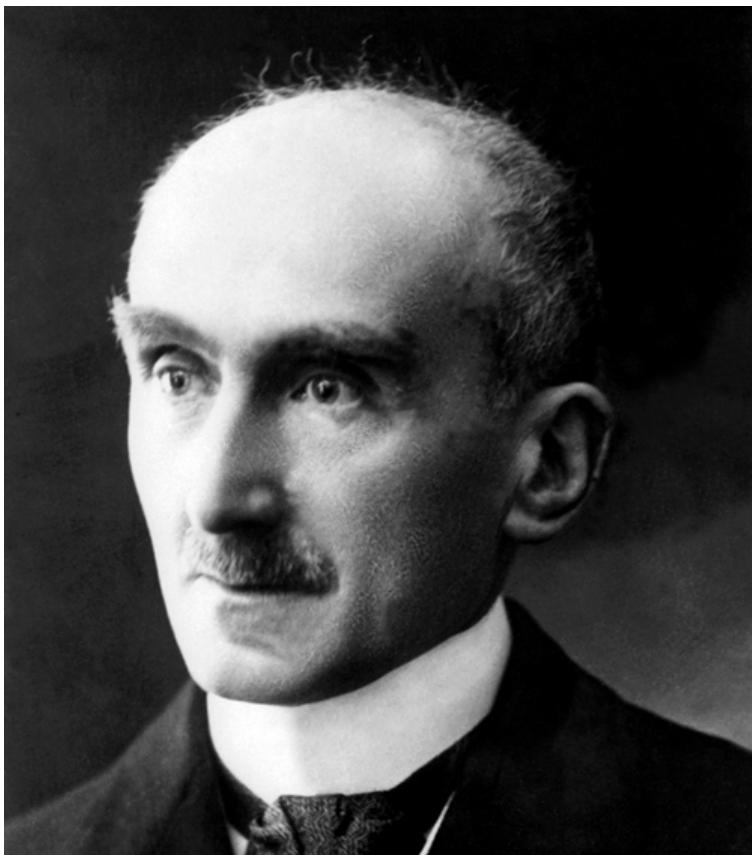


IMPRESSIONIST PHILOSOPHY

Review of Henri Bergson, The Two Sources of Morality and Religion, trans. R Ashley Andra and Cloudesley Brereton, with the assistance of W. Horsfall Carter (London, 1935: Macmillan), London Mercury 32 (1935), 489–90



M. Bergson has much to answer for. The immense vogue of his books, particularly in literary and artistic circles, has undoubtedly contributed to the massed attack on the intellect for which this century will for long be notorious. He, more than any living man,

IMPRESSIONIST PHILOSOPHY

is responsible for the abandonment of rigorous critical standards and the substitution in their place of casual emotional responses.

This has been pointed out again and again by stern critics such as M. Julien Benda, Mr Wyndham Lewis, Mr Leonard Woolf; Bergson is bitterly blamed as a renegade intellectual who betrayed the cause of the intellect, as a Frenchman, born in the citadel which was built and defended by Descartes, Voltaire, Comte, who opened the gates to the barbarian invader, as a professional philosopher who consciously assisted at the birth of a world in which (as Trotsky remarked in another connection) the most successful mode of address is not to the head nor to the heart but to the nerves.¹

We shall not, because we cannot, defend M. Bergson against this damning and well-substantiated charge. But though his crimes are heavy, this book is not one of them. Indeed, it is his only work besides the early *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience* [1889] which is almost entirely reputable. For in it he attempts a task for which his great talent is peculiarly fitted, to give an accurate description of the states of mind called moral and religious, together with genetic hypotheses to account for their emergence. It is an essay partly in introspective psychology, partly in general sociology; his style delicate, smooth and flexible, as unsubstantial and elusive as a cloud, and as opaque; the theories are very ingenious, the aperçus are sometimes brilliant; it is a genuine and rich contribution to the important and relatively neglected subject of the psychology of ethics, and only a very long and detailed review could do it full justice.

M. Bergson is a naturalist in ethics. He believes, that is, that all propositions involving so-called ethical terms can with sufficient care be translated without residue into propositions containing none but non-ethical terms: that is, into statements of fact, mostly of psychological fact. To account for the emergence of such specifically ethical notions as seem to be denoted by words like 'right', 'wrong', 'ought', 'just' and so on, he constructs an analogy between men and ants, suggesting that men, like ants, begin by

¹ [In his speech of 9 February 1937 to the Dewey Commission on the Moscow Trials Trotsky said: 'I will appeal not to the passions, not to your nerves, but to reason.' This appears to contradict what Berlin attributes to Trotsky here. Does Berlin have another passage in mind, or is he perhaps misremembering this one?]

IMPRESSIONIST PHILOSOPHY

performing their functions quasi-automatically, in something like a somnambulistic state; this operates smoothly and efficiently, like a clockwork mechanism, until one day an ant becomes self-conscious, begins to reflect on its situation, and seeing no reason for pursuing its routine, pauses, and decides to seek leisure and enjoyment. This is contagious, and presently the anthill falls into ruin.

The will to survive reasserts itself, however, in the form of a number of rigid rules, obedience to which ensures that minimum of cooperation which is required by the community in order to continue. But since the last stage of the process is not a conscious or at any rate fully conscious one, the reason for these rules is not known to the subject: they are in fact the instinctive defences evolved by the organism to protect itself against the chaos caused by reason, which tends, disconcertingly, to pause in the midst of the struggle for existence, in order to reflect, to criticise, to doubt. This is the cause of the apparently binding, unanalysable, ‘objective’ character of the ‘living conscience’; the mysterious categorical imperative which everyone feels but no one issues is traced to its origin in the instinct for survival which demands the repression of unbridled musing. This results in the appearance before consciousness of a number of absolute but disconnected ‘atomic’ rules, which are occasionally codified, as, for example, in the Ten Commandments, which philosophers persist in attributing to the activity of reason, whereas they arise in fact out of the practical need to check the excess of this very faculty.

Such a collection of rules Bergson calls ‘the closed morality’, because he holds that it is in the very nature of a rule to circumscribe the field of its authority, which creates a negative attitude to everything beyond its frontiers. However wide the scope of the rule, something remains over; in delimiting, it excludes. This is contrasted with ‘the open morality’, which does not reside in precise maxims and does not erect frontiers for loyalty; there is a difference of kind, not of degree, between those who love a very large number of their neighbours, and those who love human beings as such: the second is a rare attainment among men, and appears as a remote and hardly intelligible ideal because it is usually described in language invented to describe ‘closed’ morality. This is unfortunate, since its source and its essence are radically different: it takes the form of admiration for and imitation

IMPRESSIONIST PHILOSOPHY

of individuals, real or imaginary, who are seen as ideal or heroic figures. To this morality belong such concepts as generosity, self-sacrifice, nobility of temper: it is impossible to translate one morality into the terms of the other without grotesque distortion, hence the pseudo-problems of moralists who are puzzled by the insoluble difficulty that while generosity is plainly a virtue, and we ought to be virtuous, to say 'It is our duty to be generous' is self-stultifying, since an act of generosity performed as a duty is not generous.

M. Bergson replies that words like 'duty', 'virtue' and so forth belong to the first, 'deontological' morality, which consists in disciplined obedience to rules, while the infinitely more attractive, spontaneous behaviour of saints and heroes belongs to the second, rare, 'open' morality. The conflict between the two is real and irreconcilable. While men congregate in societies and depend on unthinking obedience to rules for their survival, the extreme adherents of the 'open' morality will tend to be persecuted, intelligibly from the point of view of the community, as irresponsible disrupters of the state, as social incendiaries. Nevertheless the ideal ends of humanity belong to this socially dangerous universe: moral rules are at best the antidotes which make normal communal existence possible.

In stressing this dualism, M. Bergson's debt both to Aristotle and to Nietzsche is evident: and he has returned to his favourite distinction between the static and law-abiding on the one hand and the spontaneous and fluid on the other. One can hardly expect a distinguished philosophical impressionist to abandon a lifelong mental habit overnight: but it is kept discreetly in the background and does little to distort what is otherwise a fascinating essay in the phenomenology and natural history of moral and religious experiences.

The translation is adequate.

© The Isaiah Berlin Literary Trust 2017

Posted 16 September 2017