

## Introduction

### *The Picture of Morality*

Never shall we pass from the closed society to the open society, from the city to humanity, by any mere broadening out.

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

*The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* is divided into four long chapters. Each chapter is in its own way indispensable in constructing a Bergsonian theory of human rights. But with respect to the critique of a predominant dispensation of human rights, chapter 1 (“Moral Obligation”) stands out. There, Bergson outlines a conception—or better yet, a preconception—of morality that has become a subconscious orthodoxy in human rights discourse, both in his time and in our own. I call it the “picture of morality.” The purpose of Part 1 is to show how this widespread picture undermines the purpose and efficacy of human rights.

The first step toward this goal is to lay out the picture of morality in its own terms. What, according to Bergson, is its major feature? It is that moral obligation (or moral duty) can extend itself to include larger and larger groups of people, all the way to the whole of humanity. The belief that moral obligation can be indefinitely expanded is the core of the picture of morality. This is how Bergson gives voice to it:

We are fond of saying [*on se plaît à dire*] that we learn about civic virtues within the family, and that in the same way, from holding our country dear, we learn to love mankind [*le genre humain*]. Our sympathies are supposed to broaden out [*s'élargirait*] in an unbroken progression, to expand while remaining identi-

cal, and end up embracing all humanity. . . . We observe that the three groups [i.e., family, nation, and humanity] to which we can attach ourselves comprise an increasing number of people, and we conclude that the increasing size of the loved object [*élargissements successifs de l'objet aimé*] is simply matched by a progressive expansion of feeling [*dilatation progressive du sentiment*]. (DS 1001–2/32)

This picture of morality must no doubt seem natural. Maybe it even seems unobjectionable. After all, if morality is able to include all of humanity—and, as we shall see, Bergson doesn't doubt it—then how else can it proceed except by expanding the circle of specific attachments? It seems obvious that morality must extend itself step-by-step, from smaller to bigger groups, if it is to embrace all of mankind. And yet, it is precisely this image of morality that Bergson will contest.

I have been using the term “picture,” and now “image,” to refer to this conception of morality. By this, I mean that the way of thinking about morality Bergson expresses in the above passage is so deeply ingrained in us that it risks being taken for granted. To cite two very different philosophers on this score, we could say with Wittgenstein, “A picture [or image—*Bild*] held us captive. And we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably”; or, with Deleuze, “We live with a particular image of thought, that is to say, before we begin to think, we have a vague idea of what it means to think, its means and ends.”<sup>1</sup> As with these two other thinkers, Bergson also believes that an implicit cast of mind—what I am calling a picture or an image—orients our thinking and that it is difficult to become aware of it because it constitutes the very framework or medium of our thought.<sup>2</sup> A central ambition of Bergson's, therefore, is to explicitly identify those pictures and images that orient us and, in so doing, make us take responsibility for them.

To this end, let us spell out the features of this picture of morality. A diagram (Fig. 1) is helpful, in large part because the preceding passage is full of spatial language.

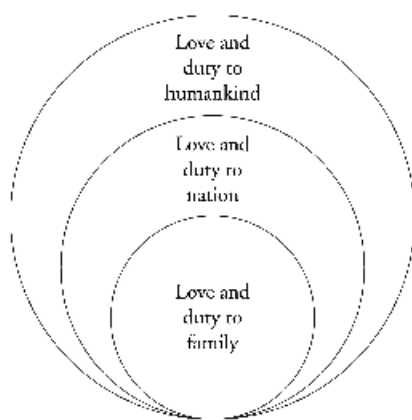


FIGURE 1. The picture of morality

This passage from Bergson, along with the diagram, will be the central point of reference in Part I. Although different theories of human rights develop the picture of morality in different ways—and we will look at two of them, Durkheimian and rationalist—they nevertheless share a common core. This core can be summarized in four points. Taken together, they constitute the major postulates of the picture of morality.

1. *Object attachment*: Love and duty are directed toward specific objects, in this case family, nation, and humanity.
2. *Compatible attachments*: Love and duty for family, nation, and humanity are compatible. Each kind of love and duty has its own quality, but there is no necessary antagonism between them.
3. *Quantitative growth*: Love and duty can extend to larger and larger groups of people, all the way to the whole of humanity.
4. *Progressive development*: Progress in morality—both at the level of the individual and of the species—is made by advancing to higher stages, from family, to nation, to humanity.

This is a snapshot, as it were, of the picture of morality that Bergson criticizes in *Two Sources*. But it is crucial to anticipate the thrust of his critique. Bergson does not deny that morality changes and evolves. Nor does he deny that morality can become universally inclusive. Far from it. Rather, he objects to the way this picture represents the evolution of morality. In particular, he objects to the idea that the moral obligations characteristic of our attachment to exclusive groups, such as the family and nation, can be safely expanded to include all of humanity. He is skeptical, in other words, that a morality inclusive of all human beings has grown out of our attachment to exclusive groups.