

Bergson's Concept of Free Will: The Problem of Moral Responsibility

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Abstract: The question of free will and determinism has remained a central debate across various disciplines, notably philosophy, theology, psychology, science, politics, epistemology and metaphysics. On the one hand, some scholars believe that there is no free will because we live in a causally determined world. On the other hand, others argue that human beings are moral and autonomous individuals who can choose freely and act otherwise. Consequently, a philosophical question arises: do humans possess free will, or are they determined by external forces and causation? Philosophers from the voluntarist tradition, particularly Henri Bergson, approach this issue in their own distinctive way. Bergson's metaphysics of free will is grounded in his conceptions of duration. He explains free will through the process of possibility and qualitative experience of inner life. According to Bergson, freedom inherently generates within duration, which can be known through metaphysical intuition. In contrast, the traditional and libertarian view of free will is concerned with the sense of moral responsibility within the realms of social, moral and legal practices. In this paper I examine Bergson's metaphysical understanding of free will and morality. I conclude my argument that Bergson's metaphysical concept of free will is confronted with free will based on the supposition of moral responsibility in the contemporary world.

Keywords: Free will; duration; intuition; moral responsibility

Introduction

The concept of free will has remained a central issues across philosophy, law and science, and continues to be a point of

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discussion in contemporary debates about autonomy, determinism, and moral responsibility. Modern discourse raise questions whether our choices are truly free allowing for alternative possibilities or whether they are determined and predictable.² The idea free will has been viewed from a variety of perspectives. For example compatibilists believe that free will is compatible with a determinist world. In contrast, incompatibilists, including libertarians, argue that humans possess free will and that it is incompatible with a deterministic world.³

Henri Bergson is one of the most influential philosophers of his time, introducing a new and very distinctive philosophical outlook. He belongs to the tradition of irrationalism, voluntarism, and process philosophy. His metaphysical argument is based on the distinction between two kinds of time: scientific time and the direct experience of time. Scientific time is explained through the space and time of the physical world measured by clocks and chronometers. It is a passive and uniform time. On the other hand, the inward and direct experience of time is heterogeneous, concrete, and indivisible; that Bergson calls “*durée réelle*” (real duration).⁴ Moreover, Bergson argues that duration is a reality and intuition is an epistemological way to approach that reality. He believes that one should attain absolute and true knowledge of an object through inner experience of it, by means of the method of philosophizing that he calls intuition. His idea of the absolute is not something static but is instead flux and pure movement.⁵ To substantiate his claim, Bergson criticizes physical determinism, arguing that free will and determinism cannot coexist. He aims to prove that pure memory is independent from the brain. The living world is entirely creative in nature, and human freedom is not something beyond this living and creative world. Furthermore, he associates free will with creative art, as it is directly revealed by our conscious experience. Psychological determinism is also not beyond his criticism, because it binds us fixed laws and causation, whereas he argues that our

² John Alexander Gunn, *Bergson and His Philosophy* (Methuen & Company, 1920), 33–5.

³ John Martin Fischer et al., *Four Views on Free Will* (John Wiley & Sons, 2024), 3–7.

⁴ Donald M. Borchert, *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2006), 563.

⁵ Esen Özyurt, *Freedom and Creativity in Bergson's Philosophy* (2013), 2.

deepest feelings and thoughts are unique to us.⁶ Such a dynamic flow of conscious states Bergson calls free will. He asserts that free will actions arise entirely from our deep self and reflect our whole personality. Lacey frames Bergson's concept of freedom as lively relationship between the self and its actions.⁷

Libertarians explain the idea of free will in terms of moral responsibility and alternative possibilities. The anti-libertarian argument suggests that free will cannot be separated from random events. The libertarian view fails to explain the difference between a genuine free choice made by an agent and actions that are random outcomes. The problem with libertarian theory is not that a person's actions are random, but that actions come from their will. The real issue is that the will itself, as a guiding principle of actions, seems to be random.⁸ Some scholars argue that this randomness makes it impossible to hold people truly free or responsible for what they do.⁹ However, Bergson focuses on the non-causal libertarian view of free will. He contends that the flow of conscious experience is not divisible into quantifiable units that would require causal laws. The scientific explanation of the flow of conscious agency is based on the physical concepts that cannot be applied to it. However, consciousness is something unique; it cannot be explained by scientific theories, as it is non-causal. This non-causal nature makes free action possible.¹⁰ On the other hand, if divine will and natural laws are external determining forces, and determinism is true, it poses a significant challenge to the rationality of believing in free will. Common approaches justify the idea of free will in relation to moral responsibility. If you take responsibility for your actions (blame/praise), you have free will. Additionally, if no external force causes your actions and choices, then you are not determined and have free will.

⁶ Joel Dolbeault, "Bergson's Theory of Free Will," *Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy* 28, no. 2 (2020).

⁷ Alan Robert Lacey, *Bergson-Arg Philosophers* (Routledge, 2010), 84.

⁸ André Juthe, "The Boundary Theory of Libertarian Free Will," *The Review of Metaphysics* 77, no. 2 (2023): 327–43.

⁹ David Palmer, *Libertarian Free Will: Contemporary Debates* (Oxford University Press, 2014), 7.

¹⁰ Michael McKenna and Derk Pereboom, *Free Will: A Contemporary Introduction* (Routledge, 2016), 233.

Another indicator is the alternative possibilities: if you have the ability to do something and could have chosen otherwise, you have free will.¹¹ The modern discussion of free will is inseparable from moral responsibility. The freedom of actions is based on our conscious and rational choices which holds us responsible for the consequences of our actions. On the other hand, Bergson's idea of free will is less about rational choice and more about intuition, emotion, and duration. Bergson argues that human beings do not function like predictable robots or billiard balls governed by mechanical laws.¹² This implies that his conception of free will is based on lived experience and intuition; thus, it is a metaphysical issue rather than a moral one.¹³

Bergson's Concept of Free Will

Physical determinism and psychological determinism are two dominant theories that refute the possibility of free will in a deterministic world. For example, physical determinism justifies its claim through the natural events and their occurrences, whereas psychological determinism justifies its claim through the occurrence of mental events. In contrast, Bergson's conception of free will rejects both forms of determinism and offers a unique solution to the problem.¹⁴ From the outset, Bergson criticized physical, scientific, and mathematical time, it divided into discrete units through clocks, calendars, dates, and the conceptual distinction between past and future. He did not view time in physical or external terms; instead, he conceived of time as internal, wherein different states of consciousness merge to form duration, which he called lived time.¹⁵ Further, Bergson explains time as form of energy that impacts our inner consciousness beyond the scope of physical laws. He contends that memory reveals a genuine freedom inherent in our conscious states, a quality that inanimate object lacks. He argues the problem

¹¹ Derk Pereboom, *Free Will*, 1st ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2022), 1–2, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108982511>.

¹² Suzanne Guerlac, *Thinking in Time: An Introduction to Henri Bergson* (Cornell University Press, 2018), 43–53.

¹³ Dolbeault, "Bergson's Theory of Free Will."

¹⁴ Gunn, *Bergson and His Philosophy*, 33.

¹⁵ Lacey, *Bergson-Arg Philosophers*, 73.

was created by the language, which captures fluid experience and obscures the true nature of freedom.¹⁶

Bergson advocates for the immediate experience of consciousness, free from language, quantitative and symbolic representation. He emphasizes the qualitative differentiation of states of consciousness, including feelings, passions. Consequently, he argues that free will is not the matter of rational inquiry but rather the direct intuition of duration.¹⁷ Bergson maintains that memory provides a means of escape from the laws of nature, and this capacity for escape constitutes the essence of free will. Free will arises from the inner self and from duration. The force of time, for Bergson, is not merely a components of consciousness but an ontological principal and fundamental fact of being.¹⁸ The self is often defined through a chain of mental states in which each state of consciousness is directly caused by the preceding one. Proponents of associationism acknowledge the connection between mental states, yet they reduce these states to representational quantities. Bergson does not refute the existence of such connections; however, he rejects the claim that they are casually connected in a deterministic sense. Consequently, for Bergson, a purely associationalist framework is incapable of representing the true nature of the self.¹⁹ For Bergson, associationism entails a defective conception of the self, as it overlooks the dynamic, qualitative, and durational nature of consciousness.²⁰ Bergson not only criticizes the associationists' position but also reflects critically Kant's concept of free will. He argues that Kant made a mistake in explaining free will by placing it beyond time and space, treating it as matter of faith. On the contrary, Bergson emphasizes that immediate data of our consciousness is temporal rather than spatial. Space is a static

¹⁶ Paul Ardoin et al., *Understanding Bergson, Understanding Modernism* (2013), 19.

¹⁷ ME Asadu and NU Asogwa, "Henry Bergson's Theory of Duration: A Critical Review," *Nigerian Journal of Philosophical Studies* 3, no. 2 (2024): 43.

¹⁸ Guerlac, *Thinking in Time: An Introduction to Henri Bergson*, 81.

¹⁹ Gunn, *Bergson and His Philosophy*, 34.

²⁰ H. Bergson and F. L. Pogson, *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*, Dover Books on Western Philosophy (Dover Publications, 2001), 159.
https://books.google.com.pk/books?id=g_8JmPzRKaAC.

medium but duration is not clock time, it is lived time. In more precise terms, Bergson maintains freedom is an undeniable reality, yet it cannot be clearly defined within duration, unless, time is mistakenly linked with space. Our true self is free its wholeness, much like the link between an artist and his work.²¹ There is fundamental conflict between scientific materialism and human mystical experience. The prevailing scientific world view is dominated by materialism, determinism and mechanism. On the other hand, we have spiritual realities and mystical intuitions, which science has failed to understand. Kant highlighted the limits of reason, asserting that it cannot answer questions about freedom, immortality, and God. Bergson, in contrast offers a way to know these realities through the method of intuition and internal experience.²² In physical world, the same event can repeat again and again, but in the mind, the same events can never repeat because we are living in real time (duration) where our mental states are constantly changing.²³ When we look at Bergson's methodology, he introduces intuition as a method to understand duration, the qualitative and fluid experience of time that science cannot grasp. This inner experience reveals consciousness as creative process, and free will emerges from duration, allowing self-expression beyond deterministic causality.²⁴ On Bergson's idea of freedom, Pamela remarks that, freedom is the agent's positive capacity for action, exemplified by the mystic's ability to embrace all humanity.²⁵ This self-intuiting activity is the foundation of Bergson's metaphysics, connecting his theories of knowledge and will.²⁶

²¹ Asadu and Asogwa, "Henry Bergson's Theory of Duration: A Critical Review."

²² Idella J. Gallagher, *Morality in Evolution: The Moral Philosophy of Henri Bergson* (Springer, 2012), 21–30.

²³ Gunn, *Bergson and His Philosophy*, 36.

²⁴ Rosemary Olanma Alozie, Stephen Oshiomah Aigbonoga, "A Critical Examination of Henri Bergson's Philosophy of Time and Consciousness", *NJP* 8, no. 2 (2025), <https://www.acjoi.com/journal/njp/iu27>.

²⁵ Pamela Sue Anderson, "Bergsonian Intuition: A Metaphysics of Mystical Life," *Philosophical Topics* 43, no. 1 (2015): 239–51.

²⁶ Ralph Barton Perry, "Notes on the Philosophy of Henri Bergson: II. Indeterminism and Dynamism," *The Journal of Philosophy, Psychology and Scientific Methods* 8, no. 26 (1911): 713–21.

In his work, *Time and Free Will*, Bergson defends incompatibilism by rejecting determinism on three grounds: (1) free will is a creative act directly given to consciousness; (2) physical determinism fails because mental life cannot be reduced to brain activity (cerebral life); and (3) psychological determinism fails because our deep psychic states are too singular that cannot be governed by general laws.²⁷ For, Bergson, it is not difficult to observe that the problem of free will is subject to conflict between the two rivalry systems of nature: dynamics and mechanism. The system of dynamism begins with what we directly know, voluntary acts (free will) as experienced in consciousness and represents this as free force. In contrast the system of mechanism begins with matter governed by laws.²⁸ Bergson's most important idea is that that moments of true freedom are rare. Most of time, we act repeatedly, habitually and follow routines in daily life. If we do not put efforts into knowing conscious states and their intrinsic connection to our whole personality, we miss the true nature of freedom.²⁹ Most scholars agree that if you believe scientific materialism, you will explain the world and human mind as purely physical systems. It is very hard to defend free will against determinism. Despite the strength of determinist argument, some have tried to find a way out. For example, Heisenberg's uncertainty principle suggests that at the subatomic level, events are not always caused by prior events. Some may have used this argue that brain might be able to create its own first cause: what we call free will.³⁰

Problem of Moral Responsibility

Bergson did not explain free will in the traditional libertarian sense tied to the moral responsibility of the agent. Instead, his concept of free will is linked to his theory of reality, what he called duration. Duration cannot be understood from the

²⁷ Dolbeault, "Bergson's Theory of Free Will."

²⁸ Bergson and Pogson, *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*, 140.

²⁹ Ömer Faruk Kayacı, *The Intuition of Duration: A Holistic Approach to Henri Bergson's Theory of Freedom* (2024), 379.

³⁰ Gordon Tait, "Free Will, Moral Responsibility and ADHD," *International Journal Inclusive Education* 7, no. 4 (2003): 429–49.

materialist perspective of science; rather, it is grasped through intuition. Similarly, free will is not to be explained in terms of the moral responsibility of actions, but mystically and intuitively.

Despite two thousand years of philosophical debate on free will—and even challenges from physics, most philosophers conclude we are morally accountable. This conclusion is strongly reinforced by the field of jurisprudence, which is historically built on the principle of personal responsibility.³¹ In contemporary philosophy, free will and moral responsibility are closely connected, because free will cannot exist if our choices are determined. If the world were totally determined, there would be neither free will nor moral responsibility. Generally, free will is known as capacity to make choices that render us morally responsible for our actions. In addition, some scholars suggest that free will plays a significant role in human life including personal autonomy, creativity and moral worth.³² Bergson's approach to free will is that he ignores the concept of moral responsibility. Instead, he proposes that free will can be understood through personal experiences, not through philosophical language, which he considers misleading. Inner experience makes free will purely metaphysical question without relation to moral reasonability. The metaphysical question is: Am I the creator of my future, or is this future already determined? However, Bergson does not eliminate the idea of morality in human life, as we are social beings and we have duties to others. For Bergson human beings are naturally moral and have capacity to love. Thus, the self is fundamentally moral. Nevertheless, this point does not resolve the conflict between free will and morality.³³ It demonstrates that Bergson's conception of the nature of morality is creative; it develops from various disciplines, including sociology, anthropology, biology, psychology and mysticism. In his work, *Matter and Memory*, he examines the connection between soul (i.e., spiritual realities) and the body (i.e., matter). He seeks to explain that consciousness is not identical with cerebral activity. In doing so, he opens the possibility of the soul's existence after death.³⁴ Bergson argues that even if all

³¹ Tait, "Free Will, Moral Responsibility and ADHD."

³² Fischer et al., *Four Views on Free Will*, 1–7.

³³ Dolbeault, "Bergson's Theory of Free Will."

³⁴ Gallagher, *Morality in Evolution: The Moral Philosophy of Henri Bergson*, 12.

physical matter, including the brain, is strictly determined, this does not imply that mental life is similarly necessitated. Therefore, freedom of the will remains possible as a distinct creative activity. Bergson claims that freedom is not just an idea but an observable reality—in fact, it is the most evident fact of our experience.³⁵

Despite Bergson's bold stance on free will, Landeweerd reflects the problem of free will and determinism is not a contemporary phenomenon; it has long history in the tradition of philosophy to understand the self. The connection of free will has been exercised in relation to moral responsibility, sin, and guilt throughout the traditions. The more important thing is that it does not only conflicts with determinism but also with randomness, chaos, and order as well. The myth of Oedipus is one of the historical pieces of evidence that reflects the struggle between Oedipus and his fate. Despite his struggle to escape his fate, marrying to his mother and killing to his father realized his fate. It implies that choice entails moral or assume moral responsibility.³⁶ Moreover, Bergson critiques the libertarian view that free will requires the ability to have done otherwise. He argues that by framing freedom in terms of alternative paths (OX or OY) from a decision point O, libertarians accept the determinist's mechanical model. Once an act is in the past, it appears necessitated by prior events (MO). This inconsistency arises from applying spatial, geometric symbols to the fluid reality of lived time, where such fixed points and paths do not exist. For Bergson, genuine freedom operates outside this deterministic schema.³⁷

³⁵ Gunn, *Bergson and His Philosophy*.

³⁶ Laurens Landeweerd, *Time, Life & Memory: Bergson and Contemporary Science* (2022), 116.

³⁷ Mark Sinclair, *Bergson* (Routledge, 2019), 72–3.



Yingxian Jin emphasizes the significance of moral responsibility in connection with free will. He argues that free will is the ability to act according to one's own choice, unconstrained by fate or external necessity. However moral obligations are more important for person than their desire to exercise free will. As social beings, humans must follow societal norms to remain part of the community. Morality and religious beliefs stem from social relationships. Adhering to moral responsibilities is essential for cooperation and acceptance within the group.³⁸ On the other hand, mystical metaphysician leads us to believe in a reality that is fluid life process rather than a static analysis. Bergson focuses on such dynamics and brings into metaphysical discussion the problem of free will. He argues that the problem of free will arises when we break down a fluid experience into static analysis. According to Moore, Bergson insists that once we employ with the intuitive method to understand motion and change. We will be freed from the old puzzles about motion. In this way, Bergson's intuition discloses

³⁸ Yingxian Jin, "The Conflict of Free Will and Moral Responsibility," *Journal of Education, Humanities and Social Sciences* 8 (February 2023): 1139–45, <https://doi.org/10.54097/ehss.v8i.4440>.

the way to know, creative self, where we experience true freedom and the mystical flow of time.³⁹

In sum, within the whole metaphysical and intuitive scheme of Bergson regarding free will, the question still persists: can free will be moral? A possible answer is offered by Bergson in *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*. He makes a distinction between two types of morality: closed morality, which is based on fixed rules for specific and limited societies; in contrast, open morality applies to all humanity without limit. It cannot be defined by fixed rules, but seeks to foster social and moral progress. From this point of view Bergson suggests that free will can be moral, but only within the context of open morality. Although, he does not claim that there is an inherent or necessary connection between free will and morality, he indicates the possibility of such a link.⁴⁰

Conclusion

Bergson is best known as a process philosopher who refuted determinism. Process philosophy is the philosophy of becoming and evolution, incompatible with both scientific and psychological determinism. He advocated that freedom is mystical and intuitive experience in real time, or duration. This experience is consciously evolving and naturally emerges, like a fruit that detaches when it is perfectly ripe. Objective and material facts are incapable of explaining the lived experience of the self, as living beings are constantly evolving. Our conscious states are impossible to predict in advance, as science does with natural events. Consequently, the libertarian and traditional idea of moral responsibility in connection with free will seems irrelevant to Bergson's metaphysical, creative and intuitive concept of free will.

³⁹ Anderson, "Bergsonian Intuition: A Metaphysics of Mystical Life."

⁴⁰ Joël Dolbeault, "Incompatibilism without Alternative Possibilities: Bergson in the Debate on Free Will," *Continental Philosophy Review* 58, no. 2 (2025): 193–210.

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