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Bergson and mystical experience

By Martin Dumont

Can mysticism be a philosophical tool? Yes, provided one understands it philosophically as an experience that leads to morality and universal love.

Reviewed: Ghislain Waterlot, *Mystique et histoire chez Henri Bergson. Une lecture des* Deux Sources de la morale et de la religion (Mysticism and History in Henri Bergson: A Reading of *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*), Paris, Honoré Champion, 2024, 438 p., 58 €.

In *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, the last major work he published in 1932, Henri Bergson became interested in mysticism, the main elements of which he sought to introduce into philosophy. Ghislain Waterlot, in his subtle and nuanced commentary of *The Two Sources*, emphasizes the singular and in many ways incredible character of Bergson's gesture: he claims that mystical experiences, particularly in Christianity, are a tool that philosophy cannot invent on its own but that it must nevertheless incorporate. Mystical experience is a shock, as it was for Bergson himself. At first, Bergson was indifferent to religious questions. But he was moved to read the mystics thanks to William James and Henri Delacroix, his former student.[1] His surprise is, in a sense, comparable to the discovery of duration, which Bergson described as the shock that led him to pose it as a problem to be examined in all its consequences.

[1] In the case of William James, it was *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902). Bergson and James were connected through correspondence and friendship. In the case of Delacroix, it was his 1899 book *Essai sur le mysticisme spéculatif en Allemagne au XIVe siècle*.

In this instance, too, Bergson experienced a shock. He believes that mysticism is a *fact*--an experience, albeit one that he never had, but which cannot be reduced to madness or sociological explanations. But this is precisely the problem: how can one take seriously mystical experiences, which would appear to be ecstasy without proof, poetry without philosophical content, and perhaps even absurdity pure and simple? To do so, it is necessary to completely reformulate how mystical experience is understood if one is to grasp what Bergson sees as true mysticism, as opposed to caricatures--such as the awful contemporary example of Nazi exaltation--and misguided interpretations.

Taking mysticism seriously

It is the great merit of Waterlot's book to bring to light the importance of this theme for Bergson and philosophy--against the current of his time and ours. At present, mystical literature is rarely considered and discussed. The pages Bergson devoted to mysticism can feel embarrassing, as if the aging master had given free rein to his fancies. Instead, Waterlot focuses on these chapters of the *Two Sources*, as well as on the final chapter--entitled "Final Remarks. Mechanics and Mysticism"--which is often denounced as an abusive intrusion on Bergson's part into the philosophy of history. Waterlot notes that even the recent renewal of Berson studies has shown little interest in these passages, which would appear hopelessly stale (p. 17). Waterlot, to the contrary, offers a detailed, line-by-line analysis, tracing the steps of Bergson's reflections in an illuminating way.

As Waterlot emphasizes, it is as a philosopher that Bergson sets out to ponder mysticism. His argument is not theological, and even less apologetical. Bergson has, incidentally, been criticized for succumbing to theology, though he constantly objected to this charge. Waterlot offers precise clarifications about Bergson's relationship with critiques of his work by theologians and his relationship with Christianity, to which he was constantly drawn even as he was constantly wary of the risk that his work might be censored (Bergson was placed on the index for *Creative Evolution*), ensuring that he preserved his status as a philosopher, notably by refusing to take the step of officially converting to Christianity.

Waterlot emphasizes that Bergson sought, to the contrary, to give mysticism a philosophical status. He constantly repeated this claim against mistaken

interpretations of his analyses, which read them as theological propositions. Bergson did not seek to make a theological intervention: "My achievement will no doubt have been to have integrated mysticism into philosophy, will preserving religion and faith in all their mystery."[2] He kept his distance from discourses about revelation, and particularly "dated revelations," namely Christianity. For Bergson, the issue is mysticism far more than Christ himself (whom he refers to, incidentally, as the Supermystical, rather than as the Savior). Bergson speaks more about the findings that he believes the mystics have made than he does of themes from Christian theology. He places far more emphasis on what he regards as the exemplary open morality of the Sermon on the Mount than on the death and resurrection of Christ, which he completely ignores despite its central importance to Christianity. But--and herein lies Bergson's originality--he does not seek to reduce Christianity to a rationally purified moral content, like Kant in *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone,* for there is indeed something non-naturalizable in mysticism, something that "nature did not prepare,"[3] which breaks with the natural and instinctive course of closed morality described in the *Two Sources*' first chapter--the morality that elicits obedience while raising human groupings against one another, to the point that, in a war, each side claims to have God's support!

Why then is it that philosophy cannot ignore mysticism? What makes mysticism essential for Bergson is that it alone can break the circle into which the human species naturally encloses itself: small, tight-knit groups that are hostile to one another. Only mysticism entails the idea--which begins as an emotion--of a universal love that breaks with a closed outlook and opens it up--albeit very imperfectly, in terms of its effects on human history. Hence for Bergson, mysticism is essential for understanding morality and its never infinite but always real possibilities of being reopened. Mystics are individuals who plunge into the *élan vital* and are able to spread once again an open morality.

This is why Waterlot's book proceeds from the religious debates initiated by Bergson's oeuvre to its implications for a philosophy of history that is at once daring and cautious, by way of Bergon's crucial analysis of the mystical experience, which is central to *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion.* Waterlot's book is the culmination of years of pondering Bergson's oeuvre. It draws on a series of successively written articles that are incorporated into a common trajectory, even if it does not entirely

[2] Bergson's interview with the canon Étienne Magnin, *MH* 68.

[3] We are borrowing the expression Bergson used to refer to the great growth of the human body resulting from technology.

avoid the repetition inevitable in an essay collection. Overall, the book shows impressive erudition while remaining constantly stimulating. The first page is intimidating in the way it declares that the book is aimed at those who are familiar with "the entirety of Bergson's thought." But this should not dissuade the reader: the book can be read completely independently.

Mystical experience as a whole

Why should we return, at present, to Bergson's analysis and mysticism? In addition to proposing a new understanding of Bergson's oeuvre, Waterlot regularly emphasizes how Bergon's thought sheds light on contemporary questions: the return of war; the question of sobriety that has become necessary because of environmental problems; the question of the overcoming of the human species by transhumanism, in ways that differ considerably from Bergson's account of a species that, through mysticism, can transcend itself; and the question of salvation that can still be conceived even when disaster seems imminent. The book devotes an entire chapter to what Bergson describes as "expedients"--that is, once it is recognized that it is vain to wait for new "exceptional souls," such as mystics who might revive us--for it must be recognized that mysticism and mechanics, which, according to Bergson, might have supported one another, experienced a "signaling error." This is why one must enter onto the terrain of the philosophy of history, an aspect of Bergson's thought that previously has rarely been considered.[4]

Waterlot's desire to understand Bergson does not prevent him from being critical. One chapter is devoted to Bergson's misuse of his own philosophy during the First World War when he wanted the war effort to go "all the way." His philosophy of history is also discussed. This is, in part, because it places Bergson at odds with himself. Bergson is a preeminent thinker of freedom and the challenges posed by human nature's immutable character even though it never changes in a significant way. Consequently, he cannot propose laws of history without contradicting himself, even as he regularly insists that history cannot be understood as cumulative moral progress. Perhaps it would have been better not to attribute an authentic philosophy of history to Bergson. Or, in any case, the concept needed to be significantly rethought.

[4] It is worth noting that the excellent introduction to Bergson thought by Arnaud Bouaniche, *Bergson. Une philosophie de la nouveauté* (Paris, Ellipses, 2022) also contains a chapter on history.

The book explains Bergson's analyses of mysticism with great depth, emphasizing that they are not confessional--that is, they do not require one to trust or accept them. This is, incidentally, what, according to Waterlot, Bergson admired about James: that he provided a neutral and strictly philosophical analysis of religious experience, on its same level. Bergson borrows this method without in the least claiming that he has had a mystical experience. This is exactly what he did in his admirable analysis of false recognition (the feeling of *déjà vu* when one experiences something for the first time), proving stimulating analyses of experiences that, he claims, he has never had himself.[5] Thus the fact that one has not experienced something does not allow one to expel it from human experience with no further discussion. Nor does it make it impossible to analyze it in depth.

What then, for Bergson, is mystical experience? Waterlot insists on the fact that Bergson analyzes what he calls "complete" mysticism (p. 219, 249). This is the same criterion that makes it possible to critique experiences that present themselves as mystical, but which are really fakes, such as political exaltation or religious delirium. Complete mysticism, for Bergson, is not confined to ecstasy but transforms it into an emotion that guides action. The complete mystic is characterized almost by a sense of incompleteness. It is not sufficient for him to have known a loving God in ecstasy. He worries about how permanent this connection to the vital principle is, and how it will carry over into action, through which others can be brought along. Bergson thus downplays ecstasy, on which so many analyses of mysticism focus. It is even possible to imagine mysticism without ecstasy. It is, in any case, restored to the *complete* gesture, without which it is meaningless. A delirious person who claims to be united with God, but who does not act, is, for Bergson, not a true mystic. This is the lesson that Janet, as the book wonderfully demonstrates, received from Bergson, though he had first been inclined to reduce all mysticism to pathology by focusing excessively on ecstasy. In this way, we encounter Bergson's central thesis concerning the brain's essential role as an instrument of action (far more than for thought). What religious delirium lacks is precisely the incorporation of ecstasy into action, perhaps because the brain has been cut off from its "focus on the real"--another major Bergsonian concept.

A mystic can thus be described as someone who achieves the absolute, in a way that is complete without being total. Even Christ, the "super-mystic," does not seem to have been characterized as a total mystic. Bursts of *élan vital*, while absolutely real, are always finite. The mystic thus becomes part of philosophy as an answer to an essential

[5] Henri Bergson, "Le souvenir du présent et la fausse reconnaissance," *L'énergie spirituelle*, Paris, Presses universitaires de France, 1990 [1919].

moral question. Not "what must I do?," but, following a typically Bergsonian displacement, "why must I do good?" Bergson reproaches rationalist moralities, which unquestionably have the advantage of leading to a universal morality, to be incapable of justifying the aspiration to goodness.[6] Only an emotion--mysticism--experiencing God solely as love, over and above any metaphysical traits and summoning humanity to universal love can, according to Bergson, provide us with the fundamental impulse that will tear us away from a closed morality. The mystic is thus neither purely solitary, purely theological, nor purely contemplative. He is, first and foremost, a man or woman of action, setting other souls on fire. Bergson does not seek to propose in this way a new morality (in contrast to what Camus expected of him, p. 16), but to lead us to an irreducible *fact* that shows that open morality already exists in experience. Theological problems are, in this way, dissolved. Bergson, in this way, undertakes a deconstruction of the philosophical idea of God, which Waterlot subtly analyzes. In himself, the mystic is no different than an ordinary man. The only--but crucial--difference is that what the ordinary man says, the mystic does.

Philosophy and mysticism

In this respect, philosophy is less than the mystic, just as it is less than the artist. It can explicate concepts, but it cannot delve into emotion like art, and, in a more lasting way, mysticism. But it allows us, Bergson explains, to take a few steps in the direction taken by the mystic, and this is its key achievement--for in Bergson's eyes, mystical experiences imply a constitutive force that few share: one must be capable of experiencing ecstasy without being broken by it, and thus capable of building on it to act. Philosophy and mysticism are thus closely connected, without being identical. Waterlot convincingly describes Bergson as the philosopher of minimal intervals: he shows that there exists an absolute difference between philosophy and mysticism, while bringing them as close as possible to ensure they are in conversation.

Philosophy, insofar as it itself a desire for action based on an initial astonishment and a desire to elucidate experiences that cannot be formulated in their disarming simplicity, should thus be recognized as having a mystical element. Bergson

[6] The theme of aspiration is also found at the same time in Simone Weil, a philosopher and mystic to whom Waterlot rightly refers.

suggests as much in the tense discussion following one of his lectures at the Société Française de Philosophie. Accused of being a mystic, Bergson replied:

> If by mysticism one means (as is almost always the case at present) a reaction against positive science, then the doctrine I defend is from start to finish a protest against mysticism … If, however, one means by mysticism a kind of appeal to deep inner life, then all philosophy is mystical (p. 23).

This critical point is essential for differentiating between a mystifying and fabulating mysticism, consisting of nothing but a direct opposition to science, and true or "complete" mysticism, which is tied to deep inner life and is enriched by regular contact with scientific evidence. This is what Bergson says about philosophy's necessary companionship with science: "we shall initiate ourselves into the science we do not know, we shall study it, and if need be, make it over. And what if it takes months or even years? We shall devote to the task the time required" (p. 269). Intuition is not a short-circuit of real duration.

There remain many questions one would like to ask of Waterlot's book--about the exceptional character that Bergson finds in mystics; about their ingeniousness, which is similar to Kant's understanding of genius; and about their scarcity and the fact they are a "category unto themselves," which makes them strikingly similar to the scholastic definition of angels, that is, individuals that are a category unto themselves. But the book has the merit of raising these questions due to its highly stimulating and well-informed readings that owe their relevance to their indifference to being fashionable.

First published in laviedesidees.fr, September 5, 2025. Translated by Michael Behrent, with the support of Cairn.info. Published in booksandideas.net, November 11, 2026.