CHAPTER VII

BERGSON'S MORALITY OF GOD

I

DEMOCRACY is the spirit of the age; France is the home of democracy; and Bergson is the greatest philosopher of France. No wonder that his philosophy appeals to the democrats, the laymen, and the amateurs, while the trained and the expert look askance at it. In the street and in the market-place it wins applause, while in the study and the classroom it is severely criticised. Bergson's dictum and style, his poetry and imagination, make his solution of the riddle of the universe quite an enchanting one to the popular gaze. The different tendencies which fascinate the modern mind—mysticism and romanticism, psychologism and pragmatism, vitalism and evolutionism—find their echo in his writings. The long-standing conflict between science and religion is supposed suddenly to have been settled by his contributions to philosophy. His constant appeal to common sense in the interests of ethical idealism and religion create the impression that science has become the ally of religion for the first time since the dawn of reflection. But the few, the specialists who judge systems not by their aims and intentions, but by their actual results, are wondering if the fairy tale of speculation so charmingly described by Bergson does justice to the claims of religion and the demands of intellect. They admit that Bergson has rendered a great
service to the cause of philosophy in having emancipated it from the trammels of an abstract and vicious intellectualism, but they are not certain that his philosophic theories are self-consistent and satisfactory.

If we take up his idea of God, like the author of Snakes in Iceland who did his work in one short sentence, "Snakes in Iceland—there are none," we may summarily dispose of our discussion by declaring that Bergson's philosophy admits of no God. His reality is the ceaseless upspringing of something new incessant, creative work. It cannot be considered to be 'God,' God cannot be a "continuity of shooting out," but Bergson is not prepared to own that his system is atheistic. He feels that his system establishes a free and creative God. "The considerations put forward in my essay on Immediate Data result in an illustration of the fact of liberty; those of Matter and Memory lead us, I hope, to put our finger on mental reality; those of Creative Evolution present creation as a fact; from all this we derive a clear idea of a free and creating God, permeating matter and life at once, whose creative effort is continued, in a vital direction, by the evolution of species and the construction of human personalities" (quoted in Le Roy, A New Philosophy: Henri Bergson).

There is no doubt that Bergson's writings are instinct with religious interest, but from this it does not follow that he gives us a coherent view of God.

II

The point to be decided at the outset is whether the God of Bergson is the supra-conscious, spiritual, trans-human ground of reality from which have proceeded both the idea and the matter that opposes it, or is the idea itself opposed by matter, the evil principle.

What is the exact relation of life to matter? The distinction between life and matter is the foundation of his argument in Time and Free-will. Life is freedom, and
matter is necessity. Life is mobile and matter is inert. Considerations which hold in the case of brute-things—determinism, mechanism, etc.—do not apply in the case of soul-life. It is because intellect, adapted to "think matter" and accustomed to its ways, mechanizes life and spatializes soul that the problem of freedom arises. If we get rid of the intellectual picture of the soul and grasp by intuition life as it is, we shall find that its essence is freedom.

In Matter and Memory an advance is made, in that even matter is looked upon as a kind of movement akin to that of consciousness. But intellect cuts across both mental and material movements, and converts them into separate states and solid things respectively. The dualism between matter and life still remains, as the arguments of Creative Evolution require it. Life has for its mission the grappling of indeterminacy on matter. Life is regarded as an effort to overcome the necessity of physical forces. For this purpose it requires energy which it cannot create. It therefore utilizes the energy already existing in matter. Without the presence of resisting matter, life cannot set out on its task. Life breaks into individuals and species on account of the resistance it meets from inert matter. Without matter the slow will be like Spinoza's Substance, incapable of taking the field. Matter, then, is something over against life, an obstacle to its free flow and a necessary condition of its progress. Matter appears to be a slows or machines, quite as original and fundamental as the slow itself, for the world-evolution. But this conclusion Bergson fights shy of.

In Creative Evolution he makes the two the inverse directions of one and the same spiritual movement. Materiality is only the interruption of spirituality. It is not a positive somewhat but only the arrest or the interruption of life. But it is difficult to understand why the ascending spiritual movement should ever have become interrupted. When once it has been interrupted,
how does it get itself condensed into matter? Even if
matter is an interruption of life, it is not a pseudo-idea,
or a mere nonentity, for Bergson’s view of negation pre-
ccludes such a possibility. Nor can we say that matter
is phenomenal in the sense that intellect creates matter;
for intellect only distorts matter but does not create it.
Matter antedates intellect. All that intellect does is to
falsify matter, make it appear that it is a co-existence
of separate solids with fixed outlines, while it is really in
a fluid condition. Again, were matter only a product
due to intellect, it should have been non-existent prior
to the rise of intellect, in the pre-human, i.e. plant and
animal, stages of evolution. But evolution could not
have started without matter. How then can matter be
at the same time a product of evolution at the intellectual
stage and a prime condition of evolution?

Bergson’s theory of matter is riddled with contra-
dictions and inconsistencies. If, to save his monism,
Bergson makes matter phenomenal and unreal, he cannot
account for the evolution of the world. If, on the other
hand, to account for the drama of the universe, he makes
matter an independent existence, then his monism is
affected.

This short résumé is necessary to show that corre-
sponding to the two views of matter, we have two different
conceptions of God. If the dualism between life and
matter is the last word of Bergson’s philosophy, then the
dual itself may be regarded as a kind of God opposed
by matter, the evil principle. We are reminded of the
familiar opposition between light and darkness, God and
Satan, Ahura Mazda and Ahirvan. Only the interplay
of two such opposing forces can account for the imperfect
world. Bergson’s God becomes a suffering deity. It is
as limited as any of his matters, for it has to struggle
through opposing conditions to win its freedom. It is
not the source of all being; for matter is independent
of it, nay, opposes its upward course. The irrevocable,
though it is utterly good, is not able to gain its ends on
account of the obstructive principle of evil. It is the
finite God which alone can satisfy the popular demands
of religion. Here Bergson satisfies the empirical tendency,
and supplies us with a God who is utterly good, unlike
the whole which contains both good and evil (see C. F.,
p. 255). But as we have seen, Bergson sometimes suggests
that his free and creative God is the author of both life
and matter. His logic requires him to make it an im-
personal principle from which both matter and life spring.
It is not to be identified with the life current, as it is the
spring of both life and matter. "I speak of God as of the
source whence issue successively, by an effect of his
freedom, the currents or impulses each of which will
move a world; he therefore remains distinct from them,
and it is not of him that we can say that most often it
turns aside, or it is at the mercy of the materiality that
it has been bound to accept" (Bergson, Paul and Ruhe,
pp. 13-44). God is not the less but the ultimate trans-
cendent. It is not an immanent principle but a tran-
scedent cause. There is not much to choose between
Bergson’s transcendent cause and Spinoza’s Substance.
Bergson leads us in either deism or pantheism. If he
says that the transcendent principle is of the nature of
becoming and not being, it is a matter of opinion which
has no logical necessity about it. If it is not a tran-
scedent deity but is the whole reality, if it is the supra-
conscious spirit from which have proceeded both the
idea and matter, then it is the God of pantheism which
is identical with the whole process of evolution. Some-
times Bergson holds that the interaction between the
two, life and matter, is the central reality and so God.
God then becomes the unfinished universe, and with it he
is ever growing. We get a God of perpetual youth of the
type Mr. Wells suggests. But the two prominent notions
are those of God as the absolute whole and God as the
life current. It is the same old trouble between the
Absolute of logic and philosophy and the God of ethics
and religion. This struggle between the logical and the
empirical tendencies we notice in the Philosophy of Bergson.

III

Does Bergson's view of God satisfy the religious-minded? In other words, is his God personal, purposeful, intelligent, free and creative? As the popular consciousness wants a personal God, Bergson is prepared to grant personality and make the prime soul a person. While he recognizes the difficulty of coming to any positive conclusion about the original unity (see Bergson, Paul and Rube, p. 44), he allows himself the privilege of characterizing it as personal.... "This source of life is undoubtedly spiritual. Is it personal? Probably. Of course, personal in a different way, without all those accidental traits which in our minds form parts of personality and which are bound up by the existence of the body. But personal in a larger sense of the term, a spiritual unity expressing itself in the creative process of evolution." (Dr. Louis Levine's interview with Bergson, N.Y. Times, Feb. 22, 1914). But God must be personal in the accepted sense of the term. M. Le Ruy, the famous French interpreter of Bergson, referring to Bergson's idea of God, says: "We cannot regard the source of our life otherwise than as personal. We cannot regard him as impersonal. We seek in him our personality. God is personal in that he is the source of our personality." Is this conception of God different from that of the pantheists? Even in that scheme, God is the source of our personality, and if that be sufficient reason for the personality of God, even there God can be looked upon as personal. If God is personal he cannot be personal in the sense human persons are. After all, human personality is only a local and partial manifestation of life, and a part can never be true of the whole. Human personality in Bergson's metaphor is a "pebble left on the beach," and it cannot display "the form of the wave that brought it there."

The supra-conscious spirit works without plan and
purpose. The vital impulse drives forward the life growth, but with no definite end or aim. "It takes directions without aiming at ends" (C. L. p. 108). We are reminded of the story Huxley somewhere tells us about the Irish Jervis who, when asked where he was going, said: "Sure and I don't know, but I am going at the Devil of a pace." The great thing is to go, does not matter in what direction. This, according to Bergson, is a point of merit. For on any finalist theory, the problem of evil is a stumbling-block. In Bergson's theory the problem is evaded and not solved by the substitution of animal instinct for intelligent purpose at the centre of things. If there is evil or disorder, it is the nature of things. "Evolution is not only a movement forward; in many cases we observe a marking time, and still more often a deviation or turning back. It must begin." (C. E. p. 109). That life should be full of surprises is what is to be expected from the way in which the creative principle evolves. The question is, whether such a principle, which invents, adapts, makes mistakes, but still in the main progresses, if we believe Bergson, can be called 'God.' The God of Bergson is not only immanent in nature but completely identical with it. Corbière says "God is hardly more than the central heart of the universe's energy. . . . He is entirely immanent. . . . Bergson's conception leads to pantheism" (Charles Corbière, "La foi de M. Bergson," Revue de Théologie, 1910). It is the ocean in which we are bathed and immersed, in which we literally live, move, and have our being. God is the universal flux and is the only reality. What Bergson does is to exalt the flux of the world, with all its defects and disorders, to the high position of divinity. He gives the whole the name of God and then tells us that in God we are. An appearance of a close and intimate relationship between God and man, the ultimate source of spirit and the human individual, is produced. But Bergson is here mutilating the meanings of words. To make the life impulse God is to commit spiritual suicide.
It is to defeat the sum of all religion. Nettleship remarks: "Whatever else 'God' means, it means the highest we can think of—something in which all that we love and adore in human beings and nature exists without any alloy" (Resevis, p. 103). But Bergson’s God is a non-moral principle, from which all things good, bad and indifferent flow. His view is destructive of belief in a purposeful God. "If all this is movement, incessant life, action, liberty, what room is there for the fixed thoughts and purposes that attribute to the Creator?" (Prof. Muirhead in the Hibbert Journal, July 1910). It is not the God with whom we can come into relations, for which the religious soul hungered. It can in no case be an object of worship.

If Bergson’s God would satisfy the theologian’s demand, then intelligence should be an attribute of God. Unless omniscience and omnipotence are attributed to God, he is not really God. If he does not know the end, if his nature is to grow, then it means he is imperfect. It would be hard to say just what he is, seeing that with him all things are possible. But in Bergson’s philosophy, intelligence is the product of the movement which has created matter and so has nothing to do with pure life or duration. Intelligence is not a quality of God. We may, in a sense, call it a divine attribute, for the original entity which contained in embryo the different lines of development, culminating in the automation of plants, the instinct of hymenoptera and the intelligence of man, had in it the intellectual tendency also. But if God should be a being in whom intelligence is displayed by intuition, then we shall have to wait for some future day when a being with divine intuition may spring up. "The gates of the future stand wide open."

Is Bergson’s God ‘free’? In spite of his vehement protests against both mechanism and fatalism, on account of their common assumption that ‘all is given,’ it is a matter of grave doubt whether in Bergson’s system all is not given. The different tendencies which later
come into existence are fused together in the original unity. Creative evolution is only the differentiation or dissociation of these tendencies. "The unity is derived from a via a larga; it is given at the start as an impulsion" (C. E. p. 104). Can we not say that all sides of future evolution are prefigured in the original unity? Nothing not contained in the original impulsion can come out at any stage. True, the future is in-calculeable, but surely there is no element of chance.

Is Bergson's God "creative"? Does God create the world? We shall be twisting words if we make Bergson's original principle the creator of the world. Growth is not creation in the technical sense in which it is generally understood. According to Bergson, it is not only God that creates; we also do so. "Creation...is not a mystery; we experience it in ourselves when we act freely" (C. E. p. 262). The individual shares in the creative evolution of which God is the centre and source. He creates, he grows, he is being made and remade continually. We have freedom, duration, and creative life and so has God. If we have obstacles in the way of our full freedom in that our souls are entangled in matter, God is no better off; for only with effort and trouble can he press into and penetrate the resisting wall of matter.

We see that Bergson does not give us a 'free' and 'creating' God. His God, when stripped of all pantheism, will be found to be inadequate to the needs of the modern soul. His idea of God is likely to repel rather than attract religious people, and there is no doubt that it has more kinship with the Absolute of philosophers than with the God of theists. Fully aware of the conflict between absolute idealism and orthodox theism, Bergson tries hard to be on the side of the orthodox religion. But when he holds that God can be realised only by a transcending of human conditions, when he identifies religion with philosophy, when he insists upon the inadequacy of intellect and the need of intuition to grasp
the whole, and when he oscillates between God as the whole and God as part, namely, the clone and he is no better than the absolutists.

IV

The account of the individual which Bergson gives is not different from that given by the absolutists. The soul is a product of the world-being. Its destiny is to be reabsorbed into the whole as the mist from the ocean must slip back into the shining sea. Bergson would have been more in line with orthodox thinkers if he had held that man is a bundle of selfish tendencies and material ends which arrest and check the higher ideals and aspirations. In this case the good would be identified with something external, and there would be an undue emphasis on self-denial and self-sacrifice. But Bergson with the absolutists holds that the individual is a blend of the spiritual and the material. The individual is not completely spiritual, in which case he would be divine, not human. Bergson says: "we are not the vital current itself; we are this current already loaded with matter" (C. E. p. 282). Were man completely material he would have no ideals and could not think of any moral law. It is because he is a complex of both that the moral problem has significance for him. The aim of morality becomes the positive promotion of the good. Sacrifice is not an end in itself but a means to self-affirmation. Virtue is the identification with the good, and is the development of the divine element in man. The individual is dependent on the ultimate reality. Only the absolute can be supposed to be completely real. Man is only attempting to become perfectly real. When man completely surrenders his lower nature, then he becomes divine. Distinction between God and man is not one of kind but one of degree. Bergson holds to a fundamental identity between the two, but unlike the absolutists he sometimes makes God also a being who struggles with
matter. The identity of nature alone can render possible free communion between man and God. Both Bergson and the absolutists agree in thinking that the whole alone is real, that the individual is partially real, and that for him to attain his goal the resisting matter will have to be overcome, and that, when the individual becomes dissolved in the whole life, when he becomes one with it, his life and is realised.

V

With regard to the question of human freedom, Bergson agrees with the absolutists. The individuals of the world are free when they escape from the mechanism of habit and routine. The individual is free in so far as he maintains his true nature as spirit, and absolutism tells us the same thing, that man is free in so far as he acts from his higher nature. Man is free as he is a unique expression of God. Freedom is due to participation in the real. What freedom the individual has, he owes to the source from which he comes. His participation in the original life is his claim to freedom. Life in the material world participates in the liberty of the original impulsion. So long as we are human, this freedom can only be partially realised as we have to struggle against the inertia of matter. When we become the principle of life in its purity, we are absolutely free.

The objection repeatedly urged against absolutism, that it gives freedom to God or the whole and not to man the part, for whatever it is worth, holds against Bergson’s philosophy also. Bergson establishes the existence of an underlying spiritual principle, beneath the particular manifestations of life. The one great vital runs through all the divergent lines of evolution. In Time and Free-will Bergson emphatically asserts the freedom of the individual who freely acts on matter. But as with the absolutists, this is only a derived freedom; for the individual when cut off from the universal activity
of life is an unreality. Witness the following passage which many will mistake to be from Spinoza or Hegel: "Life as a whole, from the initial impulsion that thrust it into the world, will appear as a wave which rises... this rising wave is consciousness... on whose current, running through human generations, subdividing itself into individuals. Thus souls are nothing else than the little rills in which the great river of life divides itself, flowing through the body of humanity." The individual is a particular manifestation of the universal life, and his position is not a whit better simply because Bergson substitutes for the material system of the scientist and the universal mind of the absolutist the dynamical life. What the man in the street wants is the freedom of the individual in his own right as a separately existing entity, and Bergson has not granted him that, however much he might have persuaded him into that belief in Time and Free-will.

Bergson is still dominated by the idea of freedom as pure contingency, which, he argues, is as much an illusion as pure determinism. The spatialising of time is regarded by him as the cause of the illusion of absolute determinism. If so, it is also the cause of absolute chance. If the spatialising of the past is the cause of determinism, the spatialising of the future is the cause of contingency. Professor Pringle-Pattison observes: "If we are true to the doctrine of real duration, we have nothing to do with this phantom future any more than with the other phantom of the past... If, as M. Bergson says, we act now with our whole past and yet are free, why should this be otherwise in the future when what is now present will constitute part of the past which we carry with us?" (Idea of God, p. 373). Bergson impresses on us forcibly the organic relationship between the past and the present, and it should follow that the past, present and future are inseparable parts of one development. To break the future from the past and make it the store-house
of miracles is to miss the continuity of duration and spatialise it. The past determines the present, though the present cannot be predicted from the past. This is the sort of freedom which absolutism offers us.

Our conclusion is that Bergson’s point of view so eloquently set forth in his writings is not a system but only a philosophic vision. Bergson is more a prophet than a philosopher, more a seer than a dialectician. His vision is quite true. There is a supreme principle whose nature is free activity, from which change and everything else originate. But in the detailed development of this vision Bergson has not been quite logical. The vision requires for its basis and support a system of absolute idealism. To become a philosophy it needs supplementation by the fundamentals of absolute idealism, and as Bergson thinks that his view is opposed to that of absolute idealism, his true vision and false logic stand apart.