



THE PHILOSOPHER AND THEOLOGY ETIENNE GILSON

THE PHILOSOPHICAL MEMOIRS OF ONE OF THE
LEADING CATHOLIC THINKERS OF THE MODERN WORLD

A RANDOM HOUSE BOOK

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Translated from the French by Cécile Gilson



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When I consider that it took me about forty years to see what I had under my eyes and to learn what I could have read from the very beginning, I find it hard to believe. But this is what really happened to me. Only a change deep enough to obscure the nature of Thomistic theology, taking place between the thirteenth century and our own times, could explain the possibility of such a mistake. The immutability in which the schools sometimes take pride is often enough no more than apparent. For indeed they do change. It even happens that if, after a long period of time, they are confronted with the face of their youth, they do not recognize it as their own. Between 1905 and 1939, through uncertainties and at the price of many false starts, a Catholic philosopher was bound to waste much time in rediscovering notions that he should always have possessed.

I could have put these years to better use than in rediscovering my own past. Never was a present more deserving of attention than the one in which it was my privilege to live, in France, during the first third of the twentieth century. In philosophy, these years were for us the age of Bergson. For the first time since Descartes and Malebranche, France then had the good fortune to possess that rare being, a great metaphysician. I mean a man who, looking at the world and saying what he sees, leaves in the minds of men a renovated image; not indeed as the scientist, by discovering new laws or new structures in matter, but rather by penetrating further into the core of being. Bergson did just that. He did it under our very eyes, in our presence, in such a simple way that we were surprised not to be able to do it ourselves, introducing us to a new world as he himself was discovering it step by step. No words will adequately express the admiration, the gratitude,

the affection we felt and still feel in our hearts for him.

To form a just idea of what this philosophy meant to us, one date should be kept in mind. Bergson was and remains before anything else in my memory the man whose first philosophical career ended, so to speak, with *Creative Evolution*. Whatever he published between the *Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness* and *Creative Evolution* came as from one single vein. Read, reread, and meditated ceaselessly, these works brought us an interpretation, complete in its principles though certainly not in its details, of the world and of man through whom the world arrives at self-awareness. We had the feeling of being formed by him and, as it were, introduced to a vision in which the universe was exposed in its intelligibility. In one sense, some of us never went beyond this point. Speaking for myself, I can say that the Bergsonian revelation ended in 1907, the year when *Creative Evolution* was published. By that time Bergson had given me all the help I could expect from him and he had said all that was profitable to me in his message. After that date, I continued to meditate his great books, but with the feeling that no new revelation was to be expected from him. However precious it could be, what he still might say would expand his message without enriching it. During the long interval of twenty-five years that separates *Creative Evolution* from *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, we knew that he was applying his genius to these problems, but we were awaiting the fruits of his meditations without any impatience. In fact, we were expecting nothing from him. His philosophy of nature had been for us a liberation. In this respect, I had contracted toward him a debt that nothing will ever make me deny; but the situation was different as far as religion was concerned. I had one, I knew what

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it was, and my very effort to deepen my knowledge of its nature turned me away from attempting other approaches. While I was thus living my religion, Bergson was still looking for one. How could I hope to receive enlightenment from him on an order of facts whose meaning he could not penetrate for lack of personal experience?

The Two Sources was published in 1932. Something unexpected then happened to me and I cannot explain it clearly. Still less can I justify it, for I am aware that there was an element of irrationality, not to say unreasonableness, in my reaction. After sending the author the usual compliments, I had the book carefully bound and placed it on a shelf in my library where it was to remain unread for years whose number I would be ashamed to acknowledge. Only the violence of my admiration for Bergson can account for such an attitude. I never confused philosophy with religion. If religion is truly at stake, then our whole life is involved. Now I knew that Bergson's book could not transcend the level of philosophy. This was a perfectly natural and reasonable fact; I would have accepted it from any philosopher whose thought had not become for so many years the food of my own. But that he, Bergson, could have embarked under my very eyes on a venture that was bound to fail, this was too much for me. Besides, the thing was done. It was no longer in my power to prevent the disaster, but I did not want to witness it.

I am not pretending that my attitude was reasonable; I am simply relating what I did. I felt reluctant to accompany a beloved master on a pilgrimage to a spring whose water I had been drinking from early youth. One does not find the sources of religion at the term of any philosophy, but beyond it. If one wishes to speak of religion, one must start from it, which has no

source, but is the source. There is no other way to reach it. What I still wanted to know about religion was not anything that Bergson could teach me. A sadness held me back on the threshold of this last masterpiece, and it was only much later, after I had learned to my own satisfaction the meaning of such words as "faith" and "theology," that I could open the book without misgivings. From the very first page the old charm worked again. I had to lay the book down for short intervals, and at times to interrupt my reading. I felt like a man who wanted to slow down the tempo of a piece of music in order to prevent it from passing away, unmindful that it was necessary for it to pass in order to be. Still, my worst fears proved more than justified. It was not this or that idea, this or that development, that was out of focus; the whole book was out of focus. The author had established himself outside the focus of his subject and had remained there.

There was another cause for emotion. Reading the masterpiece from the vantage point of faith and in the perspective of time, I thought that the experience of a whole life was at last finding its true meaning. This philosophy of Bergson, so powerless to account for the nature of religion, could have been for Christian philosophers the occasion of a thoroughgoing re-examination of their own philosophy, the prelude to a new era of doctrinal creativeness and enrichment.

The task to be undertaken was not to reform Thomism in the light of the new philosophy. The truth theology lives by is that of the Christian revelation which is immutable. The Church cannot change her theology every time it pleases some philosopher to propose a new view of the universe. On the contrary, what had to be done was to transform the new philosophy in the light of Thomism. The call was not for an anti-Thom-

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disqualified itself to this end, it was necessary for the metaphysician to look elsewhere. In the order of science proper, Bergson simply reproached intelligence with its inaptitude to know those objects whose existence it denied precisely because it failed to grasp them.

In fact, Bergson always conceived philosophical research after the pattern of scientific research. One day he was entrusted by his colleagues with the thankless task of saying what the Collège de France had contributed to philosophy since the time of its foundation in the sixteenth century. This was not easy to do since, to be quite truthful about it, the only outstanding service the Collège ever rendered philosophy had been to appoint Bergson. Bergson himself could not very well say that. Still he did not shy away from the task. Not without some secret amusement he availed himself of the occasion to say "What Philosophy Owes to Claude Bernard." Now what philosophy owes to this biologist, according to Bergson, is a conception of scientific research such as philosophers would be well-advised to follow. "Philosophy should not be systematic," Claude Bernard had said. Echoing this startling statement, Bergson added that since our intelligence, which is a part of nature, is not as wide as nature, "it is doubtful that any of our present ideas are vast enough to embrace it." Then he added: "Let us work then to dilate our thinking, let us force our understanding, if necessary let us break our routines; but let us not narrow down reality to the measure of our ideas since it is up to our ideas to model themselves, enlarged, upon reality." This war waged against intellectual sloth does not indicate an enemy of intelligence. None understood this better than Charles Péguy, who was always in deep harmony with the spirit of the doctrine. He has

neoscholastics say on this point? Strictly speaking, "quality is an accident that perfects a substance both in its being and in its operations." Though this was not to say something false, it was to say nothing useful. On the contrary, Bergson was calling attention to the experience of quality from the inside. Instead of describing it from the outside, he progressively brought his reader to perceive it such as it was in itself. In short, Bergson was teaching us to purify the category of quality from all contamination by that of quantity.

This first chapter of *The Immediate Data of Consciousness* was to have far-reaching consequences. By bringing his first effort to bear upon the notion of quality, Bergson had shown great metaphysical acumen. By so doing he was loosening the first mesh of the net woven by the determinism of quantity. For the first time since Comte and Kant metaphysics had waged war against scientific determinism on its own ground and won it. Through this break, all the rest was to follow. Psychological determinism was eliminated from the mind; freedom was restored in its rights and this not simply in virtue of some abstract piece of reasoning, but rather as an observed and personally experienced fact. At the same time, the soul was itself again, free from matter; and mechanical determinism, the first article of the materialistic creed, was brought back within its own bounds in nature as it had been in the mind. The term of this development was to be the notion of a world conceived as the work of a creative evolution, an ever-flowing source of inventions, a pure duration which, as it progressed, shed matter as a by-product.

We had repeatedly been told that metaphysics was dead. Our professors agreed on this one and only point, that metaphysics had ceased to exist. Lévy-Bruhl liked to repeat, with Comte, that metaphysics did not need

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to be refuted; it was of itself falling into disuse. Now the very thing we had hoped to receive from the Sorbonne, and had been refused, the Collège de France was giving to us with liberality. The Collège de France, this sole and unique teaching institution which, in France, is a state institution and yet free, how grateful to it we should feel, we, the young friends of metaphysics whom Bergson had found wandering in the desert of scientism and led out of it!

When in 1907 we could at last read, as in a sort of intellectual trance, the view of the world depicted in *Creative Evolution*, we could not believe our eyes. Of course this was somewhat above our heads. The book was the fruit of the long labor of a great philosophic mind. The doctrine it contained was such that it was almost an insult to accept it at first sight, as if one were then qualified to test its foundations, to calculate the resistance of the material, and to assess without error the solidity of the building. It was necessary to pause, to ponder on the doctrine, to walk personally in the philosopher's footsteps, in short, to embark upon this philosophical venture on one's own. But the winds seemed to be favorable. By a piece of luck so extraordinary that it seemed almost providential, theology had just come upon a pagan philosophy—all the more philosophy as it was the more pagan—which offered theology a soil in which nature is in proximate potency to grace, the only source from which its perfection can come to it. What was needed was another Thomas Aquinas.

We are still waiting for him. One hopes never to see again another example of the wisdom of theology so little anxious to discharge the task it rightly claims for its own. To judge the philosophers in the light of revelation, to redress their errors, to make up for their shortcomings, is a magnificent task; to achieve it, however,

philosophers, and the only difference between them was that they happened to be Christians, often priests and theologians, whereas he himself was a religious agnostic. The philosophy they asked him to accept was not even the true philosophy found in the writings of Saint Thomas. Most of the time, it was some substitute, such as that of Cajetan or of Suarez. At any rate, they met Bergson on purely philosophical grounds, with the consequence that, in order to convince him, they should have been better philosophers than he was. Had they met him as theologians and relied on the light of theological wisdom, they could have done with him what Thomas Aquinas had once done with Plato, Aristotle, Avicenna, Averroes, and many other ones; that is to say, they could have shown him where his philosophy fell short of the truth and, at the same time, pointed out the higher source of light from which they themselves derived their certitude. Instead of one more dispute between philosophers, one would then have witnessed theology at work in the fulfillment of her perennial task.

The disorder was then at its peak. The theologians were behaving toward Bergson as philosophers, while their philosophy could not but be a philosophy of theologians. Now Bergson was neither a theologian nor a Christian. To judge him in the name of Christian philosophy was to impose on him duties that were not his; it was to exact from this philosophic intelligence, possibly the purest that the world had known since Plotinus, tasks that as a pagan he was not able to discharge. This was not all. By severing the philosophy of Saint Thomas from its theological sources, they divided the doctrine of the Common Doctor of the Church into two stumps, a separate theology on the one side and a separate philosophy on the other, and they allowed the ancient tree of Christian philosophy to wither on the ground. They

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coin, of which Bergson himself rightly said that it outlined a "natural metaphysics of the human understanding," carried with it a physics and a cosmology that though admirable in their time, are now out of date. No doubt the physics of Aristotle was full of notions that would remain universally and perpetually valid. A philosophy of nature has been drawn from it, a sort of intermediary wisdom and, so to speak, a halfway house between science and metaphysics, but Aristotle himself did not see any difference between them. What we call philosophy of nature was to him physics itself, the science of a universe of concentric spheres, eternally existing and eternally moved by their desire for a first form pure of all matter, the Prime Immovable Mover. This is a universe in which, with the exception of the Prime Mover, who forever enjoys himself in the eternity of a blessed life, ~~everything is ceaselessly in motion and yet nothing new ever happens.~~ The world of Aristotle has an everlasting existence, the heavens have eternally accomplished their revolutions and are still doing so; and even in our sublunar world, in which individuals are endlessly coming to be and passing away, the species are immutable, having always been what they now are and will ever be. Corrected on the more critical points on which it directly opposed the teaching of the Church, for instance on the necessary existence of an uncreated universe, the scientific and philosophical view of the world formulated by Aristotle has been perpetuated in neoscholasticism; and, on the whole, it continued to be the doctrine used against Bergson by his scholastic opponents when, at the maximum of its virulence, the modernist movement was condemned in 1907.

A crisis of conscience then developed among many young Catholic philosophers open to the influence of Bergson. It was not the so-called Bergsonian theologies

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as Aristotle had conceived them, joined his cosmography in the world of lost illusions. The world of modern science differs from that of the Greeks in this, that it has a history. This unexpected confluence of nature and history, two orders that in the past had always been separated, not to say opposed, will remain for those who will look back to it from the future the distinctive feature of the late-nineteenth-century view of the world. Since then we ourselves have seen scientific universes tumbling upon one another with increasing velocity. Those of us who were born in the world of Newton have passed from it into that of Einstein, and we might be at a loss to say in which universe we are living today. The philosophy of Bergson itself lost its breath trying to catch up with the world of Einstein. Whatever one may think of it, one can hardly deny that with its insistence on change, becoming, duration—in short, creative evolution—Bergson's philosophy truly was that of the science of our own time.

The obstinacy of many scholastics in maintaining in a state of philosophical privilege the Greek cosmos of Aristotle is all the more difficult to understand because the universe of science was never closer to that of Scripture than it is today. The Old Testament relates the origin of the world as a story, that is to say, a sequence of moments in the course of which the diverse elements of the physical world, the vegetable and animal species, then man himself, appeared successively on the stage of the world. Nothing resembles this universe of Scripture less than the eternal and uncreated cosmos of Aristotle, peopled with species immutably fixed under their present appearances, and completely alien to history both in its origin and its duration. Assuredly, Scripture can do without science. It is as independent of the universe of Einstein as of that of Aris-

tote, and religious dogmas lie so far beyond the reach of laboratory demonstration that scientific revolutions will leave the Church unconcerned. There was therefore no reason for the theologians to follow after Bergson. Only, it is paradoxical that scholastics persistently used Aristotle against him on the very points on which his personal notions about the world were closer to the teaching of Christian dogma than was that of the Greek philosopher.

One of the harmful effects of this attitude was to create the false impression of an absolute doctrinal divergence between the philosophical thought of Bergson and that of Saint Thomas. On this point we have a choice witness in the person of Charles Péguy. For the Catholic critics of Bergson were Thomists, or so considered themselves, and since Péguy knew nothing about Saint Thomas Aquinas he believed them implicitly. All the attacks launched against Bergson in the name of Thomism were inevitably understood by him as a struggle between Bergson and Saint Thomas Aquinas in which Bergson even appeared to be the aggressor. One wonders how he could have been, since his complete ignorance of Thomism protected him on this point. Péguy was in a turmoil over the situation. Entreating the Catholic adversaries of Bergson to weigh the consequences of their attitude, he then warned them as follows:

Whatever will be taken away from Bergson will redound to Spencer, and not to Saint Thomas. And once more Saint Thomas will have nothing, and he will have no one. He will be as he was and what he was twenty-five or thirty years ago, before the coming of Bergson: a great saint of the past, a great doctor of the past, a great theologian of the past. Respected, revered, venerated. Without any hold on the present, without access, without that