***The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* by Henri Bergson**

One – Moral Obligation

Bergson begins by noting that our **behaviours are restricted by society**. We learn what is allowed or prohibited, and therefore what is right or wrong, from the limitations placed on us by society. He compares society “to an organism whose cells, united by imperceptible links, fall into their respective places in a highly developed hierarchy, and for the greatest good of the whole naturally submit to a discipline that may demand the sacrifice of the part.” (p.9) Of course, this is only a comparison because cells lack the freedom that characterises humans. In the organism, the behaviour of cells is governed by necessity. The equivalent force in society for humans is ***habit***, which, while it doesn’t exert the same inevitable pressure on its parts, does create a sense of obligation that is difficult to resist. “The members of a civic community hold together like the cells of an organism. Habit, served by intelligence and imagination, introduces among them a discipline resembling, in the interdependence it establishes between separate individuals, the unity of an organism of anastomotic cells.” (pp.13-4)

Society is crucially important to each of us as individuals. Indeed, for Bergson: “Each of us belongs as much to society as to himself.” (p.14) For sure, we are each individuals with original personalities, but “we are in continuous contact with other men whom we resemble, and united to them by a discipline which creates between them and us a relation of interdependence.” (p.14) **This social connection is the principle solid thing to which the individual ego clings.** Bergson admits there is another equilibrium, or point of solidity, possible deep within each individual, but few people have the capacity to find this. In general, “…it is on the surface, at the point where it inserts itself into the close-woven tissue of other exteriorised personalities, that our ego generally finds its point of attachment; its solidity lies in this solidarity.” (p.15) This means that obligation, which we usually see as a “bond between men, first binds us to ourselves.” (p.15) Obligation must have a deep hold on us like this us for it to be the force that it is in our lives. “Were there not some part of society in us, it would have no hold on us; and we scarcely need seek it out…” (p.15) In Sartre, a bond like this would be called ontological (and is, in the form of being-for-others). None of us could cut ourselves off from society because our entire lives are bound up with it; “…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, and because even if there is no one present, even if he is merely thinking, he is still talking to himself. Vainly do we try to imagine an individual cut off from all social life.” (pp.15-6) Not only are we bound to society in this way, but we also get strength from it.

**Moral distress** is then a “throwing-out of gear of the relations between the social and the individual self.” (p.17) Bergson gives an insightful description of a criminal, whose remorse, rather than being fear of punishment, is actually regret about his relations with society. What he wants is to “wipe out the past, to arrange things just as though the crime had never been committed at all… But his own knowledge persists, and note how it drives him more and more out of that society within which he hoped to remain by obliterating the traces of his crime. For the same esteem for the man he was is still shown to the man he is no longer; therefore society is not addressing him; it is speaking to someone else. He, knowing what he is, feels more isolated among his fellow-men than he would on a desert island…” (p.17) This is why some criminals give themselves up; i.e. to re-attach themselves to society, even if by a thread.

One might think that adhering to these obligations of society would be a burden, but society itself makes things easier by establishing “intermediaries” between us and it (family, trade, societies/clubs, etc.). And again, **we barely notice the obligation because society has conditioned us with habit**. Every moment we have to choose (to follow society’s dictates or not), but we “are hardly conscious of this; there is no effort. A road has been marked out by society.” (p.19) Nevertheless, there are times when the obligation does appear as a duty, especially before we have been inducted into society’s rules properly (as kids, for example). The tension arises in those situations where we must choose between society and our own desires. The first practical maxim Bergson establishes then is “obedience to duty means resistance to self.” (p.20)

The mistake most moral philosophers have made though is they have this situation backwards. In other words, they have “confused the sense of obligation, a tranquil state akin to inclination, with the violent effort we now and again exert on ourselves to break down a possible obstacle to obligation.” (pp.20-1) Most of our obligations smoothly and painlessly pass by us through the force of habit. It is the exception for us to encounter resistance, not the rule. Bergson is arguing that **it is natural for us to fulfil our social obligations, but moral philosophers tend to argue the opposite**; that we naturally resist these obligations. Moreover, they also believe that to “resist resistance, to keep to the right paths, when desire, passion or interest tempt us aside, we must necessarily give ourselves reasons.” (p.22) **The second mistake, then, is to think that because we use reasons to get back to obligation, obligation itself is of a rational order**. Of course, we do use reasons, but the only purpose of them is to “introduce more logical consistency into a line of conduct subordinated by its very nature to the claims of society; but this social claim was the real root of obligation.” (p.23) He also points out that simply living in conformity with the conventional principles which a society has adopted is actually to “live reasonably,” even if the individual doesn’t actually “reason out” his or her conduct.

Looking at Kant’s **categorical imperative**, Bergson suggests that “an absolutely categorical imperative is instinctive or somnambulistic, enacted as such in a normal state, represented as such if reflexion is roused long enough to take form, not long enough to seek reasons.” (p.26) And, in humanity, a behaviour which is instinctive is precisely that which we call habit. Should one actually manage to consciously reflect on an obligation (instead of simply acting on it), it would appear justified in the following way: “you must because you must,” which is precisely how Bergson defines the categorical imperative.

Stepping back to take an evolutionary perspective, we see that nature ensured her aims in the insect society through the iron-clad form of instinct. The beehive more closely resembles a living cell than a human society. So, how did nature manage to safeguard societies made up of individuals capable of free choice? Well, “…she would have arranged that intelligence should achieve here results comparable, as regards their regularity, to those of instinct in the other; she would have had recourse to habit.” (p.26) Each individual habit would lack such force on its own, but together, the “habit of contracting these habits” (p.26), which Bergson is calling here the, “totality of obligation” (p.27), would have resulted in a force not unlike instinct. “What we must perpetually recall is that, no one obligation being instinctive, obligation as a whole *would have been* instinct if human societies were not, so to speak, ballasted with variability and intelligence. It is a virtual instinct…” (p.28)

One might object here that this should only apply to simple, primitive societies, more closely aligned to nature than civilised ones. After all, “civilized man differs from primitive man above all by the enormous mass of knowledge and habits which he has absorbed, since the first awakening of his consciousness…” (p.29) However, Bergson argues that **our natural roots remain in “excellent condition”** (p.30; emphasis added) beneath our acquired habits. (**This idea is one of the main themes of *The Two Sources*.**) Thus, the essential characteristic of natural societies is to “include at any moment a certain number of individuals, and exclude others.” (p.30) And those ‘included’ are seldom the whole of humanity; rather, social obligation is concerned with the “closed society,” as we see amply demonstrated during times of war; “…it is not itself concerned with humanity. For between the nation, however big, and humanity there lies the whole distance from the finite to the indefinite, from the closed to the open.” (p.32)

What about **the claim that we can extend our love for family to the wider society, from this to the nation, and from this to humanity as a whole? This is *a priori* reasoning** and “the result of a purely intellectualist conception of the soul.” (p.32) Naturally, *instinctively*, we love our family and our countrymen and women “whereas love of mankind is indirect and acquired…” (p.33) through religion perhaps, or the philosophers’ arguments from reason.

The preceding showed us pure obligation as the simplest form of morality. Now, Bergson will move in the other direction to uncover **a different kind of obligation**, one that can truly encompass the whole of humanity, rather than just *my* society. This morality first appears to us in the form of individual people; the sages of Greece, the prophets of Israel, the Arahants of Buddhism, the saints of Christianity, etc. What this tells us is that there is “a difference of kind and not merely one of degree between the morality with which we have been dealing up to now and that we are about to study…” (p.34) **The first reaches its perfection in “impersonal formulae” culminating in the “universal acceptance of a law”** (p.34; emphasis added), **the second “in a common imitation of a model.”** (p.34; emphasis added) The first is presented in general maxims, the maxims of the second, however, are focused in a single individual. Thus, instead of the pressure we saw natural obligation exert on the individual, **complete morality is an attractive force**. This prompts Bergson to call this second morality “human” instead of merely “social.”

Bergson continues comparing **the first morality** with **the second morality**. In the first, the individual and their society are “absorbed together in the same task of individual and social preservation. Both are self-centred.” (p.37) Our analogy here was the cell, which at the same time that it lives for itself, also lives for the organism. “At once individual and social, the soul here moves round in a circle. It is closed.” (p.38) It was ordained from nature, and has a specific object; the family, the country. What it promises is ***well-being***. This is a **static morality**; infra-intellectual. The second morality, on the other hand, has no object; it is pure love. “The former alight directly on an object which attracts them. The latter does not yield to the attraction of its object; it has not aimed at this object; it has shot beyond and reached humanity only by passing through humanity.” (p.39) This morality is not natural, but acquired, and requires effort. The counterpart here to social pressure in the first morality (instinct and habit) is ***feeling***, and what it promises is ***joy***. This is a **dynamic morality**; supra-intellectual.

Bergson distinguishes between **two kinds of** **emotion**. The first is the consequence of an idea, or of a mental picture, “the stirring of sensibility by a representation, as it were, dropped into it.” (p.43) The second is, rather than an effect, a *cause* of intellectual states; “it is pregnant with representations, not one of which is actually formed, but which it draws or might draw from its own substance by an organic development.” (p.44) The first, which Bergson calls *infra-intellectual*, is the one in which the psychologist is interested, while the second is *supra-intellectual* and it is this one which “can alone be productive of ideas.” (p.44) The idea with the second kind of emotion is that it is linked with **creation**, and Bergson has a nice passage worth quoting in full on this:

It is the emotion which drives the intelligence forward in spite of obstacles. It is the emotion above all which vivifies, or rather vitalizes, the intellectual elements with which it is destined to unite, constantly collecting everything that can be worked in with them and finally compelling the enunciation of the problem to expand into its solution. And what about literature and art? A work of genius is in most cases the outcome of an emotion, unique of its kind, which seemed to baffle expression, and yet which *had* to express itself. But is not this so of all work, however imperfect, into which there enters some degree of creativeness? Anyone engaged in writing has been in a position to feel the difference between an intelligence left to itself and that which burns with the fire of an original and unique emotion, born of the identification of the author with his subject, that is to say of intuition. In the first case the mind cold-hammers the materials, combining together ideas long since cast into words and which society supplies in a solid form. In the second, it would seem that the solid materials supplied by intelligence first melt and mix, then solidify again into fresh ideas now shaped by the creative mind itself. If these ideas find words already existing which can express them, for each of them this seems a piece of unexpected good luck; and, in truth, it has often been necessary to assist fortune, and strain the meaning of a word, to mould it to the thought. In that event the effort is painful and the result problematical. But it is in such a case only that the mind feels itself, or believes itself, to be creative. It no longer starts from a multiplicity of ready-made elements to arrive at a composite unity made up of a new arrangement of the old. It has been transported at a bound to something which seems both one and unique, and which will contrive later to express itself, more or less satisfactorily, in concepts both multiple and common, previously provided by language. (pp.46-7)

So, **the second kind of emotion is precisely what will ground the second, ‘higher’ morality**. Bergson is quick to point out that this is not a “**moral philosophy of sentiment**;” rather, our emotion here is “capable of crystallising into representations and even into an ethical doctrine.” (p.47) The thing is that no moral doctrine can ever create an obligation. The most logically-sound and rational appeal can be refuted by anyone. “But if the atmosphere of the emotion is there, if I have breathed it in, if it has entered my being, I shall act in accordance with it, uplifted by it; not from constraint or necessity, but by virtue of an inclination which I should not want to resist.” (p.48) The truth is no one ever assented to a moral doctrine from purely intellectual reasons. Emotion always acts as an impetus for the will, and “as an explicative representation in [the realm] of intelligence.” (p.49)

The first morality has been ‘designed’ by evolution, and proceeds from a driving force, for sure, but a progression “strewn with obstacles” (p.57) or “opposing forces” (p.57) in the form of competing species. Thus, we end up with multiple societies closed against each other. This is the essence of evolution. However, the second morality is “the very essence of mobility.” (p.58) In the same way that you can’t get movement from a series of immobilities, you can’t get the second morality from the first. “That is why the first morality is comparatively easy to formulate, but not the second. For our intelligence and our language deal in fact with things; they are less at home in representing transitions or progress.” (p.59)

Bergson discusses **Socrates** next, usually considered the paradigm figure of reason. But if we look closer, we see that he “teaches because the oracle of Delphi has spoken. He has received a mission. He is poor, and poor he must remain. He must mix with the common folk, he must become one of them, his speech must get back to their speech. He will write nothing, so that his thought shall be communicated, a living thing, to minds who shall convey it to other minds. He is indifferent to cold and hunger, though in no way an ascetic; he is merely delivered from material needs, and emancipated from his body. A “daemon” accompanies him, which makes its voice heard when a warning is necessary. He so thoroughly believes in this “daemonic voice” that he dies rather than not follow it; if he refuses to defend himself before the popular tribunal, if he goes to meet his condemnation, it is because the “daemon” has said nothing to dissuade him. In a word, his mission is of a religious and mystic order, in the present-day meaning of the words; his teaching, so perfectly rational, hinges on something that seems to transcend pure reason.” (pp.61-2) Thus, Socrates is, in fact, a paradigm of the open morality we have been talking about. All of **the Greek moralists** – Stoics, Epicureans, Cynics – took their cues from Socrates, but transformed his lived philosophy into rational principles and argumentation; in short, philosophy. But there was another path Socrates’ lineage traced. From the myths in Plato’s dialogues to Plotinus, culminating in Neo-Platonism. Then the struggle ensued between Neo-Platonism and Christianity, but the important point is that it was the non-rational, non-philosophical, emotional-based teachings that succeeded where the rational philosophies failed.

Bergson explains this by noting that there is a “transition stage” between the static (life) and the dynamic (emotion) moralities, and **this transition stage is precisely intelligence**. Progressing on from the closed stage, but not reaching the open stage, such a soul would be “manifesting indifference or insensibility, it would be in the “ataraxy” or the **“apathy”** of the Epicureans and the Stoics.” (p.64; emphasis added) This is the negative description of this stage. The positive description would be **contemplation** as demonstrated by the Platonic and Aristotelian ideal. While admirable, upright, and noble; the individual in this transitional stage can only aspire to “that half-virtue, detachment.” (p.65)

Bergson has isolated the two forces acting upon us in morality; the impulsion of the ‘social’ and the attraction of the ‘human,’ but, in practice, they tend to blend together, meeting in concepts in the mind; thus, “the result is… that we lose sight of pure pressure and pure aspiration actually at work on our wills; we see only the concept into which have been melted the two distinct objects to which pressure and aspiration were respectively attached. The force acting upon us is taken to be this concept: a fallacy which accounts for the failure of strictly intellectualist systems of morality…” (pp.65-6) In other words, **philosophy has believed the driver of moral behaviour to be conceptual**, when it is, in fact, as we have seen, social and emotional.

Bergson now notes that **reason** is both the “distinguishing mark of man” and “a thing of superior value” (p.68), but neither of these explain why we ought to allow it to guide our actions. “Reason can only put forward reasons, which we are apparently always at liberty to counter with other reasons.” (p.68)

Next, Bergson goes on to discuss **justice**, which he holds to be the most instructive of the moral ideas for three reasons; it includes most of the others, can be expressed simply, and shows the two forms of obligation of which we have been speaking here. Justice emerges in primitive societies through barter, in which the value of objects must be fairly determined. This justice then naturally extends to the intercourse between people. “It will then consist mainly in the regulation of natural impulses by the introduction of the idea of a no less natural reciprocity, for example, the expectation of an injury equivalent to the injury done.” (p.69) It naturally follows that not just quantity will have to be considered, but quality also (an eye might not always be just recompense for an eye). Ultimately, we see justice emerging in class distinctions, in which “responsibilities and privileges are looked upon as a common stock, to be eventually distributed among the individuals according to their worth, consequently according to the services they render.” (p.71) This is precisely Bergson’s “social” morality; an obligation which met a social need, and which was applied to the individual through the pressure of society.

But how do we go from this to “the justice which implies neither exchange made nor service rendered, being the assertion pure and simple of the inviolability of right and of the incommensurability of the person with any values whatever?” (p.71) This is a transition from a **relative to an absolute justice**, and no matter how we look at this, it involves *creation*. Rather than a steady, natural progression from the one to the other, whether the transition took place by stages or all at once, there must be a sudden leap, for the two are different in kind, not merely in degree. It is “part of our habit of considering all forward movement as a progressive shortening of the distance between the starting-point (which indeed exists) and the goal, which comes into being as a stopping-place only when the moving object has chosen to stop there.” (p.72) This is obviously demonstrated most clearly in **Zeno’s dichotomies**. “And it is this same illusion which we find in ethics when the continually expanding forms of relative justice are defined as growing approximations of absolute justice. The most we are entitled to say is that once the latter is stated, the former might be regarded as so many halts along a road which, plotted out retrospectively by us, would lead to absolute justice. And even then we should have to add that there had been, not gradual progress, but at a certain epoch a sudden leap.” (p.73) But how does this leap take place? It is indeed only possible if society as a whole as given its assent, for “most great reforms appeared at first sight impracticable, as in fact they were. They could be carried out only in a society whose state of mind was already such as their realization was bound to bring about; and you had a circle from which there would have been no escape…” (p.74) This first start must be given by an individual or individuals in which the social ego is expanded through a genuinely creative effort. And this is exactly what we find in the miracle of **artistic creation**. Genuine artistic creation is at first disconcerting, if not repelling, but it creates “little by little, by the simple fact of its presence, a conception of art and an artistic atmosphere which bring it within our comprehension; it will then become in retrospect a work of genius; otherwise it would have remained what it was at the beginning, merely disconcerting.” (p.75) In other words, **the** **artwork changes public taste** and is then retrospectively seen to be a work of genius. This is important because we usually imagine the work of genius is in the art all along, and we (as the public) merely recognise it. Exactly the same thing happens in **moral invention**. Morality is an effort of creative evolution for Bergson, and what he means to convey by this is that these exemplary individuals who change our moral sensibilities (in the same way that the artistic genius changes our tastes) represent “the appearance of a new species…” (p.97) This emphasises again how the second morality is different *in kind* from the first, not merely an extension of it.

Bergson considers the philosophical thought experiment in which, for the existence of humanity, one innocent person was condemned to eternal torment. Would be condone this? No, “a thousand times no! Better to accept that nothing should exist at all!” (p.76) So, how have we arrived at this place where justice is no longer relative and bound up with “social life, within which it had always dwelt with no particular privilege, and soared above it, categorical and transcendent?” (p.76) Bergson attributes the first creative step in this direction to have been made by the **prophets of Israel**, who “imparted to justice the violently imperative character which it has kept…” (p.76) But this was still a closed morality that only applied to the Jews. The second step was taken by **Christianity** which made a truly open morality, appealing to the idea of universal brotherhood. Israel, then set out the *form* of this higher justice, while Christianity expanded its *substance*.

Again, Bergson discounts the philosophers. **Plato** included the idea of man among his Transcendent Ideas, but never seemed to make the leap from this to the notion that “all men were of the same essence…” (p.77) “From this to the idea that all men, *qua* men, were of equal worth and that the common essence conferred on them the same fundamental rights, was but one step. But the step was not taken.” (p.77) This would have required equating the barbarian and the Greek. The **Stoics** pronounced that all men were brothers and the notion of the citizen of the world, but these “were the expression of an ideal, and ideal merely conceived, and very likely conceived as impracticable.” (p.77) No Stoic ever considered making slaves equal. Thus, the modern idea of justice has progressed from the early days of Christianity through a “series of individual creations which have succeeded through multifarious efforts animated by one and the same impulse.” (p.78)

Given that **moral progress is a continual *creation*, it is fundamentally unpredictable**. Future moralities don’t exist here and now, or even worse, eternally, such that we could figure out the perfect one if only we were smart enough.

Take liberty, for instance. It is commonly said that the individual is entitled to any liberty that does not infringe the liberty of others. But the granting of a new liberty, which might lead to an encroachment of all the different liberties on one another in present-day society, might produce the opposite effect in a society where feeling and custom had been modified by that very reform. So that it is often impossible to state *a priori* the exact degree of liberty which can be allotted to the individual without injury to the liberty of his fellow-men; change the quantity, and the quality is no longer the same. On the other hand, equality can hardly be obtained, save at the expense of liberty, so that we should first ask ourselves which of the two is preferable to the other. But the question admits of no general answer; for the sacrifice of this or that liberty, if it is fully agreed upon by the citizens as a whole, partakes still of liberty; and above all, the liberty which is left may be superior in quality if the reform, tending towards greater equality, has led to a society where men breathe more freely, where greater joy is found in action. Look at it how you will, you must always come back to the conception of moral creators who see in their mind's eye a new social atmosphere, an environment in which life would be more worth living, I mean a society such that, if men once tried it, they would refuse to go back to the old state of things. Thus only is moral progress to be defined; but it is only in retrospect that it can be defined… (pp.79-80)

So, we have identified two driving forces behind morality. Nevertheless, reason appears to be the sole imperative because these two forces have “resulted in certain rules being laid down and an ideal being set up as a pattern: to live morally will mean to follow these rules, to conform to this ideal.” (p.81) As we have already seen, the intellectual is the middle ground between pure obligation and pure aspiration (both non-realisable ideals), and the sub-rational and supra-rational meet there, being “represented by their projections. These intermingle and interpenetrate. The result is a transposition of orders and appeals into terms of pure reason.” (p.85) **Moral life is therefore rational life**, but “it does not follow that morality has its origin or even its foundation in pure reason.” (p.85)

Reason alone, logic, the notion of the Good; none of these can account for morality. Instead, we philosophise on morality from within a society that has already been moralised. Thus, any idea can be built up as the moral principle. Bergson singles out **utilitarianism** as a theory built on the principle of selfishness, but selfishness so broadly defined (pride, craving for praise, etc.) that it can twist and bend to accommodate itself to moralities already established by other means. “In a word, the moral theorists take society for granted and consequently also the two forces to which society owes its stability and mobility. Taking advantage of the fact that all social ends interpenetrate one another, and that each of them, resting as it were on that stability and mobility, seems to be invested with these two forces, they have no difficulty in reconstituting the content of morals with one or other of the ends assumed as a principle, and then showing that such morality is obligatory.” (pp.91-2)

**The intellect** is principally a selfish faculty whose office is to further the goals of the individual. But this first impulse can be checked and turned around. This is precisely what we see happening in theories of ethics. Intelligence argues for an interpenetration of personal and general interests, that “an intelligent egoism must allow all other egoisms their share.” (pp.92-3) But one should ask *why* the first impulse is rejected. If the intellect were the source of morality, we ought to see morality flowing naturally from this first impulse. That we don’t indicates that the intellect is not the proper ground of morality. Bergson’s real insight here is that **the two sources of morality are not themselves moral**. Thus, when moralists attempt to trace the origins of morality, they miss their goal precisely because they are looking for something moral; i.e. an intellect or rationality that can influence the will.

So, **how should morality be taught?** Bergson doesn’t “deny the utility, the necessity even, of a moral instruction which appeals to reason alone…” (p.97) Discussion, reflection, analysis and argument is only possible on the plane of the intellect, and these are all essential for morality. However, intelligence alone is insufficient for developing morality. Intelligence will make a do-gooder better at doing good, but also an evil-doer better at doing evil. What is required first is a good intention, and this brings us before the will. How can we get a hold of the will? There are two options; **training**; that is, the inculcation of impersonal habits, and **the “mystic way”**; by which Bergson means imitation of someone, but conceiving of this in terms of a “spiritual union, a more or less complete identification.” (p.97)

This latter, Bergson also calls **religious**, but only if we understand this the right way. A religion that induces a fear of punishment and/or hope of reward hasn’t progressed beyond the first method; “it still looks upon moral education as training, and upon morality as discipline…” (p.98) Likewise, religion that appeals to dogma or metaphysical theories is incapable of operating beyond the intellectual plane. Here words seem to fail Bergson, as he describes the second way as a metaphysical understanding that compels our assent beyond intellectual reasoning. As he says, “True mystics simply open their souls to the oncoming wave. Sure of themselves, because they feel within them something better than themselves, they prove to be great men of action, to the surprise of those for whom mysticism is nothing but visions, and raptures and ecstasies. That which they have allowed to flow into them is a stream flowing down and seeking through them to reach their fellow-men; the necessity to spread around them what they have received affects them like an onslaught of love. A love which each one of them stamps with his own personality. A love which is in each of them an entirely new emotion, capable of transposing human life into another tone.” (p.99)

Finally, Bergson notes that **the second morality** he has been talking about **is also a part of Life**. There might be a tendency to think of the first as life, and the second as some human addition over and above it, but this would be to forget that human beings are also a part of life. Societies (the origin of the first type of morality) and the human species itself (the origin of the second type of morality) are but manifestations of life, which it seems Bergson is starting to identify as love.

Two – Static Religion

Bergson begins here by criticising the “spectacle of what religions have been in the past” (p.102) as a “farrago of error and folly!... *Homo sapiens*, the only creature endowed with reason, is also the only creature to pin its existence to things unreasonable.” (p.102) Thus, his first question is **how such unreasonable beliefs could have been (and continue to be) accepted by reasonable beings?** He rejects Levy-Bruhl’s suggestion that human intelligence has evolved such that our modern-day intellect is different from that of our forebears. This would require that “habits of mind acquired by individuals in the course of centuries can have become hereditary, modifying nature and giving a new mentality to the species.” (p.103) He also rejects Durkheim’s appeal to collective mentality as the instigator of irrational beliefs, as if the collective weren’t prefigured in the individual.

Bergson begins by categorising unreasonable beliefs as phantasmic representations, and the acts which produce them “myth-making” or “fiction.” Now, we act according to facts; that is, according to intellectual judgement. But the thing about fiction is that it has the power to “thwart our judgment and reason” (p.109). And this is our first clue. **If, after creating intelligent beings, Nature had the need to restrict that intelligent activity without also compromising the future of that intelligence, the best way to do that, in the absence of real facts, real experience, would be to manufacture a counterfeit of experience.** “A fiction, if its image is vivid and insistent, may indeed masquerade as perception and in that way prevent or modify action. A systematically false experience, confronting the intelligence, may indeed stop it pushing too far the conclusions it deduces from a true experience.” (p.109) This is Bergson’s claim, and it is supported by the facts that intelligence is always immediately followed by religion, and only intelligent creatures are superstitious.

This tendency to myth-making is actually similar to instinct, and we would call it so, “were it not that it is precisely in the place of an instinct that these phantasmic images arise in the mind. They play a pan which might have devolved on instinct, and which would actually do so in a being devoid of intelligence.” (p.110) On these grounds then, Bergson will call it a ***virtual instinct***. And this puts us back in the purview of the evolution of life, necessitating **a review of some of the key points concerning the vital impulse** Bergson outlined in *Creative Evolution*.

First, there is no physico-chemical; i.e. mechanical, explanation of life such that we can explain it in terms of an accumulation of accidental variations. Second, life has evolved in certain definite directions that cannot be imposed on it by its external conditions, which would amount to admitting that “modifications undergone by the individual are handed down to his descendants…” (p.113), in other words, the heredity of acquired characteristics. So, the driver of change is not external, but an “inward impulse that passes from germ to germ through individuals, that carries life in a given direction, towards an ever higher complexity.” (p.113) This is the third idea. Fourth, science conceives of the mechanical explanation, but then proceeds in particular cases to reason as if adaptation were actually life ‘solving’ problems raised by external conditions, thus relying on an ‘impetus’ on the sly. Fifth, Bergson confronts the “mystery” of how life is able to do this by supposing that the same thing decomposable into an infinity of parts co-ordinated with each other when seen from outside, may, in fact, be a simple, undivided act when realised from the inside. Sixth, if life is not reducible to matter or chemistry, it is something different from matter, and further, uses matter as an instrument even as it encounters it as an obstacle. Seventh, in noting that each of the main paths of evolution is concerned with developing certain essential characteristics more and more (i.e. instinct and intelligence), then we can conjecture that, eighth, “the vital impulse began by possessing these characteristics in a state of reciprocal implication: instinct and intelligence, which reach their culminating point at the extremities of the two principal lines of animal evolution, must therefore be taken one with the other, before their separation: not combined into one, but one in the beginning, instinct and intelligence being then mere views, taken from two different points, of that simple reality.” (p.115) He then adds that, contrary to both mechanism and finalism, it is impossible to forecast the specific forms of life evolution will create, precisely because life is not driven by impulsion (mechanism) nor attraction (finalism). Hence, Bergson suggests life progresses by way of an *impetus* “whilst it can also, by the indivisibility of what is felt internally and the divisibility to infinity of what is externally perceived, give the idea of that real and effective duration which is the essential attribute of life.” (p.115)

We now return to the main thread of the story. Since instinct is, in a sense, closer to the pure drive of life (because instinct is “but an extension of nature’s work of organization” (p.119)), and at the extreme of this branch of evolution we find the creation of societies *par excellence* (in the anthill and beehive), so much so that the individual is always ready to sacrifice itself for the society, then it is reasonable to conclude that “**nature is more concerned with society than with the individual**.” (p.119; emphasis added) This is clearly no longer the case with humans, which means that the “inventive efforts manifested throughout the domain of life by the creation of new species has found in 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.” (p.119) So, what we find is that **intelligence, principally concerned with the individual, now stands as a threat to social cohesion**. If nature is to overcome this it cannot be through instinct because this has been replaced by intelligence. Rather, it must produce “a virtuality of instinct, or, if you prefer it, by the residue of instinct which survives on the fringe of intelligence: it cannot exercise direct action, but, since intelligence works on representations, it will call up “imaginary” ones, which will hold their own against the representation of reality and will succeed, through the agency of intelligence itself, in counteracting the work of intelligence. **This would be the explanation of the myth-making faculty**.” (p.119; emphasis added)

This now lets us say some things about **the kind of religion Bergson calls static**, which, as the universal myth-making behaviour *par excellence*, is “***a defensive reaction of nature against what might be depressing for the individual, and dissolvent for society, in the exercise of intelligence*.**” (p.205; emphasis added) **The** **first function of static religion in this role then is the direct preservation of the society**. There are a few ways this happens:

1. **Customs** (which predated laws, and which they were no doubt based on); that is, everything habitual to the members of a group and which serves to preserve group solidarity, will tend to take on a religious character. Indeed, in primitive societies “the whole of morality is custom; and as religion forbids any departure from custom, morality is coextensive with religion.” (p.123)
2. The notion of a **god** who prohibits, prevents, and punishes will arise. However, mythology is a late product of nature. The beginnings of religion would have seen this directing ‘force’ as “an element of personality, but not yet a complete personality.” (p.125) The prohibitions protecting the social order appear as more than words, but not yet the full divinity portrayed by the myth-making function.
3. The concept of the **taboo**, a mixture of ‘sacred’ and ‘dangerous’ will arise around the “object occupying the centre of a field of resistance” (p.126). Naturally, each taboo would have “been a prohibition in which society had a well-defined interest. Irrational from the point of view of the individual, since it suddenly checked intelligent activity without resorting to intelligence, it was rational inasmuch as it was in the interests of the society and the species. Hence, sexual intercourse, for example, was satisfactorily regulated by *taboos*. But precisely because no appeal had been made to individual intelligence, because the object was even to thwart it, intelligence, seizing upon the idea of *taboo*, must have extended it arbitrarily in all directions, by chance association of ideas, without troubling about what we might call the original intention of nature.” (p.128)

Next, we turn to **the second function of static religion, which still concerns the preservation of society, but this time *indirectly* through the guiding and stimulating of *individual* activities**, and always in line with our guiding principle; a *virtual instinct* turning the representational power of intelligence, which has become a danger to the progress of life, upon itself in order to restore nature’s intention. Bergson describes his method as follows: “We postulate a certain instinctive activity; then, calling into play intelligence, we try to discover whether it leads to a dangerous disturbance; if it does, the balance will probably be restored through representations evoked by instinct within the disturbing intelligence; if such representations exist, they are primary religious ideas.” (p.138) What follows is an account of these **primary religious ideas**.

First came the knowledge of our own deaths, which, since it ran “counter to nature’s intention” (p.131), was countered with the (intellectual/religious) myth of **life after death**.

Now, in what form does the primitive society conceive of the survival of its dead? Since ancestor worship requires myths about gods, this will only come later. Prior to this, Bergson suggests that it would have been natural for primitive individuals to come to believe that, from the simple act of seeing their reflection in a pool of water, “there is a body which is detachable from the one [they] can touch, a mere shell of a body, devoid of weight…” (p.133). On its own, there is, of course, no reason to believe this body survives death, but since we already have this notion secured, it will be clear that what does survive death will be this detachable body, and not the tangible one. Hence, the idea that **people live on as shades or phantoms** **after death**.

Animals don’t know hesitation. They act with the certainty of instinct. Intelligence, however, must “co-ordinate means with a view to a remote end, and… undertake what it does not feel absolutely sure of carrying out.” (p.139) This uncertainty is clearly a hindrance to the forward progression of life, so we find a representation arising to counter it – a representation of “**favourable powers**” capable of overriding natural causes and safeguarding our success. This tendency (like all primitive tendencies) is still evident today in the myriad superstitions that form whenever we, civilised and advanced though we may be, desire an outcome whose fulfilment is uncertain.

These ‘powers’ take shape as a kind of **universal soul**, “a force diffused throughout the whole of nature and distributed among individual objects and beings.” (p.134) It goes by different names in different cultures; *mana*, *orenda*, *wakanda*, etc., but is considered a “source of power upon which animate beings, and even a considerable number of inanimate objects, can draw…” (p.135). There is nothing to suggest an individual can retain a soul after death, but with the notion of a ghostly form of the body already in place, “there is nothing to prevent our also leaving in it the principle which endowed the body with the strength to act. The result will be an active and effective shade capable of influencing human events.” (p.135) At this point, the dead have become forces to reckon with, who must be appeased. Much absurdity will follow from this.

Now, Bergson takes a detour to **critique M. Levy-Bruhl, who accuses primitive peoples of complete indifference to proximate or physical causes**, and complete reliance on mystic ones. Bergson points out that it is only in events concerning human beings (typically accidents or death) that primitive peoples are likely to invoke mystic causes. In normal, everyday events (a tree being blown by the wind, the water current carrying the canoe, etc.) ordinary causality is never questioned. Moreover, even in events concerning human beings, proximate causes still proliferate for the primitive individual. When a fragment of stone is dislodged by the wind and kills someone, does “he deny that the rock was already split, that the wind loosened the stone, that the blow cracked the skull? Obviously not.” (p.145) So, where does the supernatural cause enter? “[W]e shall see that what the primitive man explains here by a “supernatural” cause is not the physical effect, it is its human significance, it is its importance to man, and more especially to a particular man, the one who was crushed by the stone.” (p.145) Moreover, if the effect has a human significance, the cause must have equal significance, or at least it must be of the same order; that is, it must be *intentional*.

**M. Levy-Bruhl also claims that primitive peoples refuse to admit the existence of chance**. Everything is accounted for by spirits and supernatural forces. In an ingenious argument, Bergson notes that Levy-Bruhl is guilty of slipping into the very primitive mentality he is criticising. In believing in chance, holding it to be something real, Levy-Bruhl (and all of us, for that matter), is inadvertently attributing events to ‘mystical’ forces. So, what is chance? Imagine a tile is blown off the roof and kills a passer-by. We would not hesitate to call this chance. But what if the tile just fell harmlessly to the ground. We would not think to call this chance. All we would see would be mechanism, the pure playing out of natural forces. The difference is that in the first case, “some human interest is at stake, and… things happened as though man had been taken into account, either with a view of doing him a service, or more likely with the intention of doing him an injury… Chance is then mechanism behaving as though possessing an intention.” (p.148)

At this point, Bergson takes stock and notes that we have come to the idea of forces operative in the world on our behalf that are not yet full personalities, but characterised by a mere “partial anthropomorphism.” (p.152) Essentially, “what was first conceived was neither an impersonal force nor spirits already individualized: man simply attributed purpose to things and events, as if nature had eyes everywhere which she focused on man.” (p.176) Bergson proceeds to ratify this through **the method that is one of the central themes of *The Two Sources*; namely, since habits are not hereditary, and we are not therefore fundamentally different from our most distant ancestors, their attitudes are still observable in our own personalities, and we need only peer beneath the surface of our learnt, civilised traits to see in those behaviours and tendencies at our cores what our distant ancestors may have felt.** “We must search for these fleeting impressions, which are immediately blotted out by reflexion, if we want to find some vestige of what may have been felt by our remotest ancestors.” (p.160)

**We tend not to believe this, for two reasons. First, we believe it is better for each individual to be born rational and civilised, rather than having to work for it.** “We want man to be born superior to what he used to be, as if true merit did not lie in effort, as though a species in which each individual has to rise above himself by a laborious assimilation of all the past were not, to say the least, on a par with a species in which each generation would be raised in its entirety to a higher level than the preceding ones by the automatic play of heredity!” (p.161) **Second, we believe intelligence to be above biological necessities**. We shouldn’t have to appeal to vital needs to explain what intelligence does. It operates on a ‘higher’ level.

So, once a society has these “elementary personalities” (p.164), there are **three paths the myth-making function can go down**. It can fashion exalted gods for itself, create lesser deities, such as spirits, or it can imagine forces which can be bent to our will. The first two lead to **static religion**, while the third arrives at **magic**.

We will start with **magic**. Bergson notes that some people have thought that non-civilised people had some kind of pantheism in mind. He doubts this. As he says, “it is very unlikely that humanity starts from such general and abstract notions. Before any man can philosophize he must live.” (p.165) Thus, it is in action where we should look for origins. Here, then, we find that before primitive peoples theorised about the force of which they have an inchoate sense, postulating certain principles of magic, such as “like acts on like,” and “the part stands for the whole,” they simply acted *as if* they had formulated those principles of magic. Primitive intelligence did not begin by conceiving principles; rather, it merely later “translates into a conception what was suggested by an instinct. To put it more clearly, there is a logic of the body, an extension of desire, which comes into play long before intelligence has found a conceptual form for it.” (p.167) The rational principles tell us nothing about the natural impulse from which magic sprang. Bergson gives the example of a man who wants to kill a distant enemy. What does he do? In a fit of rage, he stamps about, waving his arms, shouting words. Once the performance is complete, he imagines that the “partial anthropomorphism” we talked about earlier will do the rest. Now, it will naturally occur to him on a later occasion when he might desire to harm another enemy, that he might be able to achieve the same end, but with less effort. He will go through the same motions, but perhaps utilising a model, a dummy. In so doing, he will be inventing voodoo. The first magic principles can be traced back to a similar origin. “The essential is always to repeat in tranquillity, with the conviction that it is efficacious, the act which has given a quasi-hallucinatory impression of its efficacy when performed in a moment of excitement.” (p.169)

Bergson now turns to **the link between magic and science**. Science is the opposite of magic. It “measures and calculates with a view to anticipation and action. It first supposes, then verifies, that the universe is governed by mathematical laws.” (p.170) What science needed to flourish was a “twofold effort, that of a few men to find some new thing and that of all the others to adopt it and adapt themselves to it.” (p.171) Bergson feels that after a society has started on this path, it will tend to continue relatively easily, however, the initial impulsion would be difficult to provoke, probably requiring some existential threat, “perhaps the menace of extermination, such as that created by the discovery of a new weapon by an enemy tribe.” (p.172) Societies that remained primitive would have been ones with no neighbours, and those for whom life had been easy and untroubled. The longer they remain primitive, the more entrenched their magical practices become, the harder it is for them to start on the path of science. However, Bergson stresses that magic did not pave the way for science, as if we moved from a magical era to a scientific one. Rather, both magic and science are natural to humanity and have always co-existed. Importantly, we haven’t moved beyond magic; the tendencies to magical thought remain with us today. “Driven back by science, the inclination towards magic still survives, and bides its time. Let our attention to science relax for one instant, and magic will at once come rushing back into our civilized society…” (p.173)

What of **the link between magic and religion**? Again, Bergson suggests that magic and religion, despite what is typically believed, are fundamentally different, and, although there is certainly more similarity here than between magic and science, like them, religious beliefs did not emerge from magical ones. “It goes without saying that religion thus conceived is the opposite of magic. The latter is essentially selfish, the former admits of and often even demands disinterestedness. The one claims to force the compliance of nature, the other implores the favour of the god. Above all, magic works in an environment which is semi-physical and semi-moral-the magician, at all events, is not dealing with a person; whereas on the contrary it is from the god’s personality that religion draws its greatest efficacy.” (p.175) Magic and religion share a common origin, but go in separate directions. However, the similarities they share mean that “there should be something of the one hovering round the other, that some magic lingers in religion, and still more, some religion in magic.” (p.175)

Moving now to **the lesser deities**, Bergson again starts from the vague notion of “intentions inherent in things” (p.179), and notes that this tends either to a belief in spirits or cults of animals. The former share enough in common with their primitive origin that no more needs to be said about it, but why cults of animals? We find this strange today because we have come to prize the human intellect so much, and can’t imagine venerating a less intellectual animal. However, in its early days, the intellect hadn’t yet conferred on us all of its benefits. In fact, lacking the weapons and tools nature had bequeathed to animals, we were severely disadvantaged with our intellect, which could even have been a disadvantage, introducing indecision to interfere with our instinctual actions.

Finally, we come to the worship of actual gods, the first real form of religion, what Bergson calls **static religion**. He sees these various early religions as “intermediate forms” on the way to dynamic religion, and holds they are “nothing but variations on the twofold theme of elementary animism and of magic…” (p.187) which the myth-making function has gotten a hold of and elaborated. But **why does the myth-making function work on religion with such force?** Bergson finds two reasons. First, in religion, “the adherence of each individual is reinforced by the adherence of all.” (p.198) Prior to experimental science, universal assent is the surest guarantee of truth. Second, religion belongs to a realm different from knowledge. Rather, its chief office is action. This is how primitive societies were able to treat the gods as real and independent of humanity, even though their existence clearly depended on humans to invent them and tell stories about them. Factual ‘truth’ in relation to their religion was irrelevant to these societies, because, at bottom, religion was about countering the threat posed by the intellect and preserving society; i.e. it was about action. Religion is a form of strength and discipline, and therefore requires regularly repeated exercises. Thus, “there is no religion without **rites and ceremonies**.” (p.201; emphasis added) Such rites, while arising from belief, also strengthen it.

This partially accounts for the difference between **religion and philosophy**. Although philosophy is sometimes superadded onto religion (e.g. India and Persia), “philosophy and religion always remain distinct.” (p.203) The former is principally action, the second thought.

Bergson is also clear concerning static religion, or religion “ordained by nature” (p.205), that he is not proposing “solidarity between such a religion and morality. History is witness to the contrary. To sin has always been to offend the deity; but the deity has by no means always been offended by immorality or even crime; there have been cases where he has prescribed them.” (p.205) He also makes a distinction between social obligations of a general character that make life in common possible, and the concrete social tie that concretely binds the members of society to each other. The former arose naturally from customs, the latter is static religion.

There is one last point worth making about Bergson’s comments in this chapter. **Static religion is that which hasn’t marked any real progress**. Societies which have changed in a positive fashion will have had to follow a pioneer, an inventor, a genius. “The change is here an increase of intensity…” (p.137), a qualitative progress. Other societies which haven’t experienced the upwards pull of the genius still change, just “not that intensification which would be a qualitative progress, but a multiplication or an exaggeration of the primitive state of things… Thenceforth, marking time, they ceaselessly pile up additions and amplifications. Through the double effect of repetition and exaggeration the irrational passes into the realm of the absurd, and the strange into the realm of the monstrous.” (p.137) Such is the fate of societies languishing in static religion.

Three – Dynamic Religion

Bergson speaks of **Life** as a “great current of creative energy… precipitated into matter, to wrest from it what it can.” (p.209) Closely connected with this, **evolution** is “the act of placing in matter a freely creative energy” (p.211). Intellectual activity, reflexion, analysis, all lead in the opposite direction from this originary impulse. In order to reconnect with life and the creative impetus behind it, then, we should look backwards to the source. For this task, we will need to disregard, or at least subordinate the intellect, and embrace **intuition**. Not everyone is capable of this, however. Only the strongest, most noble of souls are able to open themselves to this impulse, but when they do, they would completely attach themselves to life, and therefore joy and love, but not for this or that tribe, for the whole of humanity. This is what Bergson calls **dynamic religion**. Another name for dynamic religion is **mysticism** which Bergson defines “by its relation to the vital impetus…” (p.213) Here, Bergson starts getting careless with his words, saying the following of the creative effort that is Life itself; “This effort is of God, if it is not God himself.” (p.220)

True mysticism, like all genius, is the privilege of the few, the gifted, and Bergson defines the mystic as “an individual being, capable of transcending the limitations imposed on the species by its material nature, thus continuing and extending the divine action.” (pp.220-1) Most people cannot hope to achieve such affinity with life, however, when they are confronted with it, “there is in the innermost being of most men the whisper of an echo… we do not, and in most cases we could not, will it; we should collapse under the strain. Yet the spell has worked…” (p.214)

So, what happens is this higher vision revealed by the ‘genius’ is absorbed into static religion. “Incapable of rising to these heights, he will go through the motions, assume the appropriate attitudes and in his speech reserve the foremost place for certain formulae which he can never see filled with their whole meaning…” (p.214) Thus, arises a mixed religion, a new direction given to the old, an “aspiration for the ancient god who emanated from the myth-making function to be merged into the God Who effectively reveals Himself, Who illuminates and warms privileged souls with His presence.” (p.214) We see here **another theme that runs all through Bergson’s philosophy; two things we typically believe to fall on the same continuum but are actually different in kind**. The blending of static and dynamic religion is, therefore, not a gradual transformation of the one into the other; rather, it is the mixing of two quite different phenomena.

Bergson sees in the development of **Greek thought**, the attempts that were made to reach backwards to touch Life itself. He traces this development through Dionysianism, Orphism, Pythagoreanism, Platonism, and then into Alexandrine mysticism. Plotinus was the closest Greek thought came to true mysticism. “He [Plotinus] went as far as ecstasy, a state in which the soul feels itself, or thinks it feels itself, in the presence of God, being irradiated with His light; he did not get beyond this last stage, he did not reach the point where, as contemplation is engulfed in action, the human will becomes one with the divine will.” (p.221)

Similarly, in **Hindu thought**, they strove for the impetus through two paths. The first involved altering physiology and psychology. Bergson references an intoxicating drink called *soma*, which was supposed to produce something like a divine rapture. Later came *yoga*. The second path was renunciation, which reached a unique completeness in **Buddhism**. Since this is the opposite of action, it fails to reach Bergson’s mysticism.

Complete mysticism finds expression for Bergson only in the great **Christian mystics**. Here, Bergson makes some **observations concerning mysticism**. First, the mystic often talks of experiencing ecstasies, raptures, or other disturbances. These are the result of “a shock to the soul… [in] passing from the static to the dynamic, from the closed to the open, from everyday life to mystic life.” (p.229) We see the same thing in other types of genius. Still, the mystic lets the current take them, after which time they are filled with “a boundless joy, an all-absorbing ecstasy or an enthralling rapture: God is there, and the soul is in God.” (p.230) Although the soul has become absorbed in God, the will (the source of action) remains outside, and this provokes anxiety. This accounts for the “agitation in repose which is the striking feature of what we call complete mysticism.” (p.231) As the agitation grows, the mystic enters the “darkest night” of which all the great mystics have spoken. Finally, once the mystic transcends contemplation, such that now “it is God who is acting through the soul, in the soul; the union is total, therefore final.” (p.232) There is now, for the mystic, a “superabundance of life. There is a boundless impetus. There is an irresistible impulse which hurls it into vast enterprises.” (p.232) At this point, “the visions are left far behind: the divinity could not manifest itself from without to a soul henceforth replete with its essence. Nothing remains to distinguish such a man outwardly from the men about him.” (p.232)

What characterises the mystic for Bergson is **love**; but “no longer simple the love of man for God, it is the love of God for all men.” (p.233) This is different from the philosopher’s universal fraternity based on reason because only the former can induce us to attach ourselves to it passionately. Bergson even asks if philosophy could have come up with its principles if mystics hadn’t already shown them the way. What about the naturally expanding circles of affection; family, country, humanity? The family and social group are the only *natural*; i.e. instinctual, bonds ordained by nature. Beyond this, nature would be far more likely to prompt societies to war with each other. “The mystic love of humanity is a very different thing. It is not the extension of an instinct, it does not originate in an idea. It is neither of the senses nor of the mind. It is of both, implicitly, and is effectively much more. For such a love lies at the very root of feeling and reason, as of all other things… its direction is exactly that of the vital impetus; it *is* this impetus itself…” (pp.234-5)

In essence, Bergson sees **Christianity as the core of mysticism that transformed the (static) religion of Judaism and drove the (static) religious elements of Christianity** that sprang up around it, and which were the only way the public could grasp it.

Next, Bergson notes that it was “by following as closely as possible the evidence of biology that we reached the conception of a vital impetus and of a creative evolution.” (p.249) However, to go beyond these questions and question the vital impetus itself, requires mysticism. In what must surely be some of the weakest arguments in all of Bergson’s writings, he proceeds to claim that we may trust the findings of mysticism because different mystics’ accounts corroborate each other, and, although the certainty that comes from a fully worked-out system at once is absent, “probabilities may accumulate, and the sum-total be practically equivalent to certainty.” (p.248) The mystical conclusion is that “God is love, and the object of love: herein lies the whole contribution of mysticism. About this twofold love the mystic will never have done talking.” (p.252)

At this point, Bergson has fully taken to equating the originary impetus with God and love, beginning even to use the masculine pronoun when referring to it. “Creation will appear to him [the mystic] as God undertaking to create creators, that He may have, besides Himself, beings worthy of His love.” (p.255) Thus, as he concluded in *Creative Evolution*, life and matter are co-existent and independent, and since life is love, we can consider that we inhabit “a universe which is the mere visible and tangible aspect of love and of the need of loving, together with all the consequences entailed by this creative emotion: I mean the appearance of living creatures in which this emotion finds its complement…” (p.256) He then goes on to argue that the problem of the afterlife must “remain open” (p.264), suggesting that there is at least evidence in favour of it from experience in which we see a certain independence of the ‘soul’ or ‘spirit’ (basically memory) from the physical.

Fortunately, Bergson is, while going slightly off the rails here, still cognizant of the fact that he is venturing beyond his earlier work, which was much more philosophically viable: “No doubt we are here going beyond the conclusions we reached in *Creative Evolution*. We wanted then to keep as close as possible to facts. We stated nothing that could not in time be confirmed by the tests of biology… Here we are in the field of probabilities alone.” (p.256) Probabilities? You can say that again!

Four – Final Remarks

Bergson begins this last chapter with a **brief summary**: There are two kinds of society; closed and open. Corresponding to this, we see two kinds of religion and morality; one static, the other dynamic. The former can be traced to instinct and nature’s dictate that life proceed in society. The latter has its source in the vital impetus that is the creative drive of life. The reason we don’t see this clearly is that intelligence intervenes and seeks a motive; i.e. an intellectual content, to moral prescriptions, and “since intelligence is systematic, it imagines that the problem consists in reducing all moral motives to one. Now, if so, it is merely a matter of choosing one of them. General interest, personal interest, self-love, sympathy, pity, logical consistency, etc., there is no principle of action from which it is not possible to deduce more or less the morality that is generally accepted.” (p.269) The moral philosopher, then, finds in their theory nothing more than what they put there at the start.

From here on out, we will look at **what our investigation of nature reveals about human beings and our societies**. The guiding idea here is that, although education has layered atop of the modern human habits and attitudes completely different from those of our forebears, “the dispositions of the species subsist, immutable, deep within all of us” and we need only “dig down, first beneath the strata of the acquired, then beneath nature, and so get back into the very impetus of life.” (p.273)

**Humanity was designed by nature for small societies**. Thus, we see many of the problems we face are “problems which the increased size of societies may well have rendered insoluble.” (p.275) The only reason modern large cities are able to work is because there is a “principle of unity arising from the very heart of each of the elementary societies grouped together, that is to say, from the very seat of the disruptive forces to which an uninterrupted resistance has to be opposed. This principle, the only one that can possibly neutralize the tendency to disruption, is patriotism.” (pp.276-7)

**The form of government human societies are naturally designed for is monarchy or oligarchy**, two systems that are very similar. In every monarchy, there is a “community of privileged individuals, who borrow from or give to the chief something of his prestige, or rather who draw it, as he does, from some supernatural power.” (pp.277-8) Thus, analogous to the polymorphism we see in insect societies, where “diversity of social function is bound up with a difference of organization” (p.278), Bergson sees a naturally mandated ***dimorphism*** in humans, although rather than being physical, it is psychical. However, “this dimorphism does not separate men into two hard and fast categories, those that are born leaders and those that are born subjects. Nietzsche's mistake was to believe in a separation of this kind: on the one hand “slaves,” on the other “masters.” The truth is that dimorphism generally makes of each of us both a leader with the instinct to command and a subject ready to obey, although the second tendency predominates to the extent of being the only one apparent in most men.” (p.278)

So, what of **the ruled and the ruler**? Bergson notes that the ruled have always believed themselves to “belong to a superior race. There is nothing surprising in this. What might surprise us more, if we were not familiar with the dimorphism of social man, is that the people themselves should be convinced of this innate superiority.” (p.280) It should be obvious that there is nothing intrinsically different about the rulers and the ruled, but instinct holds us fast… until the upper class themselves break the illusion. They can do this unwittingly through incompetence or by abusing their power too much, but just as often it happens intentionally when members of the ruling class turn against it.

It is natural, therefore, that humanity should eventually have arrive at **democracy**. “Of all political systems, it is indeed the furthest removed from nature, the only one to transcend, at least in intention, the conditions of the “closed society.” It confers on man inviolable rights… It proclaims liberty, demands equality, and reconciles these two hostile sisters by reminding them that they are sisters, by exalting above everything fraternity.” (pp.281-2) Thus, Bergson says that democracy is “evangelical in essence and that its motive power is love.” (p.282)

So, natural society can be defined in the following way: self-centredness, cohesion, hierarchy, and absolute authority of the chief. This entails discipline and a war-spirit. **Did nature will war**? Nature bequeathed to us a tool-making intelligence, meaning that we are to be owners of our tools. “But since they are things apart from him, they can be taken away from him; it is easier to take them ready-made than to make them… the origin of war is ownership, individual or collective, and since humanity is predestined to ownership by its structure, war is natural.” (p.284) Another piece of evidence inclines us in this direction; our prejudicial attitudes to foreigners. “That we should know nothing about a country to which we have never been is not surprising. But that, being ignorant of it, we should criticize it, and nearly always unfavourably, is a fact which calls for explanation.” (p.285) Even more strangely, the resistance varies in inverse ratio to the distance we are from the foreign country under consideration. “It is those whom we have the greatest chance of meeting whom we least want to know.” (p.286)

Despite this somewhat Hobbesian analysis, Bergson is clear that **we can overcome these primitive, natural instincts** and build truly open societies, beneficial to all. This is because the war-instinct, while independent, hinges on rational motives. If we can address these motives, the unpleasant consequences of the closed society can be avoided. The main target of Bergson’s concern here is the modern preoccupation with **comfort and luxury**. He notes that the never-ending desire for the new never manages to yield the solid satisfaction we expect it to: “Never, indeed, do the satisfactions with which new inventions meet old needs induce humanity to leave things at that; new needs arise, just as imperious and increasingly numerous.” (p.298) In seeing the “frenzy” here, he looks to the past and notes an earlier frenzy in the opposite direction: “Throughout the Middle Ages, an ascetic ideal had predominated. There is no need to recall the exaggerations to which it led; here already you had frenzy.” (p.298) Asceticism was always confined to a minority, but he asserts that it nevertheless influenced the wider public and “became diluted for the rank and file of mankind into a general indifference to the conditions of daily existence.” (p.298) Even the richest made do with an absence of comfort that we would find astonishing. “It has been pointed out that if the lord lived better than the peasant, we must understand by this that he had more abundant food. Otherwise, the difference was slight.” (pp.298-9)

So, we see here the application of **another key theme in Bergson**; “two divergent tendencies which have succeeded each other and have behaved, both of them, frantically. So, we may presume that they correspond to two opposing manifestations of one primordial tendency…” (p.299) Following this model of oscillation and progress, Bergson notes that we should expect a return to simplicity: “We know that one frenzy brings on the counter-frenzy.” (p.303) Although this is obviously not a certainty, given that the future is fundamentally indeterminate. We see this play out in history. Socratic thought diverged into two different directions; the Cyrenaic and the Cynic. These developed into Epicureanism and Stoicism, and even Epicureanism divided into two; that of Epicurus and that of its popular counterpart.

This “continual craving for creature comforts, the pursuit of pleasure, the unbridled love of luxury” (p.303) all cause Bergson anxiety for the future because this balloon that has been “madly inflated” will deflate just as suddenly. These artificial, superfluous needs have to a large degree driven the scientific spirit of invention to produce more gadgets and toys, but this spirit “has not always operated in the best interests of humanity. It has created a mass of new needs; it has not taken the trouble to ensure for the majority of men, for all if that were possible, the satisfaction of old needs.” (p.305) Industry has been unconcerned with the needs it is catering to, simply “complied with public taste, and manufactured with no other thought than that of selling.” (p.306) Here Bergson recommends some centralised, organising body “which would co-ordinate industry and agriculture and allot to the machine its proper place, I mean the place where it can best serve humanity.” (p.306) Instead of encouraging artificial needs, fostering luxury, favouring cities to the detriment of the countryside, and widening the gap between employers and employed, Bergson would like to see an industry more regulated and responsible.

In an interesting passage, Bergson talks about **mechanisation**. We haven’t, he asserts, understood **the essence of machinery**. Machinery has come to be seen as simply for providing “exaggerated comfort and luxury for the few, rather than liberation for all.” (p.309) He suggests that man “must use matter as a support if he wants to get away from matter.” (p.309) And, then he goes further. “If our organs are natural instruments, our instruments must then be artificial organs. The workman's tool is the continuation of his arm, the tool-equipment of humanity is therefore a continuation of its body.” (p.309) The problem is that our machines have become so unimaginably powerful that they have extended, even distended, our bodies out of all proportion to the soul within, that the latter is “too weak to guide it. Hence the gap between the two.” (p.310) And from this gap, flow so many social, political, and international problems. In this sense then, Bergson says, “mechanism should mean mysticism” (p.310); i.e. it should concern itself with the welfare and betterment of (all of) humanity. For this, we are awaiting a mystic genius who will carry humanity beyond itself, who will “yearn to make of it a new species, or rather deliver it from the necessity of being a species; for every species means a collective halt, and complete existence is mobility in individuality.” (p.311)

However, instead of relying on a genius, Bergson suggests that we might find the inspiration or motivation from a more thorough investigation of **the paranormal**. The brain is primarily concerned with restricting an individual’s attention, narrowing their focus to within practical, utilitarian concerns. If this organ should be impaired for some reason, then we might just find other forces or capacities beyond those of which we are currently aware. In fact, Bergson considers that the vast wealth of phenomena recorded by psychic research makes it more likely than not that at least some of these stories reflect genuine abilities, even asserting that telepathy seems to be the “most strongly established fact” (p.316). His argument is that if “the reality of “telepathic phenomena” is called in doubt after the mutual corroboration of thousands of statements which have been collected on the subject, it is human evidence in general that must, in the eyes of science, be declared to be null and void: what, then, is to become of history?” (p.316)

Finally, there is a solid **definition of nature** that is worth mentioning in closing: “Nature – let us repeat it – is the name we give to the totality of compliances and resistances which life encounters in raw matter…” (p.311)