

## Preface

For me the essential of Bergsonism will always be the idea of philosophy as transformation of perception.

Pierre Hadot, *The Present Alone Is Our Happiness*

In 1932, nearly a dozen years after the appearance of his previous major work, Henri Bergson published *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*. Although he was still regarded as the preeminent French philosopher of his time, the publication of this book caught nearly everyone off guard. “One fine day,” wrote Jacques Maritain, a close reader of Bergson, “without any publicity, without any press release, without anyone, even among the author’s closest friends, having been informed, the work that had been anticipated for twenty-five years appeared in bookstores.”<sup>1</sup>

The surprise that greeted *Two Sources* is indicative of its fate. The debate and controversy that surrounded its immediate reception were characterized by misunderstanding and polemic.<sup>2</sup> On top of that, the book was soon afterward nearly forgotten. No doubt there are several possible explanations for this. Perhaps it seemed that a book on morality and politics written during the interwar years could no longer reach contemporary problems. Or maybe it was because so many of its principal themes (such as mysticism, love, and moral obligation) were uncongenial to his leading interpreters. Whatever the reason, it remains the case that *Two Sources* is by far the least read of Bergson’s major works.<sup>3</sup>

Unexpected in its arrival, misunderstood in its reception, and by and large ignored, what interest can this text have for us now? To approach this question, a remark made by Pierre Hadot is helpful. An expert in ancient philosophy, he is by no means a Bergson specialist. But his standing as an appreciative outsider allows him to assess what is timely and vital in this

1. Cited in Soulez and Worms, *Bergson*, 229.

2. *Ibid.*, 229–39. “Make no mistake: behind the noisy liveliness of the debate that immediately followed its appearance, the reserve and misunderstandings that marked the scholarly reception of Bergson’s last book will contribute a great deal to its future eclipse” (235). See also Soulez, “Bergson as Philosopher of War and Theorist of the Political,” 119–22.

3. See Lefebvre and White, “Introduction: Bergson, Politics, and Religion.”

philosophy. When asked in an interview about which aspects of Bergson remain vibrant for him, he replied:

Bergson, for me, was first my *baccalauréat* paper of 1939, in which I was given the subject from a text by Bergson: "Philosophy is not the construction of a system but the resolution, once taken (that is, taken once and for all), to look naively in oneself and around oneself." First, the phrase "philosophy is not the construction of a system" eliminated all theoretical and abstract construction from the outset. Moreover, the second part of the sentence signified that philosophy is above all a choice and not a discourse. It was a decision, an attitude, comportment, a way of seeing the world. . . . For me the essential of Bergsonism will always be the idea of philosophy as transformation of perception.<sup>4</sup>

I take it that Hadot is using the word "perception" in its most expansive sense: that the basic aim of Bergsonism is to transform one's everyday orientation or way of life. Understood in this way, each of Bergson's books can be seen to undertake a transformation of a particular object or region of everyday life. *An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*, for example, recovers the immediacy of experience; *Matter and Memory* regains an attention to the present moment; and *Creative Evolution* instills an awareness of the creativity all around us. And what would *Two Sources* do? It presents us with a way of being in the world—Bergson calls it love—untouched by hatred.

I have interpreted Bergson's political philosophy in this vein. To my mind the great power of *Two Sources* lies in its insistence that, in the end, none of the problems of politics—which include huge ones such as war and fascism, as well as everyday ones such as prejudice and exclusion—will be resolved without an attendant transformation in the relationship one has to oneself. Its beauty, one might say, is that it is a uniquely non-moralistic text of political philosophy. In refusing to isolate—or rather, to insulate—problems of politics from those of ethics, it provides a thoroughgoing reinterpretation not only of the challenges that face us but, most especially, of the demands that solutions to them exact from each one of us.

To bring out this vision of political philosophy I have focused on Bergson's discussion of human rights in *Two Sources*. The idea behind my

4. Hadot, *The Present Alone Is Our Happiness*, 125–26. See also Hadot, "Philosophy as a Way of Life," 272.

book is that he provides a genuinely new way to think about them. Rather than understand human rights as primarily an institution or a mechanism designed to protect all human beings from serious abuse, we will see that Bergson conceives of them as a medium of personal transformation. Or, to borrow terms that will become central to this investigation, my thesis is that for Bergson the main purpose of human rights is to initiate all human beings into love. Thus it is through Bergson's conception of human rights that I propose to channel the problematic of self-transformation that animates the whole of his political philosophy.

I hope this book makes two contributions, one to the philosophy of human rights and the other to the study of Bergson. First of all, I use Bergson to advance a theory of human rights that reinterprets their purpose and function along the lines of self-care. To my knowledge he provides the first and only account of human rights as a medium to improve upon, relate to, and care for ourselves.

This brings me to the second contribution. On the surface it might seem doubtful that Bergson furnishes anything like an account of human rights at all. Certainly he provides suggestive remarks, maybe even a sketch. But an account? Readers familiar with *Two Sources* will find my concentration on human rights unorthodox. That's because even by a generous count his explicit discussion of human rights is confined to roughly a dozen pages scattered throughout the whole of *Two Sources*.<sup>5</sup> It will thus be a key ambition of mine to demonstrate that human rights are not a subject of just particular or local interest for Bergson. They are not one topic among others, and their importance for Bergson does not correspond to the direct attention he gives them. Instead human rights are at the very center of his vision of politics. And by this I mean two things. On the one hand, because it is the political institution that most fully embodies his ideal of "love" and the "open society," we will see that Bergson pins tremendous hope on human rights. And on the other hand, because they embody that ideal, we will see that Bergson uses human rights as a kind of perspective from which to evaluate all other institutions, types of political organization, and what we might generally call political phenomena. It is my belief that human rights in *Two Sources* have exactly the same standing as the republic in Plato's *Republic* or democracy in Spinoza's *Theological Political Treatise*: yes, human rights are a specific institution (hence the

5. DS 1000–1004/30–35, 1035–39/71–75, 1040–42/77–80, 1215–16/282–83.

dedicated pages Bergson accords them), but, much more than that, they are also the means by which to judge the sense, value, and orientation of all other political forms.

To date, the fact that Bergson has an original concept of human rights remains unknown. This is both surprising and a shame. It is surprising because on a personal and practical level Bergson was deeply committed to the realization of human rights. For example, he worked closely with the Woodrow Wilson administration to establish the League of Nations, and later he was appointed president of its International Commission for Intellectual Cooperation (the precursor to UNESCO).<sup>6</sup> And though they never met, Bergson had a profound influence on John Humphrey, who was the principal drafter of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.<sup>7</sup> It is also a shame because a focus on human rights brings out the most timely and challenging dimension of Bergson's political philosophy: the outline of a way of life that is nothing short of a transformation of perception.

By no means do I claim that an emphasis on personal transformation is a new or novel way to read Bergson. Nearly all of his great readers put it at the forefront of their interpretation.<sup>8</sup> Long before the publication of *Two Sources*, William James would affirm that, above all, Bergson exacts a "certain inner catastrophe"—that is, a reorientation in percep-

6. The principal source for Bergson's political biography is Soulez, *Bergson politique*. Its main themes are summarized in Soulez and Worms, *Bergson*, 141–70. For a shorter summary, see Lefebvre and White, "Introduction: Bergson, Politics, and Religion," 1–3.

7. Curle, *Humanité*: "Humphrey kept a journal of his private thoughts during his early tenure at the United Nations. From these journals, it is apparent that he came to view the *Universal Declaration* in terms of Bergson's book *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*" (6). To be clear, however, this is a retrospective assessment on the part of Humphrey: he did not begin to read Bergson until December of 1948, the very month in which the Universal Declaration was adopted by the General Assembly.

8. The great exception in this respect is Deleuze, who systematically underplays subjectivist, spiritualist, and phenomenological dimensions in Bergson. As Guerlac states, "It is as if, in *Le bergsonisme* (1966), Deleuze had carefully edited out all those features of Bergson's thought that might appear 'metaphysical' (the soul, life, value, memory choice), all those features that distinguish the human being from the machine, that suggest an appeal to experience and a phenomenological perspective. It is perhaps this gesture that most clearly delineates the contours of the New Bergson" (*Thinking in Time*, 179–80). It is no doubt in part due to Deleuze's tremendous influence in the reception of Bergson that the theme of personal transformation remains relatively untapped in English-language scholarship today.

tion and attitude—in each of his readers.<sup>9</sup> Likewise, Vladimir Jankélévitch states that for Bergson “the philosophical act is not a rearrangement of already-known concepts” but is instead “a *serious* act and a complete conversion of the whole person, a conversion that implies an overturning of all our habits, all our associations, all our reflexes.”<sup>10</sup> And closer to our time Frédéric Worms argues, “It is as if Bergson’s philosophy rediscovered from the outset the most ancient task of philosophy, which is not to distinguish between concepts, but between ways of conducting oneself, not only to think, but also to intervene in life, to reform or transform it.”<sup>11</sup> My own interpretation of Bergson follows very much in these footsteps. If I am able to mark my own contribution to this literature, it is the following: First, in *Two Sources* the problem of personal transformation becomes an explicitly (and explicitly urgent) political problem. And second, human rights are one of the principal mediums through which this self-transformation can take place.

9. James, *A Pluralistic Universe*, 266, citing Gaston Rageot.

10. Jankélévitch, *Henri Bergson*, 288. See also “With the Whole Soul,” 156; “Do Not Listen to What They Say, Look at What They Do,” 550; and *Premières et dernières pages*, 87.

11. Worms, *Bergson ou les deux sens de la vie*, 8.