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HENRI BERGSON

THE

TWO SOURCES OF

MORALITY

AND

RELIGION

A DOUBLEDAY ANCHOR BOOK



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THE TWO SOURCES OF
MORALITY AND RELIGION

By HENRI BERGSON

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Translated by R. Ashley Audra and
Cloudesley Brereton

With the assistance of W. Horsfall Carter

Doubleday Anchor Books, 1954

2 vols



DOUBLEDAY & COMPANY, INC., GARDEN CITY, N.Y.

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his solitude he would carry with him, enveloping him and supporting him, the image of society; but now he is cut off from the image as well as the thing. He could reinstate himself in society by confessing his crime: he would then be treated according to his deserts, but society would then be speaking to his real self. He would resume his collaboration with other men. He would be punished by them, but, having made himself one of them, he would be in a small degree the author of his own condemnation; and a part of himself, the best part, would thus escape the penalty. Such is the force which will drive a criminal to give himself up. Sometimes, without going so far, he will confess to a friend, or to any decent fellow. By thus putting himself right, if not in the eyes of all, at least in somebody's eyes, he re-attaches himself to society at a single point, by a thread: even if he does not reinstate himself in it, at least he is near it, close to it; he no longer remains alienated from it; in any case he is no longer in complete rupture with it, nor with that element of it which is part of himself.

It takes this violent break to reveal clearly the nexus of the individual to society. In the ordinary way we conform to our obligations rather than think of them. If we had every time to evoke the idea, enunciate the formula, it would be much more tiring to do our duty. But habit is enough, and in most cases we have only to leave well alone in order to accord to society what it expects from us. Moreover, society has made matters very much easier for us by interpolating intermediaries between itself and us: we have a family; we follow a trade or a profession; we belong to our parish, to our district, to our country; and, in cases where the insertion of the group into society is complete, we may content ourselves, if need be, with fulfilling our obligations towards the group and so paying our debts to society. Society occupies the circumference; the individual is at the centre: from the centre to the circumference are arranged, like so many ever-

ligation as a whole is immanent in each of its parts, all duties are tinged with the hue taken on exceptionally by one or the other of them. From the practical point of view this presents no inconvenience, there are even certain advantages in looking at things in this way. For, however naturally we do our duty, we may meet with resistance within ourselves; it is wise to expect it, and not take for granted that it is easy to remain a good husband, a decent citizen, a conscientious worker, in a word an honest fellow. Besides, there is a considerable amount of truth in this opinion; for if it is relatively easy to keep within the social order, yet we have had to enrol in it, and this enrolment demands an effort. The natural disobedience of the child, the necessity of education, are proof of this. It is but just to credit the individual with the consent virtually given to the totality of his obligations, even if he no longer needs to take counsel with himself on each one of them. The rider need only allow himself to be borne along; still he has had to get into the saddle. So it is with the individual in relation to society. In one sense it would be untrue, and in every sense it would be dangerous, to say that duty can be done automatically. Let us then set up as a practical maxim that obedience to duty means resistance to self.

But a maxim is one thing, an explanation another. When, in order to define obligation, its essence and its origin, we lay down that obedience is primarily a struggle with self, a state of tension or contraction, we make a psychological error which has vitiated many theories of ethics. Thus artificial difficulties have arisen, problems which set philosophers at variance and which will be found to vanish when we analyse the terms in which they are expressed. Obligation is in no sense a unique fact, incommensurate with others, looming above them like a mysterious apparition. If a considerable number of philosophers, especially those who follow Kant, have taken this view, it is because they have confused the sense of

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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.

After an attack of rheumatism, we may feel some discomfort and even pain in moving our muscles and joints. It is the general sensation of a resistance set up by all our organs together. Little by little it decreases and ends by being lost in the consciousness we have of our movements when we are well. Now, we are at liberty to fancy that it is still there, in an incipient, or rather a subsiding, condition, that it is only on the look-out for a chance to become more acute; we must indeed expect attacks of rheumatism if we are rheumatic. Yet what should we say of a philosopher who saw in our habitual sensations, when moving our arms and legs, a mere diminution of pain, and who then defined our motory faculty as an effort to resist rheumatic discomfort? To begin with, he would thus be giving up the attempt to account for motory habits, since each of these implies a particular combination of movements, and can be explained only by that combination. The general faculty of walking, running, moving the body, is but an aggregation of these elementary habits, each of them finding its own explanation in the special movements it involves. But having only considered the faculty as a whole, and having then defined it as a force opposed to a resistance, it is natural enough to set up rheumatism beside it as an independent entity. It would seem as though some such error had been made by many of those who have speculated on obligation. We have any number of particular obligations, each calling for a separate explanation. It is natural, or, more strictly speaking, it is a matter of habit to obey them all. Suppose that exceptionally we deviate from one of them, there would be resistance; if we resist this resistance, a state of tension or contraction is likely to result. It is this rigidity which we objectify when we attribute so stern an aspect to duty.

It is also what the philosophers have in mind, when they see fit to resolve obligation into rational elements. In order to resist resistance, to keep to the right paths, when desire, passion or interest tempt us aside, we must necessarily give ourselves reasons. Even if we have opposed the unlawful desire by another, the latter, con-
 x | jured up by the will, could arise only at the call of an idea. In a word, an intelligent being generally exerts his influence on himself through the medium of intelligence. But from the fact that we get back to obligation by rational ways it does not follow that obligation was of a rational order. We shall dwell on this point later; we do not intend to discuss ethical theories for the present. Let us merely say that a tendency, natural or acquired, is one thing, another thing the necessarily rational method which a reasonable being will use to restore to it its force and to combat what is opposing it. In the latter case the tendency which has been obscured may reappear; and then everything doubtless happens as though we had succeeded by this method in re-establishing the tendency anew. In reality we have merely swept aside something that hampered or checked it. It comes to the same thing, I grant you, in practice: explain the fact in one way or another, the fact is there, we have achieved success. And in order to succeed it is perhaps better to imagine that things did happen in the former way. But to state that this is actually the case would be to vitiate the whole theory of obligation. Has not this been the case with most philosophers?

Let there be no misunderstanding. Even if we confine ourselves to a certain aspect of morality, as we have done up to now, we shall find many different attitudes towards duty. They line the intervening space between the extremes of two attitudes, or rather two habits: that of moving so naturally along the ways laid down by society as barely to notice them; or on the contrary hesitating and deliberating on which way to take, how far

to go, the distances out and back we shall have to cover if we try several paths one after another. In the second case new problems arise with more or less frequency; and even in those instances where our duty is fully mapped out, we make all sorts of distinctions in fulfilling it. But, in the first place, the former attitude is that of the immense majority of men; it is probably general in backward communities. And, after all, however much we may reason in each particular case, formulate the maxim, enunciate the principle, deduce the consequences: if desire and passion join in the discussion, if temptation is strong, if we are on the point of falling, if suddenly we recover ourselves, what was it that pulled us up? A force asserts itself which we have called the "totality of obligation": the concentrated extract, the quintessence of innumerable specific habits of obedience to the countless particular requirements of social life. This force is no one particular thing and, if it could speak (whereas it prefers to act), it would say: "You must because you must." Hence the work done by intelligence in weighing reasons, comparing maxims, going back to first principles, was 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. Never, in our hours of temptation, should we sacrifice to the mere need for logical consistency our interest, our passion, our vanity. Because in a reasonable being reason does indeed intervene as a regulator to assure this consistency between obligatory rules or maxims, philosophy has been led to look upon it as a principle of obligation. We might as well believe that the fly-wheel drives the machinery.

Besides, the demands of a society dovetail into one another. Even the individual whose decent behaviour is the least based on reasoning and, if I may put it so, the most conventional, introduces a rational order into his conduct by the mere fact of obeying rules which are

to that of instinct in respect of both intensity and regularity. This is exactly what we have called the "totality of obligation." This, be it said, will apply only to human societies at the moment of emerging from the hands of nature. It will apply to primitive and to elementary societies. But, however much human society may progress, grow complicated and spiritualized, the original design, expressing the purpose of nature, will remain.

Now this is exactly what has happened. Without going deeply into a matter we have dealt with elsewhere, let us simply say that intelligence and instinct are forms of consciousness which must have interpenetrated each other in their rudimentary state and become dissociated as they grew. This development occurred on the two main lines of evolution of animal life, with the Arthropods and the Vertebrates. At the end of the former we have the instinct of insects, more especially the Hymenoptera; at the end of the second, human intelligence. Instinct and intelligence have each as their essential object the utilisation of implements: in the first case, organs supplied by nature and hence immutable; in the second, invented tools, and therefore varied and unforeseen. The implement is, moreover, designed for a certain type of work, and this work is all the more efficient the more it is specialized, the more it is divided up between diversely qualified workers who mutually supplement one another. Social life is thus immanent, like a vague ideal, in instinct as well as in intelligence: this ideal finds its most complete expression in the hive or the ant-hill on the one hand, in human societies on the other. Whether human or animal, a society is an organization; it implies a co-ordination and generally also a subordination of elements; it therefore exhibits, whether merely embodied in life or, in addition, specifically formulated, a collection of rules and laws. But in a hive or an ant-hill the individual is riveted to his task by his structure, and the organization is relatively invariable,

whereas the human community is variable in form, open to every kind of progress. The result is that in the former each rule is laid down by nature, and is necessary: whereas in the latter only one thing is natural, the necessity of a rule. Thus the more, in human society, we delve down to the root of the various obligations to reach obligation in general, the more obligation will tend to become necessity, the nearer it will draw, in its peremptory aspect, to instinct. And yet we should make a great mistake if we tried to ascribe any particular obligation, whatever it might be, to 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, like that which lies behind the habit of speech. The morality of a human society may indeed be compared to its language. If ants exchange signs, which seems probable, those signs are provided by the very instinct that makes the ants communicate with one another. On the contrary, our languages are the product of custom. Nothing in the vocabulary, or even in the syntax, comes from nature. But speech is natural, and unvarying signs, natural in origin, which are presumably used in a community of insects, exhibit what our language would have been, if nature in bestowing on us the faculty of speech had not added that function which, since it makes and uses tools, is inventive and called intelligence. We must perpetually recur to what obligation *would have been* if human society had been instinctive instead of intelligent: this will not explain any particular obligation, we shall even give of obligation in general an idea which would be false, if we went no further; and yet we must think of this instinctive society as the counterpart of intelligent society, if we are not to start without any clue in quest of the foundations of morality.

From this point of view obligation loses its specific

it endures, almost unchangeable, throughout the centuries; habits and knowledge by no means impregnate the organism to the extent of being transmitted by heredity, as used to be supposed. It is true that we could consider what is natural as negligible in our analysis of obligation, if it had been crushed out by the acquired habits which have accumulated over it in the course of centuries of civilization. But it remains in excellent condition, very much alive, in the most civilized society. To it we must revert, not to account for this or that social obligation, but to explain what we have called obligation as a whole. Our civilized communities, however different they may be from the society to which we were primarily destined by nature, exhibit indeed, with respect to that society, a fundamental resemblance.

For they too are closed societies. They may be very extensive compared to the small agglomerations to which we were drawn by instinct and which the same instinct would probably tend to revive to-day if all the material and spiritual acquisitions of civilization were to disappear from the social environment in which we find them stored; their essential characteristic is none the less to include at any moment a certain number of individuals, and exclude others. We have said above, that underlying moral obligation there was a social demand. Of what society were we speaking? Was it of that open society represented by all mankind? We did not settle the matter, any more than one usually does when speaking of a man's duty to his fellows; one remains prudently vague; one refrains from making any assertion, but one would like to have it believed that "human society" is already an accomplished fact. And it is well that we should like to have it believed, for if incontestably we have duties towards man as man (although these duties have an entirely different origin, as we shall see a little later) we should risk undermining them, were we to make a radical distinction between them and our duties to our fel-

low-citizens. This is right enough so far as action is concerned. But a moral philosophy which does not emphasize this distinction misses the truth; its analyses will thereby be inevitably distorted. In fact, when we lay down that the duty of respecting the life and property of others is a fundamental demand of social life, what society do we mean? To find an answer we need only think what happens in time of war. Murder and pillage and perfidy, cheating and lying become not only lawful, they are actually praiseworthy. The warring nations can say, with Macbeth's witches: "Fair is foul, and foul is fair." Would this be possible, would the transformation take place so easily, generally and instantaneously, if it were really a certain attitude of man towards man that society had been enjoying on us up till then? Oh, I know what society says (it has, I repeat, its reasons for saying so); but to know what it thinks and what it wants, we must not listen too much to what it says, we must look at what it does. It says that the duties it defines are indeed, in principle, duties towards humanity, but that under exceptional circumstances, regrettably unavoidable, they are for the time being inapplicable. If society did not express itself thus, it would bar the road to progress for another morality, not derived from it, which it has every inducement to humour. On the other hand, it is consistent with our habits of mind to consider as abnormal anything relatively rare or exceptional, disease for instance. But disease is as normal as health, which, viewed from a certain standpoint, appears as a constant effort to prevent disease or to avoid it. In the same way, peace has always hitherto been a preparation for defence or even attack, at any rate for war. Our social duties aim at social cohesion; whether we will or no they compose for us an attitude which is that of discipline in the face of the enemy. This means that, however much society may endow man, whom it has trained to discipline, with all it has acquired during centuries of civili-

zation, society still has need of that primitive instinct which it coats with so thick a varnish. In a word, the social instinct which we have detected at the basis of social obligation always has in view—instinct being relatively unchangeable—a closed society, however large. It is doubtless overlaid by another morality which for that very reason it supports and to which it lends something of its force, I mean of its imperative character. But 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. We are fond of saying that the apprenticeship to civic virtue is served in the family, and that in the same way, from holding our country dear, we learn to love mankind. Our sympathies are supposed to broaden out in an unbroken progression, to expand while remaining identical, and to end by embracing all humanity. This is *a priori* reasoning, the result of a purely intellectualist conception of the soul. We observe that the three groups to which we can attach ourselves comprise an increasing number of people, and we conclude that a progressive expansion of feeling keeps pace with the increasing size of the object we love. And what encourages the illusion is that, by a fortunate coincidence, the first part of the argument chances to fit in with the facts; domestic virtues are indeed bound up with civic virtues, for the very simple reason that family and society, originally undifferentiated, have remained closely connected. But between the society in which we live and humanity in general there is, we repeat, the same contrast as between the closed and the open; the difference between the two objects is one of kind and not simply one of degree. How much greater it would be if, passing to the realm of feeling, we compared with each other the two sentiments, love of country and love of mankind! Who can help seeing that social cohesion is largely due to the necessity for a community to protect

itself against others, and that it is primarily as against all other men that we love the men with whom we live? Such is the primitive instinct. It is still there, though fortunately hidden under the accretions of civilization; but even to-day we still love naturally and directly our parents and our fellow-countrymen, whereas love of mankind is indirect and acquired. We go straight to the former, to the latter we come only by roundabout ways; for it is only through God, in God, that religion bids man love mankind; and likewise it is through reason alone, that Reason in whose communion we are all partakers, that philosophers make us look at humanity in order to show us the pre-eminent dignity of the human being, the right of all to command respect. Neither in the one case nor the other do we come to humanity by degrees, through the stages of the family and the nation. We must, in a single bound, be carried far beyond it, and, without having made it our goal, reach it by outstripping it. Besides, whether we speak the language of religion or the language of philosophy, whether it be a question of love or respect, a different morality, another kind of obligation supervenes, above and beyond the social pressure. So far we have only dealt with the latter. The time has come to pass to the other.

We have been searching for pure obligation. To find it we have had to reduce morality to its simplest expression. The advantage of this has been to indicate in what obligation consisted; the disadvantage, to narrow down morality enormously. Not indeed because that part of it which we have left on one side is not obligatory: is there such a thing as a duty which is not compulsory? But it is conceivable that, starting from a primitive basis of obligation pure and simple, such as we have just defined, this obligation should radiate, expand, and even come to be absorbed into something that transfigures it. Let us now see what complete morality would be like. We shall use the same method and once more proceed,

not downwards as up to now but upwards, to the extreme limit.

In all times there have arisen exceptional men, incarnating this morality. Before the saints of Christianity, mankind had known the sages of Greece, the prophets of Israel, the Arahants of Buddhism, and others besides. It is to them that men have always turned for that complete morality which we had best call absolute morality. And this very fact is at once characteristic and instructive; this very fact suggests to us the existence of 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, between the minimum and the maximum, between the two extremes. Whereas the former is all the more unalloyed and perfect precisely in proportion as it is the more readily reduced to impersonal formulae, the second, in order to be fully itself, must be incarnate in a privileged person who becomes an example. The generality of the one consists in the universal acceptance of a law, that of the other in a common imitation of a model.

Why is it, then, that saints have their imitators, and why do the great moral leaders draw the masses after them? They ask nothing, and yet they receive. They have no need to exhort; their mere existence suffices. For such is precisely the nature of this other morality. Whereas natural obligation is a pressure or a propulsive force, complete and perfect morality has the effect of an appeal.

Only those who have come into touch with a great moral personality have fully realized the nature of this appeal. But we all, at those momentous hours when our usual maxims of conduct strike us as inadequate, have wondered what such or such a one would have expected of us under the circumstances. It might have been a relation or a friend whom we thus evoked in thought. But it might quite as well have been a man we had never

Pub: 'human' - social in the stead of
 personal - social. Human 35

met, whose life-story had merely been told us, and to whose judgment we in imagination submitted our conduct, fearful of his censure, proud of his approval. It might even be a personality brought up from the depths of the soul into the light of consciousness, stirring into life within us, which we felt might completely pervade us later, and to which we wished to attach ourselves for the time being, as the disciple to his teacher. As a matter of fact this personality takes shape as soon as we adopt a model; the longing to resemble, which ideally generates the form, is an incipient resemblance; the word which we shall make our own is the word whose echo we have heard within ourselves. But the person matters little. Let us merely make the point that, whereas the first morality was the more potent the more distinctly it broke up into impersonal obligation, on the contrary the latter morality, at first dispersed among general precepts to which our intelligence gave its allegiance, but which did not go so far as to set our will in motion, becomes more and more cogent in proportion as the multiplicity and generality of its maxims merge more completely into a man's unity and individuality.

Whence does it derive its strength? What is the principle of action which here takes the place of the natural obligation, or rather which ends by absorbing it? To discover this, let us first see what is tacitly demanded of us. The duties dealt with so far are those imposed on us by social life; they are binding in respect of the city more than in respect of humanity. You might say that the second morality—if we *do* distinguish two—differs from the first in that it is human instead of being merely social. And you would not be entirely wrong. For we have seen that it is not by widening the bounds of the city that you reach humanity; between a social morality and a human morality the difference is not one of degree but of kind. The former is the one of which we are generally thinking when we feel a natural obligation.

there would be no object, no inducement. But if we step across the intervening space, thinking only of the goal or looking even beyond it, we shall easily accomplish a simple act, and at the same time overcome the infinite multiplicity of which this simplicity is the equivalent. What then, in this case, is the goal, what the direction of the effort? What exactly, in a word, is required of us?

Let us first define the moral attitude of the man we have been considering up to now. He is part and parcel of society; he and it are absorbed together in the same task of individual and social preservation. Both are self-centred. True, it is doubtful whether private interest invariably agrees with public interest: we know against what insurmountable difficulties utilitarian ethics has always come up when it laid down the principle that the individual could seek only his own good, while maintaining that this would lead him to desire the good of others. An intelligent being, pursuing his personal advantage, will often do something quite different from what the general interest demands. Yet, if utilitarian ethics persists in recurring in one form or another, this means that it is not untenable, and if it is tenable the reason is precisely because, beneath the intelligent activity, forced in fact to choose between its own interests and those of others, there lies a substratum of instinctive activity, originally implanted there by nature, where the individual and the social are well-nigh indistinguishable. The cell lives for itself and also for the organism, imparting to it vitality and borrowing vitality from it; it will sacrifice itself to the whole, if need be; and it would doubtless then say, if it were conscious, that it made this sacrifice in its own interest. Such would probably be the state of mind of an ant reflecting on her conduct. She would feel that her activity hinges on something intermediate between the good of the ant and the good of the ant-hill. Now it is just with this fundamental instinct

ference of kind. The first imply a choice, therefore an exclusion; they may act as incentives to strife, they do not exclude hatred. The latter is all 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. Has it, strictly speaking, an object? We shall ask this question. But for the present we shall confine ourselves to noting that this psychic attitude, or rather psychic motion, is self-sufficient.

Nevertheless there arises in regard to it a problem which stands ready solved in the case of the other. For that other was ordained by nature; we have just seen how and why we feel bound to adopt it. But the second attitude is acquired; it calls for, has always called for, an effort. How comes it that the men who have set the example have found other men to follow them? And what is the power that is in this case the counterpart of social pressure? We have no choice. Beyond instinct and habit there is no direct action on the will except feeling. The impulse given by feeling can indeed closely resemble obligation. Analyse the passion of love, particularly in its early stages; is pleasure its aim? Could we not as well say it is pain? Perhaps a tragedy lies ahead, a whole life wrecked, wasted, ruined, we know it, we feel it, no matter, we must because we must. Indeed the worst perfidy of a nascent passion is that it counterfeits duty. But we need not go as far as passion. Into the most peaceful emotion there may enter a certain demand for action, which differs from obligation as described above in that it will meet with no resistance, in that it imposes only what has already been acquiesced in, but which none the less resembles obligation in that it does impose something. Nowhere do we see this more clearly than in those cases where the demand ceases to have any practical consequence, thus leaving us the lei-

man, more particularly the feature of intelligence. All becomes clear, on the contrary, if we start by a quest beyond these manifestations for Life itself. Let us then give to the word biology the very wide meaning it should have, and will perhaps have one day, and let us say in conclusion that all morality, be it pressure or aspiration, is in essence biological.

Insult: to be able:
to reason something out is not identical
with rationality. The transformation of
"instincts" is an illusion just be-
cause they become "objects" of argument.
The capacity of thought has nothing to do
with a) intelligence or b) reason. —

Arendt B2430.B4 D42 1954
Bergson, Henri, 1859-1941
The two sources of morality
and religion