

REVIEW

Thomas R. Flynn, *Sartre, Foucault, and Historical Reason, Volume One: Toward an Existentialist Theory of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997). ISBN: 0-226-25468-2.

Thomas R. Flynn, *Sartre, Foucault, and Historical Reason, Volume Two: A Poststructuralist Mapping of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005). ISBN: 0-226-25471-2.

In this two-volume study, Thomas R. Flynn undertakes a comparison of the very different approaches to historical meaning present in the work of Jean-Paul Sartre and Michel Foucault. The first volume undertakes a detailed analysis of the place of history in Sartre, from his War Diaries of 1939-1940 to his multi-volume "existential biography" of Gustave Flaubert, which remained unfinished at the time of Sartre's death. The second volume focuses on what the author terms Foucault's spatial mapping of history, as opposed to Sartre's dialectical (and hence temporal) philosophy of history. This volume is organized into three parts. In the first part, Flynn articulates Foucault's specifically nominalist and concrete conception of history. The second part takes up the concepts of spatiality and vision in Foucault's work, and the third part juxtaposes Sartre's narrative conception of historical reason with Foucault's spatial one, and uses this contrast to investigate their respective philosophical approaches. Foucault's philosophical approach to the question of history is the explicit concern of the second volume, but Flynn develops this question as a means of interrogating Foucault's philosophical project as a whole. Each volume forms one part of a diptych that can stand alone, but both volumes emphasize significant points of contact between two thinkers thought by many to be mutually exclusive. In this review, I shall focus on each of the volumes alone before discussing Flynn's conclusions regarding the complex relationship between Sartre and Foucault. My discussion of Foucault will necessarily be limited primarily to Flynn's discussion of Foucault's conception of experience. Although Flynn's discussion of spatiality, vision, language, and parrhesia should be of great interest to Foucault scholars, it is his discussion of Foucault's notion of experience that sets Flynn's work apart from much of the secondary literature on Foucault.

In his initial volume, Flynn focuses on the role of history in Sartre's philosophical project during both the early period characterized by *Being and Nothingness* and the later period characterized by *The Critique of Dialectical Reason*. Sartre's philosophy of history testifies to his attempt to respect the role of the committed individual in history without rendering the individual the source of historical meaning or succumbing to a vapid historical relativism, and this attempt remains a constant both early and late. Hence, Sartre attempts to find meaning in history without resorting to a transcendental ego as the source of that meaning. Additionally, Sartre is at pains to maintain some sense or meaning within history without resorting to some totalizing force or vision as one finds in versions of the Hegelian Absolute. History cannot dissolve into a collection of atomistic events or facts, but the meaning within history must be a meaning immanent to history. Accordingly, history for Sartre is also the realm of value and this value within history is irreducible to the individual. Neither is this source of value something absolutely transcendent. There must be some thread or *sens* of history immanent to history in order for history to be meaningful on its own terms as history.¹ The place of the individual and individual praxis remains of paramount importance for Sartre's philosophical endeavor, but he articulates a dialectical relationship between the individual and the collective in texts such as the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, in which he formulates a full-blown social ontology.² Flynn summarizes this Sartrean vision of history as one that is "totalizing without a totalizer". Individuals serve to express history, and history is the dialectical expression of individual choice within the context of supra-individual structures. As a result of this dialectical relationship between individual and society, the role of the historian and the historian's attempts to interpret meaning within history becomes an issue, for historical events on Sartre's account only have meaning retrospectively.

The dialectic between the individual and society is not the only locus of meaning in history, however. In addition to this dialectical relationship, there is also a brute facticity that erupts into history during times of scarcity. Sartre designates this worldly recalcitrance "the practico-inert." It is the task of society to mitigate the dreadful effects of this facticity. History thus is the relationship between three aspects: that of the individual, social institutions, and the practico-inert. The struggle against want is a major source of the value within history. Societies' struggles against scarcity provide a regulative ideal within history: Although need will never be abolished, it is this hope that in large measure makes history, and, as a result, life itself, valuable.³ The

1 See esp. Chapter Four ("History as Fact and Value") of Volume One.

2 This issue is the focus of Chapters Six ("The *Sens* of History: *Discovery and Decision*") and Seven ("History and Biography: *Critique 2*") of the first volume.

3 This is Sartre's attempt to reconcile the committed individual of *Being and Nothingness* with the requirements of Marxist dialectical materialism.

practico-inert dimension of material scarcity will never be abolished, hence this hope remains but a regulative ideal that lends historical reflection a futural dimension and a sense of value and meaning.

Sartre's social ontology seeks to maintain the dialectical tension between individual freedom and society's attempts to mitigate this unpredictable freedom. Society cannot be understood as a group of indistinguishable individuals (i.e., Kant's cogs in a machine)⁴ but rather a group of unique individuals who maintain their ontological independence while forming meaningful group bonds.⁵

According to Flynn, Foucault avoids this indeterminacy between the individual and the collective in his approach to history by denying the relevance of the personal sphere. At least in his work of the 1960s, individuals are products of impersonal historical discourses. Biographical detail, though not denied, is rendered irrelevant, conditioned as it is through epistemic necessity. Flaubert does not render himself Flaubert through a series of more or less informed choices, but is instead rendered Flaubert. This is at the root of Foucault's well-known anti-humanism. Flynn cites in this respect Foucault's remark in *The Order of Things*:

If we question Classical thought at the level of what archaeologically made it possible, we perceive that the dissociation of the sign and resemblance in the early seventeenth-century caused these new forms—probability, analysis, combination, and universal language system—to emerge, not as successive terms engendering one another or driving one another out, but as a single network of necessities. And

4 Immanuel Kant, "An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?," *Perpetual Peace and Other Essays on Politics, History, and Morals*. Trans. Ted Humphrey (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett, 1983), 46.

5 This tension between the individual and the group threatens to become a contradiction that would doom Sartre's project. Flynn considers this tension primarily in terms of the relationship between history and biography in Sartre's Flaubert study. Here is how Flynn summarizes Sartre's project in this monumental study: 'Gustave Flaubert was a lifelong interest, if not a passion, of Sartre's. So it is fitting that a massive study of Flaubert's "life and times" should form the culmination of Sartre's work, conjoining his love of philosophy and literature with a rage to "understand a man"... Placed in the context of Sartre's abiding concern to unmask individual and collective bad faith, the three volumes of *The Family Idiot* constitute the paradigm of an existentialist approach to history, one that undertakes to comprehend an agent's comprehension of his historical praxis'. (180). As this passage makes clear, miscomprehension and bad faith are symmetrical in the individual and the collective: I can misunderstand myself and my motives, just as the age can be mistaken about itself and its motives (Flynn remarks on this moralizing tendency in Sartre's language regarding impersonal historical forces at the end of Chapter Nine, see page 231).

it was this network that made possible the individuals we term Hobbes, Berkeley, Hume, or Condillac.⁶

Flynn certainly respects the gulf that separates Sartre from Foucault on the problematic of historical reason. He thematizes this gulf in the figures of the diary and the map at the beginning of his book, and these models organize Flynn's treatment of each thinker throughout both volumes. The diary represents Sartre's approach to the problem of history, an approach that begins with individual choice that "thickens" into social praxis. Sartre, who learned to be wary of attempts to spatialize time from Bergson, found in the individual human the being able to temporalize itself, i.e., tell its own story and relate its story to its companions. However, the telling is not the important aspect; much more vital to Sartre's philosophical project is the fact that the individual *lives* her life for the benefit of herself and her fellow human beings.

Foucault's early attempts to depersonalize time and deemphasize personal narrative can be understood under the rubric of the map. History understood as a map is the locus of individual historical events that do not possess meaning apart from their external relations with one another.⁷ This is the import of Foucault's positivism, a positivism that the committed stance of Sartre's historical agent would find distasteful.

Flynn points out that this radical depersonalization and spatialization of history is only one aspect of Foucault's project. Certainly by the end of his life, Foucault will be emphasizing the role of the individual in terms of his investigations of ancient modalities of self-care, a development that Flynn surveys in detail in the second volume of this study.⁸ More intriguing perhaps are the hints indicating that Foucault was interested in the question of freedom during the 1960s as well. Flynn discusses this conception of freedom in his final chapter. It is present, Flynn argues, in Foucault's treatment of the twin sciences of man, psychoanalysis and ethnology. The significance of these discourses is that they permit their practitioners to occupy a position outside their own societies; psychoanalysis and ethnology permit individuals to subject their own societies to critique, and it is this realm that is the outside or the unconscious of Western man that allows Foucault some measure of autonomy as a researcher:

As Foucault concludes, their primary character made it inevitable that ethnology and psychoanalysis should share a profound kinship and

6 Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*. Trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (London: Tavistock, 1970), 63; cited by Flynn, Vol. 1, 247-248.

7 Flynn discusses the category of the event in Chapter Three ("The Career of the Historical Event") of the second volume.

8 See esp. chapters 11 and 12.

symmetry. They both should be sciences of the unconscious, “not because they reach down to what is below consciousness in man, but because they are directed towards that which, outside man, makes it possible to know, with positive knowledge, that which is given to or eludes his consciousness” (OT 378). It is for this reason that Foucault can see his own project as “unearthing an autonomous domain that would be the unconscious of knowledge [*savoir*]” (FL 40). (Flynn, 1, 255)

Freedom for Foucault in the 1960s would be manifest not only in the words of psychoanalysts and ethnologists but also in writers such as Maurice Blanchot, the Surrealists, and Raymond Roussel, writers who articulate a “neutral space” that

characterizes contemporary Western fiction (which is why it is no longer mythology or rhetoric). The reason that it is now so necessary to think through this fiction—while in the past it was a matter of thinking the truth—is that “I speak” runs counter to “I think.” “I think” led to the indubitable certainty of the I and its existence; “I speak” on the other hand, distances, disperses, effaces that existence and lets only its empty emplacement appear. Thought about thought, an entire tradition wider than philosophy, has taught us that thought leads us to the deepest interiority. Speech about speech leads us, by way of literature as well as perhaps by other paths, to the outside in which the speaking subject disappears.⁹

Flynn’s discussion of the role of freedom and language in Foucault’s work is especially valuable, for it points to a vexing problem in Foucault studies in general and with regard to Foucault’s later thought in particular: How might the anti-humanism manifest in Foucault’s earlier work be reconciled with his turn toward the subject in the last two volumes of the *History of Sexuality*? Is this seemingly irreconcilable disjunction simply indicative of two radically different phases in Foucault’s work, i.e., an earlier archaeological period and a later genealogical one?¹⁰

Although Flynn is certainly sympathetic to such interpretations, in the second volume of his study, he points out another way of reading Foucault’s work. Instead of accounting for this difference by pointing to a distinction

9 Michel Foucault, “The Thought of the Outside,” *Essential Works of Michel Foucault 1954-1984, Volume 2: Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*. Ed. James D. Faubion (NY: New Press, 1998), 149.

10 This has been the standard way of interpreting this distinction at least since Dreyfus and Rabinow. See Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982). Some commentators have distinguished three periods in Foucault’s work, but all agree that Foucault’s texts can be grouped temporally and thematically.

between the archaeological Foucault of the 1960s and the genealogical Foucault of the 1970s and 80s, Flynn proposes what he calls an axial reading of Foucault's oeuvre. Foucault's texts, regardless of when they were written, can be read along one of three axes, that of knowledge or truth, power or governmentality, and subjectivation or ethics.¹¹ All of these elements are present in varying degrees in each of Foucault's works, whether early or late. Certainly Foucault emphasizes one term over the others at various points in his career, but he never focuses upon one exclusively. Furthermore, each axis "answers respectively to one of the three dimensions in Foucault's applied methodology, namely, archaeology, genealogy, and problematization, and is most properly studied by that particular method" (Flynn 2, 145). This is Flynn's primary interpretive innovation in this work, and it is a welcome one. This interpretive device permits Flynn to account for the vexing fact that Foucault, despite his apprehensions with regard to the subject, continues to employ the word "experience." Flynn's elucidation of Foucault's use of this problematic word helps to resolve the apparent contradiction of the anti-humanist Foucault's turn to the subject late in his career and point out a key contrast with Sartre as well. Although these various axes help to make sense of Foucault's project, the axes themselves are not dialectically unified into some higher totality, as they would be in the work of Sartre. Instead, the three axes, though they are described by Foucault as "matrices of experience," are constitutive of experience, not expressions of some primordial unity. It is out of this matrix that subjects become what they are and that objects become comprehensible, i.e., that experience itself becomes possible.

Flynn takes up this question of experience in Chapter Nine of the second volume ("Experience and the Lived"). The title of the chapter points to the distinct concepts of experience in the work of Sartre and Foucault, distinctions absent from English but present in the German terms *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis* (and distinguished in French as the terms *l'expérience* and *le vécu*). (Flynn, 2, 210). *Erfahrung* corresponds to experience as constitutive, while *Erlebnis* "is usually ascribed to a subject whose inner life it articulates" (Flynn 2, 210). Unlike the Idealist partisans of *Erfahrung* and their phenomenological heirs, for Foucault experience is not transcendently constitutive (as the constitutive experience of a transcendental ego, for example) but is rather *correlative*:

Experience is not a quality of substance like the Cogito, though it may be constitutive of subjects. Neither is it simply a form of knowledge, whether as scientific [*connaissance*] or as epistemic conditioning [*savoir*], though it entails a cognitive dimension. And it is not a simple

11 Flynn, Volume 2, p. 144. Flynn points out at this point that the second term of each disjunct does not designate a synonym of the first. Rather, the second terms serve to extend and explicate the first.

will to power, though there is no experience, so it seems, that does not include an aspect of power. To speak of it as the “space enclosed” by these three axes or as their mutual “correlation” suggests that experience is the result, but not the source, of these three phenomena conjointly. In other words, one must resist the temptation to hear in Foucault’s use of the term an echo of F.H. Bradley’s Hegelian “experience” as prior to all differentiation or of William James’s or John Dewey’s pragmatist “experience” as correlative to nature and the matrix of culture (Flynn 2, 211).

Foucault’s conception of experience is thus thoroughly consistent with his historical nominalism. While it would not be completely correct to say that Foucault seeks to explicate a conception of experience independent of subjectivity, he does downgrade the primacy of the subject, and show how the subject is the product of a “difficult elaboration” not completely within its control.¹²

Reading Foucault as philosopher of a (specific kind of) experience makes the writings of Foucault’s last period more comprehensible, and it helps clarify both Foucault’s proximity to and distance from Sartre. For both philosophers, the subject is not born but is made. Foucault is certainly allergic to Sartre’s utopian strain as manifest in his conception of Kantian-inspired ‘city of ends’ and he resists all efforts at totalization, but both philosophers adopt a conception of the self as an achievement that can be traced ultimately back to the Nietzschean heritage in both of their projects.¹³ Both Foucault and Sartre are interested in the question of style, in the question of whether one can make one’s life peculiarly and uniquely one’s own, and what sort of institutions are required to foster this sort of autonomy; hence Foucault’s fascination with the Greeks, and Sartre’s fascination with literary biography. But this point of close proximity in their respective projects also points to their greatest divergence, and it is a substantive one: both Foucault and Sartre are broadly speaking concerned with the relationship between the individual and society. But Sartre always conceived of this relationship in terms of the

12 Michel Foucault, “What is Enlightenment?” *The Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984, Volume 1: Ethics, Subjectivity, and Truth*. Ed. Paul Rabinow (NY: New Press, 1997), 311.

13 Flynn 2, 280: Throughout our study we have remarked a similarity between Foucault’s self-creating choices and Sartrean authenticity. In our search for parallel and contrasting features in the works of Sartre and Foucault, the foregoing discussion of parrhesia presses the matter even more, for the “truth-telling” or “fearless speech” that Foucault praises in these lectures, especially when the “truth” concerns oneself and one’s *style of life*, invites a comparison with Sartrean good faith and the well-known existentialist virtue of authenticity. In both cases, we are dealing with an ethical *style*, not a specific content. Each of these appeals to a kind of heroic honesty that Karl Jaspers took for a Nietzschean hallmark that would scarcely be unwelcome to either Sartre or Foucault.

primacy of the individual, whereas Foucault never could. While Sartre's question concerns the place of the individual within the social whole within which the individual must reconcile herself dialectically (as an actor in history), Foucault's problematic concerns how the individual can articulate herself in the face of those institutional relations of truth and power that render her what she is.

The value of Flynn's study for Foucault scholars lies in the (at this juncture) programmatic way that he situates the relationship between Foucault and Sartre: mindful of the profound philosophical differences between the two men, yet open to the possibility that there might be, if not direct correspondences between Sartre and Foucault and their respective philosophies of history, then at least grounds for comparison. The potential difficulties of any comparative study are that one runs the risk of making one author into another (e.g., claiming something like the following: "The key to Foucault's understanding of history lies in his hidden debt to Sartre" or vice-versa), or synthesizing the discrete views of each into some sort of harmonious whole. Comparative studies of this nature are a delicate balancing act to be sure, and Flynn successfully navigates the tightrope. Hopefully this review has touched on some of the themes that make the second volume worthwhile on its own, but the true merit of Flynn's study lies in the relationship between the two thinkers articulated over the course of both volumes. Flynn concludes his study by citing Robert Maggiori:

Writing in *Liberation*, the leftist paper which both Sartre and Foucault helped found, on the occasion of the latter's death, he notes that one spontaneously associates Sartre and Foucault as the leading "committed intellectuals" of their day. After charting the ups and downs of their respective and mutual careers as philosophers and as militants, Maggiori concludes: "It now remains for us to read them in relation to each other, not in order to attempt an impossible synthesis or to achieve artificial reconciliations, but to be enriched by the one and the other" (Flynn 2, 310).

Among many other things, Flynn's insightful study ought to make Foucault scholars think once again about the writings of Jean-Paul Sartre specifically and Foucault's relationship to French phenomenology and Marxism more generally. Flynn's two-volume study will certainly serve as the starting point for any such dialogue.

Corey McCall, Elmira College