JEAN-PAUL SARTRE: MYSTICAL ATHEIST OR MYSTICAL ANTIPATHIST?

KATE KIRKPATRICK

University of Oxford

Abstract. Jean-Paul Sartre is rarely discussed in the philosophy of religion. In 2009, however, Jerome Gellman broke the silence, publishing an article in this journal in which he argued that the source of Sartre's atheism was neither philosophical nor existential, but mystical. Drawing from several of Sartre's works – including *Being and Nothingness*, *Words*, and a 1943 review entitled 'A New Mystic' – I argue that there are strong biographical and philosophical reasons to disagree with Gellman's conclusion that Sartre was a 'mystical atheist'. Moreover, I question the likelihood of drawing any definitive conclusions regarding the sources of Sartre's ambiguous atheism.

Given his status as one of the best-known atheists of the twentieth century, it is hardly surprising that little research has been dedicated to Sartre and mysticism. It is an area, however, that deserves greater scholarly attention. To date there have only been two brief studies published in English: a chapter in Jacques Salvan's 1967 *The Scandalous Ghost* and a more recent contribution from Jerome Gellman in 2009 – an article in this journal in which he argues that Sartre was a 'mystical atheist'.[1] Though he is not the first to apply this epithet to Sartre,[2] Gellman finds so much evidence in favour of mysticism in Sartre's works as to suggest that the latter's atheism is neither philosophical nor existential, but mystical – that is, rooted in a mystical experience of the non-existence of God.

[1] One might also wish to include Hazel Barnes' introduction to *Being and Nothingness*, which includes a brief comparison of Sartre's ontology and mysticism. Though not explicitly devoted to mysticism, there are notable works on Sartre and the sacred (King 1974) and Christian thinkers such as Aquinas (Wang 2009); and in French, Jeanson's *Sartre devant Dieu* (2005).

[2] Salvan notes that others have christened Sartre as such (1967: 134).

This paper seeks to assess this claim, first by inspecting Gellman's readings of Sartre's texts; and second by assessing those passages where Sartre explicitly treats mysticism. What emerges is neither mystical atheism nor mystical antipathy, but a kind of mystical ambivalence: a question still hanging in the air.

I. GELLMAN'S PORTRAIT: THE MYSTICAL ATHEIST

Gellman bases his claim for Sartre's 'mystical atheism' on two textual foundations:

(1) an account Sartre gives in both his autobiography *Words* and a later conversation with Beauvoir, in which Sartre describes having had a 'momentary intuition' that God does not exist; and

(2) the ostensibly mystical language employed by Sartre in describing the experiences of Roquentin, the protagonist of his first published novel, *Nausea*. Although scholars dispute the extent to which this is the case, Sartre claims in *Words* that he '*was* Roquentin', that he used this character to show 'the texture of [his] life', and Gellman accepts this equation of creator and created.[3]

Constraints of space prohibit considering the second of these at great length. For now suffice it to say that though Sartre's literary works are indeed full of mystic-like language – of moments of 'vision', 'seeing', 'unveiling', and 'revelation' – these metaphors do not necessarily imply mysticism. On Sartre's philosophical view of literature the author is a 'revealer' (WL[4] 27) of everyday existence and every written word a 'disclosure' (WL 14) of meaning. But to conduct a thorough study of this language would distract us from our main project: ascertaining whether Sartre's atheism should properly be called 'mystical'. So instead we shall turn to Sartre's 'momentary intuition' of God's non-existence.

Gellman cites the version of the story given in the conversation with Beauvoir, published posthumously in *Adieux* (rather than the one given in *Words*). In it we read the following:

> When I was about twelve [...] in the morning I used to take the tram with the girls next door [...] One day I was walking up and down outside their house for a few minutes waiting for them to get ready. I don't know where the thought came from or how it struck me, yet all at once I said to myself, 'God doesn't exist.' [...] As I remember very well, it was on that

[3] Gellman 2009: 132–6.

[4] All references to texts by Sartre use the abbreviations listed in the bibliography.

> day and in the form of a momentary intuition that I said to myself, 'God does not exist'. (Beauvoir 1984: 437)

This description might be sufficient for some to justify the conclusion that Sartre was 'a mystical atheist'. Indeed, the philosopher of religion might wish to point out that it does display several of William James' famous four 'marks' which justify calling an experience mystical – perhaps not the ineffability, but the noetic, transience, and passivity criteria seem to be met.[5] On Gellman's own definition – as provided in his article and elsewhere in his entries on mysticism in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* and the *Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Religion*, for example – Sartre's experience qualifies as mystical because it is a '*unitive experience* granting knowledge of realities or states of affairs that are of a kind not accessible by way of sense-perception, somato-sensory modalities, or standard introspection'.[6]

What the Sartre scholar is likely to find problematic is that this account is not the only story Sartre tells about the origins of his unbelief. In fact, in *Words* alone Sartre recounts three – attributing his unbelief, first, not to 'conflicting dogma' but his 'grandparents' indifference' (W 64). A page later we read a second account, a famous passage expressing indignation at being subject to God's *gaze*:

> Once I had the feeling that He existed. I had been playing with matches and had burnt a mat; I was busy covering up my crime when suddenly God saw me. I felt His gaze inside my head and on my hands; I turned round and round in the bathroom, horribly visible, a living target. I was saved by indignation: I grew angry at such a crude lack of tact, and blasphemed, muttering like my grandfather: '*Sacré nom de Dieu de nom de Dieu de nom de Dieu*.' He never looked at me again. (W 65)

Then there is the third tale, which Gellman considers, of Sartre waiting for his childhood companions. And though it is less explicitly presented as an account of atheist origins, one might also wish to include a fourth genesis myth – where Sartre states outright that in his childhood he 'glimpsed Evil, the absence of God' following the death of a child (W 142). Even a throw-away line in *Being and Nothingness* – which intriguingly refers to a 'mystic crisis in my fifteenth year' – might be a fifth (BN 520). The point of this catalogue is that – leaving aside Sartre's rhetorical tendencies and the debates about the reliability of autobiography in general

[5] James 1929: lectures 16 and 17.

[6] Cited in Gellman 2009: 133.

and *Words* in particular – it paints a rather more ambiguous portrait than Gellman presents. It seems more likely to this reader that, as Anthony Flew writes, 'multiple factors combine in the creation of convictions'.[7]

Though he does not refer to these alternative histories, Gellman does mention the proof Sartre offers for God's non-existence in *Being and Nothingness* and a later discussion of it with Beauvoir, which was published after Sartre's death in *Adieux*.[8] The proof is simple: on Sartre's ontology, nothing can be both in-itself and for-itself, so God is impossible. It is an ontological argument for God's non-existence: *Quod erat demonstrandum*. But in dialogue with Beauvoir Sartre acknowledges that in *Being and Nothingness* he 'set out reasons for [his] denial of God's existence that were not actually the real reasons', saying that the real reasons were 'much more direct and childish' (Beauvoir 1984: 438). It is in this context that he re-tells the tale of the intuitive moment of God's non-existence, elaborating that at the age of twelve he looked on this experience as 'a manifest truth that had come to me without any foregoing thought. *That was obviously untrue*', he continues, 'but it was how I always saw it – a thought that came suddenly, an intuition that rose up and that determined my life'.[9]

It is the dismissive inclusion of 'that was obviously untrue' that piques my curiosity, and may challenge Gellman's interpretation. While Sartre does give prominence to the version Gellman cites in *Adieux*, elsewhere he notes that 'it is not unusual for the memory to condense into a single mythical moment the contingencies and perpetual rebeginnings of an individual history' (G 1). And in *Adieux* itself his momentary intuition was deemed untrue. But why? What about this is 'obviously untrue'? In order to answer this question, we shall now turn to see what we can glean from Sartre's writings on the subject of mysticism.

II. IN SARTRE'S WORDS: MYSTICAL ANTIPATHIST?

First, it is important to remember Sartre's context: in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, France underwent a renaissance of mysticism. Bergson's *Matter and Memory* was published in 1897, and l'abbé Bremond's influential study of mysticism in France – *Histoire littéraire du sentiment religieux en France* (published in eleven volumes between

[7] Flew 2007: 11.

[8] Gellman 2009: 132.

[9] Beauvoir 1984: 434, emphasis added.

1916 and 1933), as well as other currents of mysticism – from Péguy, Claudel, and Bernanos, among others – were part of the intellectual soil in which Sartre's ideas took root.[10] We know from Beauvoir that Sartre 'took an interest in the psychology of mysticism' in the 1930s, which prompted Beauvoir herself to read the likes of Catherine Emmerich and Saint Angela of Foligno.[11]

But what does the word 'mysticism' mean when it flows from Sartre's pen? In *Words* he refers to his youthful self as a 'militant and a mystic' (W 154f.), and as 'prey to two opposing mystical theologies' (W 108). Mysticism, he writes, 'suits displaced persons and superfluous children [...]' (W 63); it does not seem to be the purview of the enlightened, autonomous philosopher but rather a naïve state of intellectual minority. When contemporary critic Émile Bouvier applied the word to him Sartre was astonished, writing in his *War Diaries*: 'I'd never have believed that anyone would consign me to mysticism.' (WD 158)

This reading is supported by the work which gives the clearest picture we have of Sartre's view of mysticism. In 1943, the same year in which *Being and Nothingness* appeared, Sartre published a review of Georges Bataille's *Inner Experience*, labelling its author 'a new mystic' whose undertaking was 'an adventure beyond philosophy'. Here Sartre is emphatic that mystical illumination leads, as Kant put it in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, to the 'death of all philosophy'.

As Cardinal Newman wryly observed, mysticism 'begins in mist and ends in schism': and the schism between philosophy and other, mistier 'modes of knowing' has a long and complicated history.[12] Indeed, William James comments that the word 'mysticism' and its cognates are often employed as terms of reproach, rebuttals 'to throw at any opinion which we regard as vague and vast and sentimental, and without a base in either facts or logic'.[13] A case in point – and penned by an author who exerted considerable influence on Sartre – is André Gide's definition of mysticism as 'whatever presupposes and demands the abdication of reason'.[14]

---

[10] See Copleston 1974: 210ff. on Bergson; see Connor 2000: 16, 19–20 on the intellectual climate in France. This notion of mysticism as departure from reason was particularly important in the 1930s, when the word 'mysticism' took on connotations of National Socialism. It was the antiphilosophy: where philosophy emphasizes doubt and critical reflection, mysticism was a kind of being carried away, often against reason (Connor 2000: 129).

[11] Beauvoir 1962: 51.

[12] See Connor 2000: 31.

[13] James 1929: 370.

In 'A New Mystic' Sartre's usage stands in this tradition: as Peter Tracey Connor writes, 'When Sartre calls Bataille a mystic in 1943, the meaning of the term is fairly clear, for he is using it in a colloquial (and dismissive) sense, to refer to one who has substituted for reason some form of intuition or revelation.'[15] Though a strong case is made by Amy Hollywood for reading the review as part of a post-War campaign to purge the French literary scene of impurities, on my reading this is not the only dynamic at play. Sartre criticizes Bataille's style and his method. The former, he writes, 'is close to choking or drowning in its efforts to render the gasping suffocations of ecstasy or anguish' (NM 224). And as for the latter, it is a failed attempt at a synthesis of 'rapture' and 'rigorous intellectual method' (NM 223). Bataille believes that conviction 'does not arise from reasoning, but only from the feelings which it defines' (cited in NM 223), but Sartre dismisses Bataille's syllogisms as proofs 'supplied by an orator, jealous lover, barrister or madman' (NM 223). In case there was any possibility that his reader might think it possible to be both 'mystic' and 'philosopher' simultaneously, Sartre puts the final nail in that coffin, writing that Bataille is 'neither a scholar nor a philosopher, [though he] has, unfortunately, a smattering of science and philosophy' (NM 240). No: 'it is for the mystic's apprentice that M. Bataille writes' (NM 232), and his offering is 'a little holocaust of philosophical words. What happens when he uses one of them? Its meaning curdles and turns like milk in the heat' (NM 239).

In addition to his adulterations of words, Sartre takes offence at the idea that Bataille claims some privileged access to knowledge – or rather, non-knowledge. *Inner Experience* is, 'like most mystical writings, the product of a *re-descent*. M. Bataille is returning from an unknown region; he is coming back down among us' (NM 230). 'He is on high, we are down below. He delivers a message and it is for us to receive it if we can.' (NM 233)

Moreover, it is not just the style of the message, nor the means of the delivery that Sartre takes issue with. It is also the content. But by refusing to be reduced to argument, the mystic evades responsibility for any particular position – which is particularly problematic for some of the claims Bataille proceeds to make concerning the absence of God.

[14] Gide 1967: 414.

[15] Connor 2000: 26

'Mysticism', as Sartre eventually defines it, 'is ek-stasis or, in other words, a wresting from oneself towards, and intuitive enjoyment of, the transcendent.' But, Sartre asks, 'How can a thinker who has just asserted the absence of any transcendence achieve, in and by that very move, a mystical experience?' That is the question he believes Bataille must – yet fails to – answer (NM 274). On this topic it is worth quoting at length from Sartre's review:

> There are people you might call survivors. Early on, they lost a beloved person – father, friend, or mistress – and their lives are merely the gloomy aftermath of that death. Monsieur Bataille is a survivor of the death of God. And, when one thinks about it, it would seem that our entire age is surviving that death, which he experienced, suffered, and survived. God is dead. We should not understand by that that He does not exist, nor even that he now no longer exists. He is dead: he used to speak to us and he has fallen silent, we now touch only his corpse. Perhaps he has slipped out of this world to some other place, like a dead man's soul. Perhaps all this was merely a dream. (NM 234)
> God is dead, but man has not, for all that, become atheistic. Today, as yesterday, this silence of the transcendent, combined with modern man's enduring religious need, is the great question of the age. (NM 235)

The problem, then, which Sartre poses to Bataille is this (and, indeed, it is a question which might be asked of Gellman): how can one deny the transcendent and yet affirm mysticism?

Lest it be thought that Sartre's view of mysticism in 'A New Mystic' is idiosyncratic amongst his works, it must be pointed out that in *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre uses the word 'mystic' to indicate fallacious, misleading experience – for example, of the kind by which humanity (mistakenly) arrives at the idea of God. This notion, God, 'refers to an infinite series of mystic experiences of the presence of the Other, the notion of God as omnipresent, infinite subject for whom I exist' (BN 305). Elsewhere in Sartre's opus mysticism is presented as a human project as impossible as God himself – it is an effort at uniting the in-itself and for-itself.[16] In short, in the few places where Sartre's philosophical writings address mysticism outright, they tend to do so in antipathy; it is the bedfellow of bad faith. But he nonetheless assigned mystics enough credit to read and study them, and even went so far as to say in *What*

[16] See, for example, Sartre's discussion of mysticism in *Saint Genet* (1963), which Gellman cites for part I of his article.

is Literature? that 'God, if he existed, would be as the mystics have seen him, in a *situation* in relationship to man' (WL 14).

In light of this, an objector may wish to dismiss Sartre's rejection of mysticism as a category mistake. The examples given above are theistic; Sartre didn't know, perhaps, that 'atheist mysticism' was a viable alternative. But to suggest this is to assume that he rejects mysticism solely on account of its (supposed) content. For Sartre, as an existentialist, the problem of content is inseparable from the problem of method. Existence comes not only before essence, but before knowledge. Sartre does object to theistic mysticism for content-related reasons: specifically, because it imposes categories on experience which are not present in the experience itself (phenomenologically). But this is also a methodological objection, and one which is no less applicable to 'atheist' mysticism. For a rationalist like Sartre, a mystical experience of the absence of God is inconclusive at best (after all, a theist might interpret the same experience as evidence of the *deus absconditus*). The transcendent is silent, and that, as Sartre puts it in the passage cited above, is 'the great question of the age' (NM 235). When Gellman appeals to Sartre's use of 'intuition', 'seeing' or 'unveiling' as a mystical idiom, one therefore wonders whether the two are using the same words to speak different languages. Gellman takes these to be epistemological, equating Sartre's descriptions of phenomenological awareness with mystical experiences which grant *knowledge*. For Sartre, however, phenomenological awareness should be pure consciousness, prior to epistemology.

There is a further philosophical problem with interpreting Sartre as an 'atheist mystic' in the manner Gellman does: to have a 'defining' experience – a single experience which determines the rest of one's life – is directly at odds with Sartre's doctrine of radical freedom. On Sartre's existentialist account, there can be no foundational experiences, or at least no experiences with such profound dictatorial power as to eclipse freedom. Instead, the Sartrean existentialist begins with free choices, and nothing else.

III. CONCLUSION: MYSTICAL AMBIVALENCE

It is clear from the foregoing that I believe it is problematic to call Sartre 'a mystical atheist' for both biographical and philosophical reasons. But Gellman asks a question – namely 'what was the source, the basis, of

Sartre's atheism?'[17] – which seems not to be satisfactorily answered by either response: neither mysticism nor philosophy can overturn all the stones. Mysticism is a mischief-maker whose wrongs must be righted by philosophy.

And yet, in Sartre's works, philosophy's sovereignty does not seem so absolute: in the conversation with Beauvoir mentioned above Sartre says his real reasons for denying God's existence were 'much more direct and childish' (Beauvoir 1984: 438) than the argument given in *Being and Nothingness*. Is he, therefore, assigning them greater force? Or is he, like Descartes in his *Discourse on Method*, lamenting the fact that 'we have all been children before being men [... making it] almost impossible that our judgments should be so excellent or so solid as they would have been had we had complete use of our reason since our birth, and had we been guided by its means alone'?[18] Given that Sartre later called his intuition 'obviously untrue', and believes mysticism particularly suited to 'displaced children', if he is to be called a mystic he should at least be called a reluctant one.

Having said that, it is unlikely that any answer to Gellman's question can be asserted with certainty. For Sartre's philosophical project does appeal to more than discursive reason. He did not confine himself to writing the treatise and syllogism, but used literature because atmosphere can convey things more powerfully than argument. But does that make him a mystic? In *What is Literature?* Sartre writes that 'thought conceals man', and that on their own, arguments do not interest us. 'But an argument that masks a tear –that is what we're after.'[19] If his conversation with Beauvoir is to be taken at face value, Sartre's ontological disproof in *Being and Nothingness* is such an argument. But who can claim to know what tears it masks?[20]

---

[17] Gellman 2009: 132.

[18] Descartes 1969: I, 88.

[19] WL 22. Sartre continues, 'The argument removes the obscenity from the tears; the tears, by revealing their origin in the passions, remove the aggressiveness from the argument.'

[20] This paper was presented and discussed at the annual conference of the Mystical Theology Network – 'Mystical Theology: Eruptions from France' – held at All Hallows College, Dublin, in January 2013. I am grateful for comments from Pamela Sue Anderson, George Pattison, and a reviewer for this journal, and for the support of the AHRC.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

For texts originally published in French, original dates of publication are given in square brackets. Where applicable, abbreviations used in this article are given in parentheses.

Beauvoir, Simone de. 1984 [1981]. *Adieux: A Farewell to Sartre*, trans. Patrick O'Brian (New York: Pantheon)

Beauvoir, Simone de. 1962 [1960]. *The Prime of Life*, trans. Peter Green (London: Penguin)

Connor, Peter Tracey. 2000. *Georges Bataille and the Mysticism of Sin* (London: John Hopkins University Press)

Copleston, Frederick. 1974. *A History of Philosophy Volume IX: Modern Philosophy from the French Revolution to Sartre, Camus, and Levi-Strauss* (New York: Doubleday)

Descartes, René. 1969. *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, 2 vols., ed. and trans. by Elizabeth Haldane and G.R.T. Ross (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press)

Gellman, Jerome. 2009. 'Jean-Paul Sartre: The Mystical Atheist', *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 1(2): 127–137

Gide, André. 1967. *Journals 1889–1949* (London: Penguin)

Hollywood, Amy. 2002. *Sensible Ecstasy: Mysticism, Sexual Difference, and the Demands of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press)

James, William. 1929. *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Modern Library)

Jeanson, François. 2005. *Sartre devant Dieu* (Paris: Éditions Cécile Defaut)

King, Thomas. 1974. *Sartre and the Sacred* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press)

Salvan, Jacques. 1967. *The Scandalous Ghost: Sartre's Existentialism as Related to Vitalism, Humanism, Mysticism, Marxism* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press)

Sartre, Jean-Paul. 2010 [1943, *Cahiers du Sud*]. 'A New Mystic', in *Critical Essays*, trans. Chris Turner (London : Seagull Books) (NM)

Sartre, Jean-Paul. 2005 [1943]. *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (London: Routledge) (BN)

Sartre, Jean-Paul. 2003 [1948]. *What is Literature?*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (London: Routledge) (WL)

Sartre, Jean-Paul. 1984 [1940]. *War Diaries*, trans. Quintin Hoare (London: Verso) (WD)

Sartre, Jean-Paul. 1964 [1964]. *Words*, trans. Irene Clephane (London: Penguin) (W)

Sartre, Jean-Paul. 1963 [1952]. *Saint Genet: Actor and Martyr*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (London: Heinemann) (G)

Wang, Stephen. 2009. *Aquinas and Sartre: On Freedom, Personal Identity, and the Possibility of Happiness* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press)