

# JEAN PAUL SARTRE: THE MYSTICAL ATHEIST

JEROME GELLMAN

*Ben-Gurion University of the Negev*

**Abstract:** Within Jean Paul Sartre's atheistic program, he objected to Christian mysticism as a delusory desire for substantive being. I suggest that a Christian mystic might reply to Sartre's attack by claiming that Sartre indeed grasps something right about the human condition but falls short of fully understanding what he grasps. Then I argue that the true basis of Sartre's atheism is neither philosophical nor existentialist, but rather mystical. Sartre had an early mystical atheistic intuition that later developed into atheistic mystical experience. Sartre experienced the non-existence of God.

Jean Paul Sartre called himself a “material” atheist, one who not only believes that God does not exist but is profoundly *aware* of God's absence. This is to be compared to a group of people who meet regularly at a coffee house in Paris. One evening Pierre does not come. The entire evening, those present feel Pierre's absence, his absence is tangible, part of the scene, like the tables and the chairs. Pierre is missing. Just so, for Sartre, God's absence is to be felt everywhere. God is missing. And since God *is* missing we are to feel the obligation to create ourselves in freedom.

Within his program of material atheism, Sartre enunciated a critique of Christian mysticism. In his book on Jean Genet, Sartre defined “mysticism,” in general, as follows: “The quest for a state in which subject and object, consciousness and being, the eternal and the particular, merge in an absolute undifferentiation.”<sup>1</sup> Elsewhere in the same book, Sartre characterizes Christian mysticism in particular as follows: “It is God who will attain himself in the mystical ecstasy, which is a fusion of the Subject and the Object. There is thus nothing to do but to await the sudden figuration that will fill us with *being...*” (p. 247). Here are some examples

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<sup>1</sup> Jean Paul Sartre, *Saint Genet*: trns Bernard Frechtman (New York, 1963, G. Braziller Publishers), p. 76. All references to Sartre's book on Genet are to this volume.

with which I am familiar of what Sartre had in mind when writing of the “fusion of Subject and Object.” The early Christian mystic, Evagrius Ponticus (345-399) spoke of the experience of his self-emptying into God as akin to rivers flowing into the ocean. Jan van Ruysbroeck (1293-1381) wrote of his relationship to God as one of “iron within the fire and the fire within the iron,” and Meister Eckhart (1260-1328) declared that, “God and I are one.” In such cases, and others, the Christian mystic alleges that his true being is in God or identical with God. “The eternal and the particular, merge in an absolute undifferentiation.”

In what follows, I will first present Sartre’s objection to Christian mysticism. Then I will suggest what a Christian mystic might want to say in reply to Sartre. Lastly, I want to venture what was the true basis of Sartre’s material atheism of which his rejection of Christian mysticism is a part. I will argue that at the bottom of Sartre’s material atheism was a mysticism of a different sort – atheistic mysticism.

## I.

In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre articulates two exclusive ontological categories: One is the “in-itself,” including bare phenomenological content and the non-human furniture of the universe. The in-itself has what Sartre calls identity with itself; it has self-substance in itself, by itself, possessing givenness like a stone. Not so human beings, who are “for-themselves.” In virtue of our consciousness, we “have nothing of our selves.” Brentano made a big deal of the intentionality of consciousness, this being the difference for him between mind and non-mind. Sartre made an even a bigger deal out of intentionality – for him a person is nothing other than a consciousness going out to the in-itself, a taking on of the content of the in-itself, and never having self-substantive existence. Thus, consciousness is always a going out from itself “to become what it is not.” Human beings are thus free to become what they will. But “becoming” for a person is never achieving a substantive thickness, since a for-itself can never become the in-itself. Rather what a person becomes is precisely the accumulation of his actions, the sum total of directing himself toward the in-itself of the world.

In his later book, on Jean Genet, Sartre's ontological duality re-appears as a distinction between two modes, that of *being* and that of *doing*. In the mode of *being*, a person strives to be an object and acts in order to achieve object-hood. Sartre writes that in this mode a person wishes to "encounter this substance which defines him... One must be open to Being as the mystic is open to his God." (p. 75) In the mode of *doing*, a person aims to be a subject, a consciousness. Since these two modes co-exist in Genet, Genet steals in order to *be* a thief. But he also *is* a thief in order *to* steal. Sartre includes in this book an extensive presentation of how Christianity teaches a dual striving for both being and doing, a paradox of tension at the heart of Christian religiosity.

For Sartre, the universal bad faith of humanity is the desire to make of oneself the in-itself, to imagine that one is a substance like a stone. It is bad faith because each of us has an intuition of our freedom, of our lack of substantial being, of our being a for-itself. So I *know* that I am a for-itself. Thus I may not be satisfied simply to *wait* on tables, as in Sartre's example, I might want to *be* a waiter, to be a veritable *clump* of waiterhood. To this end I will adopt exaggerated, ingratiating acts towards customers, and will rush back and forth to the kitchen in great earnestness, to convince – myself – that I was *made* to *be* a waiter, cast in stone. I will try to be very *sincere* about my job, sincerity, for Sartre, being a mark of bad faith, involving my trying to be *true* to myself. As though I have an essence, an inner rock that I am. Thus do humans attempt to avoid the freedom of the for-itself by pretending to be the in-itself, at the same time preserving the for-itself of their own consciousness. This impossible task lies at the heart of human existential anxiety.

Now, we can understand Sartre's critique of Christian mystics. Christian mystics exemplify bad faith at its worst – pretending to have discovered that they belong to the substance of God sufficiently so as to receive for themselves a substantive, in-itself form of being. Listen to Meister Eckhart when he declares: "God's self-identity is my self-identity, nothing less nor more." "Self-identity," happens to be one of Sartre's favored phrases when characterizing the in-itself. The in-itself has self-identity in the sense that it is what it is. A for-itself has no self-identity in the sense that it is a going out of itself to the in-itself, taking on the content of the in-itself in consciousness. And listen to Augustine declare:

“I find stability and solidity in you.” Christian mysticism, Sartre believes, is motivated by the profound bad faith of asserting oneself as the in-itself, indeed as the ultimate in-itself. In Sartre’s eyes Christian mysticism is a succumbing to the mode of being in the most perverted way.

## II.

Thus goes Sartre’s critique of Christian mysticism. Now I want to suggest what a Christian mystic might say in reply. First of all, he will certainly question Sartre’s ontological dogma that nothing can be both the in-itself and a for-itself. Perhaps this is true with regard to the *same* aspect of a being, but why can there not be both of these ontological categories in different aspects of the same being? There does not seem to be a good reason why the mystic should accept Sartre’s dogma. Despite the sub-title of *Being and Nothingness* as: “An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology,” others have pointed out before me that Sartre’s dualistic ontology is not well founded in phenomenology, but seems to be a straight-out metaphysical assumption. If so, there is no good reason for the Christian mystic to think that a belief that one is ultimately one with the substance of God is a case of bad faith.

But there is much more that a Christian mystic could say here in reply to Sartre. I propose that such a mystic could see Sartre as grasping at important, true insights of Christian mysticism, but unfortunately letting them slip through his fingers. Here is what I mean.

Our mystic begins with the conviction that humans have an intuition of God, even if confused and subdued, even to the point of being subliminal. He will endorse what Aquinas writes at the beginning of the *Summa Theologica* (Q2:A1): To know that God exists in a general and confused way is implanted in us by nature.... This, however, is not to know absolutely that God exists; just as to know that someone is approaching is not the same as to know that Peter is approaching, even though it is Peter who is approaching.

To the mystic, however, this dim intuition is more than simply to the effect that God exists. It is an implicit recognition of one’s own self being included in the very being of God. It is *this* pre-mystical presentiment, dim

and amorphous, that comes to full realization in the mystical consciousness. And the Christian mystic might want to recognize that in Sartre this intuition has come close to the surface, yet Sartre misunderstands what it is he has seen.

Thus, our mystic will want to say that when Sartre asserts that a person has no *self*-substance, Sartre is seeing through a glass darkly what the Christian mystic has discovered – that a person has no distinct self-being, because he exists only in the encompassing being of God. Since Sartre is blind to God, however, Sartre interprets the emptiness of self-being as the exclusionary category of the for-itself, and misses the true import of his insight.

And when Sartre asserts that the human being has a universal desire to be the in-itself, Sartre prophesizes, knowing not what he is prophesying. For to the Christian mystic, the desire for substantive being is an expression of the vague human intuition of being included in the substance of God. Thus the search of human beings for self-substance is a seeking for their true nature – in God, which they know only obscurely. They see someone, as Aquinas said, but know not who it is. Since Sartre is blind to God, Sartre is unable to see what the Christian mystic sees, and can see it only as bad-faith.

Likewise, Sartre has it just right that human existential anxiety is rooted in the frustrated desire to be the in-itself. Since he has become blind to God, however, Sartre fails to see that this anxiety comes because ordinary attempts at being an in-itself are *misplaced* attempts at achieving substantive being in God. We want to *be* a homosexual, or to *be* a saint, to use Sartre's own examples, rather than achieving our substance by being absorbed in the being of God. Because one's true substantive being is in God, any attempt to supply *another* substantive being to oneself creates self-alienation and existential frustration. It is only when the mystic finds his own being in God that self-alienation is overcome and existential anxiety disappears in the tranquility of being.

Finally, our mystic would eagerly embrace Sartre's proclamation that we have an intuition of our freedom. But for the mystic this intuition is nothing other than an intimation of the infinite freedom of God, within whose being we have our being. Since blind to God, Sartre mistakenly assigns our intuition of our freedom to our exclusive for-itself ontology.

Thus I imagine the Christian mystic's reply to Sartre.

## III.

So, we have two metaphysical outlooks here: one - theistic mysticism, and the other - atheism. And the question I now want to address is - what was the source, the basis, of Sartre's atheism? You will not find in Sartre an argument from evil, as in Voltaire. Nor will you find critiques of arguments for God's existence as with Hume. In *Being and Nothingness* we do find a proof against God existence. In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre turned his dichotomous ontological scheme of the in-itself and the for-itself into a quick ontological proof of the non-existence of God. God is supposed to be both a substantive being, an it-itself, with givenness like a stone, and also possessed of the consciousness of a for-itself. But these two ontological categories are incompatible. It is not possible for anything to be both the in-itself and a for-itself. Hence, God does not exist. End of proof. But listen to what he says about this argument in conversation with Simone de Beauvoir: "In *Being and Nothingness* I set out reasons for my denial of God's existence that were not actually the real reasons."<sup>2</sup> In these conversations, Sartre tells de Beauvoir that he advanced his ontological proof only because he felt the need to vindicate his belief philosophically. (p. 436). So what *was* the starting place of his atheism? Sartre tells this story to de Beauvoir, which appears in a slightly different version in his autobiography of his youth, *The Words*:

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 day and in the form of a momentary intuition, that I said to myself, "God doesn't exist."

Sartre calls this realization an "intuition," and later wrote that God's non-existence had become "manifest" to him at that moment. Early in

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<sup>2</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *Adieux, A Farewell to Sartre*, trns. Patrick O'Brian (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), p. 437.

*The Words*, Sartre recounts an earlier problem with God when he writes that “as a boy I needed a Creator; I was given a big boss.”<sup>3</sup>

Considering these passages, it would be easy to make light of Sartre’s atheism as being the result of a flippant childhood whim. But that would be a mistake. Instead, I suggest that Sartre had an early serious intuition that led him to his own brand of mystical experience, just as mystical intuition leads the theistic mystic to experience God as the ground of his being. But Sartre’s mysticism is not theistic atheism. Sartre was an atheistic mystic.

To flesh out my idea I take you to the definition of mystical experience given by the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. The *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* defines a mystical experience as an alleged: “*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.” A “unitive experience” involves a phenomenological de-emphasis, blurring, or eradication of multiplicity, where the noetic significance of the experience is deemed to lie precisely in that phenomenological feature.

The Christian mystic’s experience of himself as included in the being of God, qualifies as mystical” because allegedly unitive in the way the definition specifies. The *Encyclopedia* calls this a “super sense-perceptual experience,” allegedly involving non-sensory perception-like content, given by a “spiritual” sense, appropriate to a non-physical realm.

Now, the *Encyclopedia* recognizes a second category of unitive experience, “sub sense-perceptual experience,” allegedly either devoid of phenomenological content altogether, or nearly so, or consisting of phenomenological content appropriate to sense perception, but lacking in the conceptualization typical of attentive sense perception. An example of this would be the Buddhist experience of “unconstructed awareness.” In this, the lack of conceptual configuration affords the subject a unitive experiential knowledge of true reality. In Yogacara Buddhism, for example, the notion is prominent that *vikalpa*, or “conceptual construction,” constructs a world of distinct material objects, of objects and properties, and of distinct selves, including one’s own self. *Vikalpa* creates language,

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<sup>3</sup> Jean Paul Sartre, *The Words*, tr. Bernard Frechtman (New York : G. Braziller, 1964), p. 61.

cementing division and classification into our awareness. In unconstructed awareness one comes to experience the utter “indescribability of things” as they are in themselves. Unconstructed awareness, *parinispanna*, is a unitive experience, allegedly conferring knowledge, disclosing reality as utter “tathata,” or “thusness,” seamless, without divisions. Therefore, the Buddhist claim for unconstructed awareness as unitive deserves to be called non-theistic mysticism.

There are also incipient, partial unconstructed mystical experiences, one kind of which Walter Stace called “extrovertive experiences.” In these experiences, the subject has sensory perception in which distinctions blur, become elusive, and appear unreal. The unitive sense impinges upon the sensory data to provide what the subject takes to be a glimpse into the true nature of reality, namely the undifferentiated reality provided in fully unconstructed awareness.

Now, let’s return to Sartre, the mystical atheist. In *The Words*, Sartre writes of his first major work and its central character: “At the age of thirty, I executed the masterstroke of writing *Nausea*. . . . I was Roquentin; I used him to show, without complacency, the texture of my life.” (Pp. 157–158). In the novel *Nausea*, Sartre tells the story of the existential travails of Antoine Roquentin, a young man, a writer, who resides temporarily in a small French town. Antoine’s story revolves around the meaning, or lack of it, he finds in the historical research in which he is engaged. The central event of the novel takes place in a park that Antoine visits from time to time. This time, however, looking at a chestnut tree, Antoine has an experience he never had before. Here are some excerpts:<sup>4</sup>

- (1) And suddenly, suddenly, the veil is torn away, I have understood, I have seen. (p. 170)
- (2) I had this vision. It left me breathless. (p. 171)
- (3) And then all of a sudden, there it was, clear as day: existence had suddenly unveiled itself. It had lost the harmless look of an abstract category: it was the very paste of things, this root was kneaded into existence. Or rather the root, the park gates, the bench, the sparse grass, all that had

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<sup>4</sup> All quotations are from Jean Paul Sartre, *Nausea*, trans. Lloyd Alexander (New York: New Directions Publishing Company, 1964).



vanished: the diversity of things, their individuality, were only an appearance, a veneer. This veneer had melted, leaving soft, monstrous masses, all in disorder—naked, in a frightful, obscene nakedness. (pp. 171-72)

(4) In vain I tried to *count* the chestnut trees...each of them escaped the relationship in which I tried to enclose it, isolated itself, and overflowed. (p. 173)

(5) And without formulating anything clearly, I understood that I had found the key to Existence.... In fact, all that I could grasp beyond that returns to this fundamental absurdity. Absurdity: another word; I struggle against words. (p. 173)

(6) This moment was extraordinary. I was there, motionless and icy, plunged in a horrible ecstasy. But something fresh had just appeared in the very heart of this ecstasy. The essential thing is contingency. I mean that one cannot define existence as necessity. To exist is simply *to be there*... I believe there are people who have understood this. Only they tried to overcome this contingency by inventing a necessary, causal being. But no necessary being can explain existence: contingency is not a delusion, a probability which can be dissipated; it is the absolute, consequently, the perfect free gift. (p. 177)

(7) I *was* the root of the chestnut tree. Or rather I was entirely conscious of its existence. Still detached from it—since I was conscious of it—yet lost in it, nothing but it. (p. 177)

(8) I knew it was the World, the naked World suddenly revealing itself, and I choked with rage at this gross, absurd being. (p. 178)

I cannot emphasize enough how much of this description is typical in reports of mystical experiences. The veil is lifted, one *sees*, an enormous truth is revealed, one has discovered the key to Existence, the absolute, one cannot move, there is ecstasy, things flow into one another, what one is experiencing is ineffable, there is talk of essential reality, the dissolution of the self into the content of the experience, and so on.

Compare Sartre's description of Antoine's experience to some of the expressions in the following theistic mystical experience reported by William James:

I remember the night, and almost the very spot on the hilltop, where my soul opened out, as it were, into the Infinite, and there was a rushing together of the two worlds, the inner and the outer.... I stood alone with Him who had

made me, and all the beauty of the world, and love, and sorrow, and even temptation. I did not seek Him, but felt the perfect unison of my spirit with His, The ordinary sense of things around me faded. For the moment nothing but an ineffable joy and exultation remained. It is impossible fully to describe the experience. It was like the effect of some great orchestra when all the separate notes have melted into one swelling harmony that leaves the listener conscious of nothing save that his soul is being wafted upwards, and almost bursting with its own emotion. The perfect stillness of the night was thrilled by a more solemn silence, The darkness held a presence that was all the more felt because it was not seen, I could not any more have doubted that *He* was there than that I was. Indeed, I felt myself to be, if possible, the less real of the two.

Antoine's was a unitive experience, in which distinctions blurred like colors running into each other in a washed garment. Antoine's mystical experience is an embryonic instance of an unconstructed awareness – distinctions becoming elusive to the point of disappearing, as in Antoine's saying that he *was* the chestnut tree. And from the nature of this mystical experience Antoine comes to *know* that there is no God. He has *seen* that reality has no character, no structure, no intrinsic meaning. But if there were a God, reality *would* have character, structure, and intrinsic meaning. So, by *experience* Sartre now *knows* that God is missing in the world, knows God's absence. No wonder that Sartre says of his writing of *Nausea*, "As a mystic, I attempted to reveal the silence of being by a thwarted rustling of words...." (p. 157).

Now, insofar as Antoine lives the texture of Sartre's life, as Sartre has testified, Sartre is not blind to God, as the Christian mystic charged. As far as Sartre is concerned, he has *seen* reality as it truly is, has *seen* that all of existence is absurd, superfluous, and utterly contingent. He has *seen* that all that *is* melts together unless the mind arbitrarily applies *vikalpa* to that which is "without form, and void." He has *seen* the in-itself and it is not God. All of this is *given* to him phenomenologically. And this, I suggest, is the real basis for Sartre's rejection of God and his rejection of theistic mysticism. Sartre is an atheistic mystic. His mysticism begins with an intuition at an early age that there is no God. Then, when mature, Sartre has an atheistic mystical experience. Thereafter he seeks philosophical vindication in his ontological proof against God's existence that he presents in *Being and Nothingness*.

There is a further aspect of Sartre's experience that parallels Christian mysticism – and that is the Christian mystic's "dark night of the soul." The Christian mystic's appropriation of his mystical knowledge is a long-term affair requiring great diligence. In his or her travails, the mystic is prone to the "dark night of the soul." The latter term was coined by the 15<sup>th</sup> century Spanish mystic, John of the Cross, to refer to a time of purgation leading the mystic to ultimate salvation. In Catholic theology the phrase has come to describe a tumble from the mystical knowledge that one has attained. It entails a dryness of the spirit, a losing of ground, and even the arising of doubts – doubts whether the experience was genuine. Just so, Sartre acknowledges that material atheism is a long drawn-out work, and he too goes through a dark night of the soul, that of a mystical atheist. Here are two examples. In *Existentialism is a Humanism*, Sartre endorses an idea he attributes to Dostoyevsky, namely, that if God does not exist, all is permitted. Yet, late in life, Sartre told de Beauvoir that he no longer agreed with Dostoyevsky, because he was convinced that it was absolutely wrong to kill another human being. And in his late conversations with de Beauvoir Sartre makes this astounding declaration: "I don't see myself as so much dust that has appeared in the world, but as a being that was expected, prefigured, called forth... this idea of a creating hand that created me refers me back to God." (*Adieux*, p. 438). Sartre refers to these and similar sentiments of his later in life as "remaining traces of God." While I am not about to claim that underneath it all Sartre really *believed* in God, I do want to say that his atheistic faith, grounded in a mystical awareness of God's non-existence was challenged at various points in Sartre's life, in an atheistic "dark night of the soul."

To conclude, we have here two opposing mystical conceptions of life and of reality that nonetheless share some significant features. Each is rooted in a prior intuition, followed by mystical experience, and then followed by a dark night of the soul.

Sartre's deepest atheistic inclinations are not those of a philosopher or even those of an existentialist. They are those of a mystic.