

Sartre and Atheism

An Introduction to the Round-Table Discussion of Ronald Aronson's *Living Without God*.

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While reading Ron Aronson's illuminating guide to the secular life, it struck me that, given the context, an exploration of the topic of Sartre and atheism was very much in order.

For my sources I have relied firstly on Daniel Giovannangeli's article "Athéisme" in the *Dictionnaire Sartre*. It lists about a dozen works. However, at the same time, I have kept in mind what Sartre said in 1943 in his analysis of Bataille's *L'Expérience intérieure*, namely, that even if for Sartre, Bataille and many others "God is dead ... men have nevertheless not become atheists."¹ And he adds portentously: "This silence of the transcendent conjoined with modern man's permanent need for religion is today's—as well as yesterday's—greatest preoccupation" (*Sit. I*, 1947, 142). Finally, this is also why I have made use of the illuminating comments made by Michel Contat and John Ireland in the Pléiade edition of Sartre's plays entitled *Théâtre complet* (*Tc*, xiv; 1584). I will juxtapose their comments, whenever the need arises, with Sartre's own remarks about atheism.

Regarding the latter, Sartre was not loath to admit how long and hard he struggled to free himself from Christianity. He emphasized this in 1964 while concluding his conference on Kierkegaard entitled "The Singular Universal": "becoming an atheist is a long and difficult undertaking. It requires an absolute relationship with two infinities: man and the universe" (*Sit. IX*, 189). Here he echoes Pascal's remarks about man's place in the universe: "After all, what is man in nature? Nothing compared to infinity, everything compared to nothingness, [man finds] himself in the middle between nothingness and everything" (*Pensées*, 45). Hence it is not surprising that, as John Ireland points out (*Tc*, 1583), Sartre had long projected to write an

“anti-Pascalian” play entitled *The Wager*. A play with the title *The Wager* cannot but derive its initial inspiration from Pascal’s famous bet on the existence of God. Pascal—all the while stressing that we are all “in the same boat”—states: “Yes but one must wager; you are not free not to, you are embarked.... Let us weigh the gain and the loss and pick heads that God exists. Let us consider these two possibilities: if you win, you win everything; if you lose you have lost nothing (*Pensées*, 92). To be embarked or to commit oneself are not exactly synonyms, but Pascal’s insistence that we are all in the same boat does remind one of Sartre’s comment that even if you refuse to commit yourself, your non-committal counts and you remain accountable.

With that context in mind, let us hark back to his article on Bataille where he remarked that “Bataille’s originality lies in ... his having deliberately chosen history over metaphysics” and where he adds significantly: “Here one must go back to Pascal, whom I willingly call the first *historical* thinker because he was the first to grasp that, in man, existence precedes essence” (*Sit.*, I, 139). Clearly then, a detailed analysis of the basic tenets of Sartre’s existentialism shows that much of his thinking has as a starting point a strong Christian tradition that goes back as far as Pascal, and this is never more evident than in his plays, a matter we will come back to.

In autobiographical terms, Sartre delineates his position first on Dec.1, 1939 in the *Carnets de la drôle de guerre*. While reflecting on the “classical” nature of André Gide’s *Journal*, which he contrasts with his own “mediocrity” (in the sense of his being average and therefore representative of the general population), he notices nevertheless that he shares with Gide a preoccupation with ethics. But he adds: “[I]t is certain that from the beginning I have conceived an ethics without God [and unlike Gide] without sin [but] not without Evil.” Then he launches into an autobiographical account of his childhood:

I lost my faith at the age of twelve. But I think that I never believed very strongly. My grandfather was a Protestant, my grandmother a Catholic ... I barely have any religious memories: nevertheless I see myself ... at age seven or eight setting fire to the ... curtains with a match and that memory is linked to the Good Lord, I don’t know why.... God existed but I didn’t preoccupy myself with him at all. And then one day at La Rochelle, while waiting for the Machado girls who accompanied me in the morning on my way to high school, I became impatient because they were late and, to occupy myself, I decided to think about God: “Well!” I said to myself, “he doesn’t exist.” That was an authentic revelation, even though I absolutely don’t know on what it was based. And then it was

over, and I never thought about it again, I didn't occupy my mind with that dead God any more than I had worried about God alive. I think it would be difficult to find anybody who is less religious than I am. I settled the question once and for all at the age of twelve. (CDG, 265-7).

On Dec.3 he furnishes the link between his atheism, his ethics and man's finite existence and explains why we must *accept* the situation that we find ourselves in:

I now understand and have *experienced* what is a true ethics. I see the link between metaphysics and values, humanism and disdain, our absolute freedom within a life that is unique and limited by death, our lack of consistency, since we are without God, we, who are not our own creator, ... our autarkical independence as individuals and our historicity.... [T]his time it will be an ethics which I will have experienced and applied before I have thought it out.

And the next day he declares:

We have to *assume*, to make our own, what happens to us *as if* we had given it to ourselves by decree.... This *as if* is not a lie. It results from our intolerable human condition; we are at once self-caused and without foundation. As a consequence, we are not a judge of what happens to us but because everything that happens to us can only happen because of us and hence it becomes our responsibility (CDG, 296).

Sartre concludes his ruminations about God, atheism and his personal attitude by remarking:

I have never taken the world seriously.... But I was an atheist out of pride; ... my very existence was based on pride. *I was the embodiment of pride*. There was no place whatsoever for God beside me, I was so perpetually the source of my own origins that I could not see what role an Omnipotent Being could play in my life. Afterwards, the lamentable poverty of religious thought resulted in reinforcing my atheism. Faith is silly or it is in bad faith.... Lacking faith, I have limited myself to giving up on seriousness. (CDG, 577).

Exactly a year later, while a POW in Stalag XII D in Trier, Germany, Sartre writes a nativity play entitled *Bariona* for his fellow prisoners. John Ireland remarks about it:

In medieval times, mysteries employed a great number of Biblical episodes. But Sartre uses only one: the birth and the life of Jesus-Christ. Sartre is fascinated by the Christ's story, so much so that he made it the leitmotif of his autobiography *The Words*. The use of the Christ figure is very much parodic since Sartre pokes fun at those pre-war writers who dream of salvation through literature. *Bariona*, on the other hand, ... openly reveals the messianic impulses of its heroic protagonist [and it] pushes the cult of messianic heroism to its apogee, since he dies in order that the Messiah may live, and hence by saving Christ he surpasses him. It is easy to see, as indicated by Michel Contat, that most of Sartre's plays

operate within that same pattern of the Christ story even if Sartre criticized, contradicted, [and then again] reaffirmed it subtly (*Tc*, 1566-7).

Clearly then, the atheist Sartre had no difficulty repeatedly framing his own existentialist message within a Christian context.

But let us move on to 1943 when Sartre not only publishes *Being and Nothingness* but also the revelatory article on Georges Bataille entitled “Un nouveau mystique” as well as *The Flies*. In *Being and Nothingness* Sartre remarks:

In short, every effort to conceive of the idea of a being which would be the foundation of its being results inevitably in forming that of a being which, contingent as being-in-itself, would be the foundation of its own nothingness. The act of causation by which god is *causa sui* is a nihilating act like every recovery of the self by the self, to the same degree that the original relation of necessity is a return to self, a reflexivity. This original necessity in turn appears on the foundation of a contingent being, precisely that being which *is in order* to be the cause of itself.... In a word, God, if he exists, is contingent (*BN*, 80-81).

In December of the same year Sartre also publishes some highly revelatory remarks about the death of God in his commentary on Georges Bataille’s *L’Expérience intérieure* and, interestingly, he provides these with a strong autobiographical and psychoanalytic slant:

There are men who we could call survivors. Early in life they lost a loved one, a father, a friend, a mistress, and from then on their life is no more than the gloomy aftermath of that death. Bataille is the survivor of the death of God. And it appears that, when we reflect on it, that this death—which he experienced, agonized over, and survived—is one that makes all of us today survivors. God is dead: one must not understand by this that he does not exist, nor even that he no longer exists. He is dead: he spoke to us and [now] he remains silent, we are only touching his cadaver. Perhaps he shipped out, is elsewhere like a dead person’s soul, perhaps it was only a dream (*Sit. I*, 142).

It is not difficult to see autobiographical elements reflected in these comments. After all, Sartre also lost a father and was raised by a patriarchal grandfather who mistook himself for Victor Hugo *and* God-the-Father. In addition, when Sartre’s mother remarried, Poulou lost not only a loved one but, as well, acquired a hated stepfather. Therefore we ought also to ask if he too was a survivor and if perhaps his life was also no more than the gloomy aftermath of his father’s death and the demise of his mother’s affection.

A look at *The Flies*, performed in the same year, would seem to confirm those suppositions as others have already indicated (See *Tc*, 1255-97). Personally, what has always struck me about that play is the fact that until Orestes kills his mother and stepfather, there is no

real dramatic conflict. After all, neither Clytemnestra nor Aegisthus offer any resistance to their killer nor are they defended by their bodyguards and not one of these comes forward to try and avenge the killing. In fact, the dramatic conflict begins afterwards and it involves Orestes and his sister Electra who no longer wants to assume responsibility for the double murder they plotted to commit together. It is also at that point that Orestes has to decide whether to assume the throne and continue to stay in Argos or to abandon the guilt-ridden citizenry and its cardboard god. Of course, Jupiter and Aegisthus, the king, see themselves precisely in that light and know they are impotent in the face of mankind's freedom. As Jupiter declares to the king: "Both of us impose order, you in Argos and I in the world, and the same secret weighs heavily on our hearts.... The painful secret of gods and kings: men are free. They are free, Aegisthus. You know it and they don't." Aegisthus responds: "Good heavens, if they knew it, they would burn down my palace. For fifteen years I have been playing a role in order to hide their power from them." And Jupiter continues: "Orestes knows that he is free ... [but] ... the gods have another secret: Once freedom has exploded in a man's mind, the gods can no longer do anything against that man" (*Tc*, 49-50).

If in political terms, Jupiter and Aegisthus represent the Vichy leadership which was trying to impose its rightwing fascist agenda on the French, it is understandable and not surprising that Orestes refuses to remain in such a moribund city or assume the mantle of power. At the same time, it is also possible to see Karl Schweitzer as the archetype of the Godlike comedian doing his song and dance routine for his family in a fashion similar to the role Jupiter performs as he says of himself: "For a thousand years I have danced before men. A slow and somber dance..... As long as there are men in this world, I am condemned to dance before them" (*Tc*, 49).

In other words, the death of God was also a very personal matter for Sartre and when Orestes abandons Argos, he is following in Sartre's footsteps; not only does he leave behind a grandfatherly and clown-like "God" (Karl Schweitzer) and a mother who, in real life, he had mistaken for his sister (Anne-Marie), he also rejects a moribund set of beliefs and a decrepit value system that was being imposed on an occupied France by the doddering general Pétain.

In 1951, Sartre writes a eulogy in praise of André Gide which stresses that atheism is the result of an arduous struggle: "He *lived* his ideas; especially one: the death of God.... Gide's most precious

gift to us is his decision to live out fully the agony of the death of God.... Had he made his decision abstractly at age twenty, his would have been a false atheism, but he acquired it slowly, it was the crowning achievement of a half century struggle, and this atheism became his and our concrete truth” (*Sit. IV*, 88-9).

The next year Sartre undertakes a study of Mallarmé which he later abandons. Its fragments were published in 1986 by Arlette Elkaïm-Sartre under the title: *Mallarmé. La lucidité et sa face d'ombre*. It is pertinent to our discussion because in it Sartre places the entire question of the secularization of France in a historical context and traces its origins back to the French revolution:

The text opens as follows:

1848: the fall of the Monarchy [the period of 1830-1848 designates the reign of Louis-Philippe or the July Monarchy] deprives the bourgeoisie of its “cover”: at the same time Poetry loses its two traditional themes: Man and God....

The middle class was seized with horror by this involuntary parricide just like their forefathers had been in the past by the execution of Louis XVI. They felt as if an unforgivable crime had just been committed and everyone tried to blame his neighbor. In vain, the bourgeoisie could not hide the fact that it had always nurtured this crime in its bosom: killing one’s king or one’s God amounts to the same thing and, in sum, this class represents the death of God. Atheism was an integral part of its ideology and it had just realized the Idea by undertaking it. Henri Guillemin states quite correctly: “France’s secularization, prepared towards the end of the Ancien Régime by the intellectuals, spread to all social classes under Louis XVIII and Charles X. The disappearance of faith becomes a historic fact during the Napoleonic period and the Restoration.” Indeed, during the Restoration, secularization is in progress but under Louis-Philippe it is a *fait accompli*. The new bourgeoisie cannot lose its faith because it never possessed it (*M*, 15).

This account illustrates that the movement away from Christianity began during the Ancien Régime; was accelerated during the French Revolution and reached its apogee in the nineteenth century. It is clear that Sartre views himself and his contemporaries as inheritors of this long drawn out movement towards secularism and away from belief in the Almighty.

In 1964, in his long and quite positive appraisal of Kierkegaard, Sartre concludes his remarks by describing his own relationship to the Danish philosopher in the following terms:

If I wanted to provide a summary of what his testimony about sin means to me—a term which is meaningless to me as a twentieth century atheist who does not believe in sin—I would say that it represents for the [pre-Adamic] person the state of ignorance in exteriority. Adam temporalizes

himself through sin. A free and necessary choice and a radical transformation of what he is: he makes human temporality enter into the universe. Sin is a blasphemous defiance of God—and an opting for finitude. [It is at this point that he distinguishes himself from his illustrious predecessor]: But nevertheless I am not like Kierkegaard, I am an atheist.... [However] Kierkegaard is proof for me that *becoming an atheist* is a long and difficult undertaking. It implies an absolute relationship with two infinities: man and the universe. (*Sit. IX*, 177-9)

In 1964 Sartre concludes *The Words* on the following ambiguous note:

Death reduced itself to a rite of passage and worldly immortality offered itself as a substitute for eternal life.... Being raised in a household that was both Protestant and Catholic I could not believe in Saints, the Virgin or finally God. [Instead] when I gave myself to Literature, I entered in fact into a religious order (*LM*, 210).

In conclusion, Sartre ceased believing in God at an early age but his personal struggle to develop a philosophy on an atheistic basis—even as he traces atheism back to the French Revolution and sees himself and his contemporaries as the inheritors of France’s increasing secularization—did not free him from the framework of Christianity. Christ’s life and Christian themes remain a guide for his own existence and an inspiration for his writing and especially his theater.

But what of Ron’s book? I think it marks the final stepping stone in an odyssey of a person who has always been committed to the ideals he outlines in his book. He may have moved from Marcuse, Marx, and Freud onto other concerns: but political and social causes as well as personal health struggles have brought him to a deeper understanding of the meaning of his own existence as well that of others, and therefore his book is an inspiration for all of us. But since we are here to discuss Ron’s book, I have formulated certain questions for him:

1. Why did he decide to write a “book that offers little criticism or examination of religion?” (*LWG* 18). Did he feel that the “New Atheists” had already done a more than adequate job or was his focus simply elsewhere; namely, on trying to live well on this earth?
2. Why if “it is still so very, very hard to be human” (*LWG* 19) is he surprised that people continue to turn to religion to make their lives more bearable?
3. In addition, as Ron states, “almost all modern lives have become overwhelmingly secular” and “modern life itself has

consigned religion to a non-rational inner space, except when shared with one's coreligionists. Today, even intensely religious lives are mostly secular most of the time" (*LWG* 29). Why then did he not make this fact his starting point and work out its logical consequences. To wit, if our natural existence is now largely in our own hands, why should we turn to supernatural forces when it comes to the afterlife? Secondly, what will we have to do in order to create a world fit for all humans rather than the "hell" we have often created for ourselves and continue to manufacture?

4. And finally, could one not live up to all the elements of "the good life" and still be a religious person? In conclusion, Ron has one more book to write: "A Guide for the Secular life in America." Such a work would require him to look to Europe as well as his northern neighbor Canada to compare and contrast what these societies have managed to accomplish in the secular realm and where America stands to gain (or lose).

In this context, since I am a Canadian, I would like to point out how a country that is so similar to the U.S.A. in many ways has coped with many of modern society's questions. In the last three decades, Canada has taken a very different path from the U.S.A. in respect to many thorny legal and social issues. It has abolished the death penalty; it no longer has a law regulating abortions, which means that it has strictly become a matter between a woman and her physician. Same-sex marriage has been legalized and we have had universal health care for a long time. Quebec even has subsidized child care and Ontario is instituting it. Even though many Canadians are religious, few if any would be able to identify the religion of Canada's Prime Minister. Proportionally speaking, Canada allows in as many immigrants as the U.S.A., but "immigration" as such is not a major political issue. Finally, one of the most beneficial policies in promoting social equality has been Canada's educational system. Not only does Canada not have any major private universities or colleges (all of them are the responsibility of the respective provinces), the primary and secondary school systems do not depend on the taxes of the municipality one lives in because the subsidies are distributed equally across each province by the respective ministries of education. This prevents the gerrymandering of "municipal" borders that is so typical of American communities and that has led to legalized segregation. On the other hand, we do have strict gun controls; some provinces continue to maintain province mandated liquor and

beer outlets, and even though prostitution is legal in the country, soliciting is not! This has created a bizarre and anomalous legal situation. (However, this may change in the near future since that matter is being decided by the Supreme Court). A secular agenda based on the best practices of America and on that of its social-democratic allies would provide Ron with a solid basis for establishing the core of a secular American society

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Note

1. All translations by the author.

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