

Out Of The Shadow
Henri Bergson and Three French
Philosophers

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Belle époque France did not have a more productive philosopher than Henri Bergson. Bergson's attempt to bridge the chasm between science and spirituality put him at the center of intellectual ferment during the period. Because of this, he influenced a broad array of political, scientific, and religious thinkers in the first years of the twentieth century. Those whom he influenced were as different as Georges Sorel and Marcel Proust.¹ Beyond the specifically academic dimension to his work, Bergson became an early-day celebrity in the eyes of the literate public. His lectures at the *Collège de France* drew Parisian society ladies as well as students. As a lecturer, he was nearly as much showman as academician.² This was true on both sides of the Atlantic.

Thus it is no surprise that Bergson provided inspiration, irritation, and challenge to a generation of French intellectuals. They damned him as often as they venerated him, yet French men and women of letters during the first thirty years of the century could never deny his importance.³ So it was with three of the most impressive Catholic philosophers of the time: Maurice Blondel, Gabriel Marcel, and Jacques Maritain.

Bergson's epistemology was problematic for all three men and, indeed, was the source of much of their interest in his work. Certainly Bergson's entire approach to knowing was a startling departure from the rationalist tradition. In the Bergsonian world, one did not *know* things; one *intuited* them. Not the least of the striking quality of Bergson's stress on intuition lay in the eloquence with

¹ See Jacques Maritain, *Ransoming the Time*, trans. H. L. Binsse, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1941), p. 53. See also Gabriel Marcel, "Discours sur Bergson," *Bulletin de la Société Française de Philosophie*, 54 : 1, (Jan-Mar), p. 32.

² "Discours sur Bergson," p. 27.

³ See Maurice Blondel, *La Philosophie et l'esprit chrétien*, (Paris: Presses Universitaires Universitaires de France, 1950), Vol. I, p. 78.

which he expressed it. As an animated speaker, Bergson could—and often did—beguile his listeners. The slight cock to his head, the abrupt motion of his right arm while lecturing were captivating to student audiences.⁴ One is tempted to suspect that in Bergson's dynamic style, as well as in his personal charm, there was the potential for seduction. Without a doubt, this accounted for much of the persuasiveness in his principle of intuition.

In any case, Bergson's belief in intuition as the vehicle for human knowing was central to his philosophy. Like the trunk of a tree, it supported any number of subordinate principles as though they were branches. His positions on duration, perception, biological evolution, and faith all bore on his treatment of intuition. Like the problem of epistemology itself, these other questions demanded the attention of his contemporaries. It was here that they entered into an intriguing acceptance/rejection posture with regard to Bergson. Unlike Bergson, Blondel, Marcel, and Maritain were Catholic philosophers. Therefore their interests and priorities with regard to epistemological questions took different perspectives.

In Blondel's case, any philosophical exercise had of necessity to lead to an understanding of God's divine plan.⁵ Because his career oscillated between philosophical and theological considerations, care must be taken when reading Blondel. The epistemological ground that he staked out in regard to God's existence had a Thomistic starting point. A partial knowledge of God can be gained from the study of philosophy. However, Blondel was dissatisfied with a thoroughly philosophical approach to the knowledge of God.

Though he did not acknowledge Bergsonian influence, he turned to intuition as a means of completing our apprehension of the nature of God. "Prophetic intuition" as Blondel termed it, brought the Holy Spirit into our consciousness.⁶ The human mode of apprehending Divine Revelation is driven by intuition. The inherent tension between Thomistic and Bergsonian epistemology seemed not to distress Blondel in the least. In fact, reading Blondel forces one to question whether or not he had the intellectual discipline to appreciate the elegance of St. Thomas's approach to human knowledge.

In tones more reminiscent of Tertullian than Thomas, he goes on the offensive against philosophy in his book, *La philosophie et l'esprit chrétien*. Warning of "the temptations of prideful independence [and] scientific pretension..."⁷ he argues that knowledge of God is based on faith, not reason. Continuing his diatribe against philosophical inquiry, he adds that the core of

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., p. 115.

Christian belief is neither subject to rational investigation nor open to critical analysis. He cites, as an example, the matter of the Holy Trinity. He begins, "Doubtless there are reasons for the philosopher to pose certain problems which concern the necessary unity of God and His sovereign personality. But it is not legitimate to assume, as do certain Doctors [sic], that a rational 'demonstration' can or ought to be offered in order to clarify our thoughts on the most necessary, the most fundamental of truths."⁸ Blondel imposed boundaries on discursive knowledge, which were meant to point up the futility of rational attempts to understand the divine.

Bergson had his own critique of discursive reasoning that he revealed (among other places) in his *Introduction to Metaphysics*. In his criticism of rational investigation, Bergson insisted that our abilities to *know* through reason were limited to the *relative* understanding of a given object.⁹ The great inadequacy of discursive reasoning for Bergson was that it confined our knowledge only to a set of simulacrum that could do no more than represent the *absolute*. Using his well-known example of the object moving through space,¹⁰ Bergson demonstrated that the actual flight of the object could only be traced by mathematical or empirical symbols, none of which could capture the real dynamism of a moving, animated object. Points of reference and axis marks are only able to *represent* the movement of Bergson's flying object. They cannot tell us the absolute nature of the thing. They cannot present us with the *thing in itself*.

It is here that we can detect a reason for Blondel's rejection of rational epistemology. The reason was Immanuel Kant and his insistence that the human intellect could not know things in their essence, *der Ding an sich*. Since the end of the eighteenth century and the appearance of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, French thinkers had been forced to contend with the limits that the Königsberger had imposed on epistemology. He proclaimed that we could never know the substance of anything; it was beyond our human abilities. Kant had many adherents in France by the end of the nineteenth century.¹¹ To Catholic philosophers like Blondel, Marcel, and Maritain, Kantian constraints on human knowing presented serious difficulties with the knowledge of God. The Kantian critique of human knowing set strict limits on what we could discern of the universe and especially the Kingdom of Heaven.

⁸ Ibid., p. 214.

⁹ See Henri Bergson, *Œuvres*, Textes Annotés par André Robinet, 2^{me} éd., (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1963), p. 1393.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ See A. D. Sertillanges, *Avec Henri Bergson* (Paris: Gallimard, 1911), p. 11.

After 1899, Bergson's was the most insistent voice against Kantian rationalism. Much of Bergson's doctrine of intuition was aimed at making an end run around the imposing critical edifice of Kant's epistemology. Conceding to Kant the limits he placed upon human knowledge, Bergson introduced a new dimension to the realm of cognition. It was his contention that the most profound understanding comes not from reason, but from an affinity with the metaphysical. Here was a development in the theatre of French thinking which was nothing short of dramatic. To grant Bergson his argument regarding the limits of discursive reasoning and the limitless potential of intuitive reasoning was to make all things possible. As Bergson expressed it:

Symbols and points of reference place me outside of it [the object]; they do not yield to me anything but that which is common to others of its type and not its essence.¹²

Thus Blondel could renounce rational approaches to the knowledge of God. He was at once calling for a reaffirmation of faith and striking a blow at the epistemological constraints of Immanuel Kant. Hence he was able to warn his listeners against the use of "empirical pseudo-sciences" in modes that presume to know and understand Divinity.¹³

Gabriel Marcel was similarly fascinated with Bergsonian intuition. In Marcel's case, his interest in intuitive knowledge rested as much on its didactic qualities as on its investigative attributes. He saw in Bergson's startling approach to knowing a "power of propulsion" capable of having the most profound influence on those who were exposed to it.¹⁴ Specifically, he pointed to two of *fin de siècle* France's most renowned authors: Charles Péguy and Marcel Proust. It was Marcel's contention that both these men, having been students of Bergson, came away with his brand of intuitive epistemology. More than this, Marcel contended, Péguy and Proust pursued opposing directions in their work and in their personal convictions.¹⁵ And both of them proceeded to build their ideas on the foundation that they had taken from the master.

In Marcel's eyes, the reason for the greatness of both Péguy and Proust was that they understood what was true and real; not just the empty symbols of the truth.¹⁶ So, Gabriel Marcel recognized Bergsonian epistemology for its teaching and inspirational qualities.

¹² Henri Bergson, *Œuvres*, p. 1394.

¹³ See Maurice Blondel, *Exigences philosophiques du christianisme*, (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1950), p. 280.

¹⁴ "Discours sur Bergson," p. 32.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

At the same time Marcel was put off by what he distinguished as a difference between what he viewed as Bergsonism as a philosophical system and Bergsonism as “a mode of thinking.”¹⁷ By way of criticism, Marcel feared that much of Bergson’s philosophizing, including the matter of intuitive knowledge, was suffering from intellectual sclerosis. Bergson’s disciples had embraced the form, but not the substance of their master’s thinking. In Gabriel Marcel’s estimation, Bergsonism as a system had completely discounted the role of the intellect in knowing.¹⁸ Latter-day Bergsonians had fallen into the snare of confusing the product of intelligence for intelligence itself. Marcel’s critique of Bergsonian epistemology as practiced by his followers points out a tension between intellect and instinct. This, he says, is a tension that ought not to be. Marcel’s reading of Bergson shows the dynamics of intellect and instinct as complementary, not as adversaries. Writing in 1932, Marcel mourned the “decaying ideas” which by that time he perceived as having attacked Bergsonism.¹⁹ Apparently, Marcel admired Bergsonian intuition in its pristine form, but was saddened to see its fall from grace as a result of mishandling by Bergson’s later adherents.

Jacques Maritain had been one of Bergson’s earliest pupils. Both he and his wife, Raissa, had attended Bergson’s lectures at the *Collège de France*. Maritain’s later career was characterized by a developing critique of Bergsonism. At the heart of Maritain’s reproof, was the lack of asperity in Bergson’s epistemology. Maritain pointed out that the starting point for Bergsonian intuition was empiricism.²⁰ As a former mathematician and scientist, Bergson had retained an epistemological procedure that was scientific in its essentials. As Maritain came to embrace Thomism, he also became aware of the lack of logical rigor in Bergson’s order of thought.

Maritain was perfectly willing to celebrate Bergson’s rebellion against the scientism of nineteenth-century figures such as Herbert Spencer, yet he lamented the Bergsonian tendency to fall in with the existential speculations of someone like Martin Heidegger.²¹ Bergson’s denial of the efficacy of rational thought in favor of the instinctual posed a major weakness in his epistemology as far as Maritain was concerned. Nonetheless, Maritain main-

¹⁷ See Gabriel Marcel, *Creative Fidelity*, (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Co., 1982), p. 13.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ See Gabriel Marcel, “Henri Bergson et le problème de Dieu,” *L’Europe Nouvelle*, 142, (30 avril, 1932), pp. 558-59.

²⁰ See Jacques Maritain, *De Bergson à Thomas d’Aquin: essais de métaphysique et de morale*, (Paris: Paul Hartmann, 1947), p. 34.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 33-34.

tained an immense respect for Bergson as a counterweight to nineteenth-century idealism. In Maritain's estimation, it was Bergson who reintroduced the possibility of a *cosmic* universe into European philosophy.²² Idealist philosophers—once again we meet Kant—had insisted on a universe that could be accommodated within the bounds of the human imagination. Therefore, any notion of the Deity was slave to the limits of human cognition. This, of course, was a serious assault on Christian theology. Bergson had mounted an effective counterstroke against Kantian idealism with his insistence on the metaphysical interpretation of the universe. Celebrating Bergson's metaphysics as the "most profound, penetrating, and daring known to our times,"²³ Maritain had nothing but admiration for "...the master of my youth."²⁴

Like Blondel, Maritain rejoiced in Bergsonian intuition for its brilliant opposition to Kant. Unlike the mercurial Blondel, Maritain tempered his gladness with the conviction that for all his heroics, Bergson remained well outside the limits of Aristotelianism.

Bergson's last major publication was *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, which appeared in 1932. In that study, he examined the metaphysical differences between what he called "closed" morality and "open" morality.²⁵ Closed or "static" morality was intellect-driven and designed to provide for human survival. Its major characteristics were stasis, self-centeredness, and intolerance toward different sets of belief. Open morality, on the other hand, featured continual change (evolution), inclusiveness, and an attitude of outreach toward humanity. Open morality, unlike closed, was sparked not by the intellect, but by intuition.

The Two Sources was a distillation of almost all of Bergson's philosophy. He seemed to be pulling all of his earlier statements together in this final testament. Creative evolution was linked to intuition as well as the *élan vital*, and the nature of God. For this reason, his valedictory drew the interest of the intellectual community of France and the entire west.

Marcel saw in the concepts of open and closed morality the central question in religious matters. His reading of open morality described it as providing the psychological impetus for admiration. Admiration served to remove human self-centeredness. In admiration, one was able to escape from self-absorption. For Marcel, the first step toward open morality was to escape from our egotism. Conversely, to partake of closed morality was to

²² Ibid., p. 72.

²³ Ibid., p. 57.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 127.

²⁵ See Henri Bergson, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, trans. R.A. Audra & C. Brereton, (Garden City, New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1954), p. 205.

consign oneself to isolation from the community of man.²⁶ To the extent that one was in a state of closed morality, he/she was unreceptive to the needs, aspirations, and accomplishments of the rest of humanity.

In the matter of open and closed morality, Marcel found himself closer to Bergson than in any other aspect of Bergson's thinking. Marcel pointed out that closed morality presupposed a closed society. He went on to say, "I belong to" a closed society is to relegate oneself to social as well as spiritual stagnation. When one proclaims, "I belong" in the context of an open society, he/she is making it possible to outgrow self-centeredness and to clear the way for spiritual development.²⁷ In Marcel's reading of Bergson, open morality was the key to creativity; in fact, without a free and open environment (one of the themes of *The Two Sources*), the phrase "I belong" is rendered meaningless.

In a specifically religious vein, Marcel reflected on the nature of conviction and belief in the context of open and closed morality. He drew a fine, but crucial distinction between the two words by associating "conviction" with the egocentrism of closed morality. To Gabriel Marcel, conviction denoted an uncreative, unresponsive state of mind. At the end of the day, this sort of closed mind would not be able to sustain itself and could not endure.²⁸ Marcel associated "belief" with open morality. The individual, who was central to his reading of open morality, was open to spiritual growth through belief. Belief called upon the individual to assert all of his/her faculties. The act of belief served as a spiritual exercise designed to draw the individual out and to open to him/her all the possibilities of the active life.²⁹

Blondel also saw a vital spark in Bergson's work. In praise of Bergson, he referred to his writing as the "first life of spring, removing the spirit-smothering sediment of twenty-five centuries of science."³⁰ Blondel had an affinity for Bergson's opinions regarding the nature of life and the importance of action in that life. Because of this, he made an easy transferal of his religious priorities to terms with which Bergson would have agreed. Even as Bergson had spoken of the Christian mystics as personifying open morality, Blondel described Christian theology as being "open and maintain[ing] a flexibility of adaptation by reason of the strength of all its attachments to

²⁶ See Gabriel Marcel, *Creative Fidelity*, p. 48.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 96.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 133.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 134.

³⁰ Maurice Blondel, *L'itinéraire Philosophique de Maurice Blondel*, ed. Frédéric Lefèvre, (Paris: Editions Spés, 1928), p. 48.

irrevocable and organically plastic decisions like a living being.”³¹ His version of open morality was frankly Christian, but in this instance, he saw a role for philosophy in guiding the individual believer to true openness. Though he saw philosophy and faith essentially at odds, Blondel also viewed the two as having a “symbiotic relationship” which presents each person with a unique destiny, which he dares not shun.³² None of which is to say that he was prepared to grant philosophy a blank check in leading humanity to spiritual openness. While he was willing to entertain certain Bergsonian points of view, he was adamant in warning those who would seek open morality away from Descartes. He rejected Cartesianism as both “fruitless” and “barren.”³³

Both Blondel and Marcel were willing to adapt Bergson’s open morality in the service of Christian thought. So, indeed, was Maritain. Maritain was gratified by Bergson’s treatment of the Christian mystics in *The Two Sources*. By making of mysticism the intelligent manifestation of Christianity,³⁴ Bergson convinced Maritain that dynamic religion was a mode of knowledge. In this instance, it was a matter of gaining knowledge of God’s transcendent nature. Maritain came close to stating that *The Two Sources*, if carefully read, revealed Bergson’s actual commitment to Christianity. He advised friends to “read between the lines” in *The Two Sources* for a glimpse of Bergson’s cryptic conversion to Catholicism.³⁵ Maritain identified Christian mysticism as the key to Bergson’s coming to the point of belief in Christianity.³⁶

So it was that Maritain, Marcel, and Blondel, each in his own way, embraced Bergson. In the case of Maritain it was a rather ginger embrace. Yet, the fact remains that each of these three men wrestled Bergson’s influence into some form that accommodated itself to their individual thought.

³¹ *La Philosophie et l’esprit chrétien*, p. 232.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 233.

³³ *Exigences philosophiques du christianisme*, p. 284.

³⁴ See *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, p. 213.

³⁵ *De Bergson à Thomas d’Aquin: essais de métaphysique et de morale*, p. 70.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 88.