

## BOOK REVIEW

**Thomas Flynn:**  
***Sartre: A Philosophical Biography***

**Cambridge: Cambridge University Press**  
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*Sartre: A philosophical biography* is the first comprehensive scholarly summation of Sartre's life vis-à-vis the evolution of his thought. As a biographical work, it stands out among the glut of often lurid popular accounts of his life and relationship with one-time lover and fellow philosopher, Simone de Beauvoir. The latest of such accounts, which have come out over the past decade, mine the wealth of posthumously published documents such as diaries and correspondences of the two philosophers as reflected in Hazel Rowley's *Tete-a-tete: Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre* and in Carol Seymour-Jones, *A dangerous liaison: A revelatory new biography of Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre*. These dual biographies reveal the unsurprising fact that Sartre and Beauvoir had concealed the true nature of their "existentialist" (i.e., open and polyamorous) relationships, originally recounted in Beauvoir's four-volume memoir. Flynn—a prolific scholar on Sartre and a founder of the journal *Sartre Studies International*—devotes no more than a short paragraph to these matters. Instead, he delivers what the book title promises: a truly philosophical biography.

Several other major biographies of Sartre have been published: the ones by Ronald Hayman, *Writing against: A biography of Sartre* and Annie Cohen-Solal, *Sartre: A life* were the first to come out after Sartre's death in 1980. The so-called "official" account was *Jean-Paul Sartre: Hated conscience of his century* by John Gerassi, Sartre's godson to whom he had granted a series of interviews. A fourth biography, by Bernard-Henry Levy, *Le Siecle de Sartre*, does not cover Sartre's entire life but focuses on his politics, constituting something of an anti-Marxist critique. The most recent to be published, roughly at the same time as Flynn's book, is by Patric Baert, *The existentialist moment: The rise of Sartre as a public intellectual*, which chronicles Sartre's ascent as a public intellectual. As of this writing, two more quasi-biographical books on Sartre and existentialism are in press, that of Gary Cox, *Existentialism and excess: The life and times of Jean-Paul Sartre*, and that of Sarah Bakewell, *At the existentialist cafe: Freedom, being, and apricot cocktails with Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Albert Camus, Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and others*. Sartre himself had written an account of his own childhood—*Words*—which has assumed its own status as a classic. None of these works maps the connections among Sartre's ideas against a chronology of important events from birth to old age.

Thus, Flynn's biography of Sartre is the first of its kind in that it does for its subject what Walter Kauffman has done for Friedrich Nietzsche, providing a complete account of a man's life with a view to explaining the power and vicissitudes of his philosophical thought. The book is composed of fifteen chapters, covering, among others, Sartre's childhood, educational training, teaching days at lycees, early years as a writer and literary sensation, wartime experience, the years of the occupation, the heyday of the existentialist movement, foray into politics, years of "fellow-travelling" with communism, and old age. A comprehensive biography may seem ironic in light of Sartre's view of consciousness as a spontaneous upsurge propelled by its perpetual failure at completion. But fittingly, in the concluding chapter, Flynn circles back to the much-maligned but better-known "early Sartre." After all, it is *this* Sartre's theory of the imagination and concepts of negativity and lack that constitute the central tenets of existentialism; and, indeed, of his own life. In his assessment of the philosopher's body of work, Flynn emphasizes the imaginary as a governing theme, quoting Sartre's remarks in his biography of Jean Genet:

This "insufficiency" (the imaginary) would be the ground of that "hope that is part of man," "that has always been one of the dominant forces of revolutions and insurrections," and that is the very locus of our possibility, our lack. (412)

The events presented and related ideas explained by Flynn are not new, but his thoroughness affords the reader a novel perspective on Sartre. For example, we are reminded of his little-known intellectual passions, such as his defense of the then-new medium of the cinema, written when he was a 19-year old student. He adopts Henri Bergson's view which values "the speed, the fluidity, and the energy of the moving picture" (48). He defends the artificial over the natural, pointing to the "charm of the unreal," as well as lauds the cinema for its ability to engage the youth on moral issues (48-49). We are told that Sartre was primarily attracted to the moving image for its perceived association with low-class culture, and its ability to portray the "humdrum nature" of existence (30). In light of his lifelong rebellion against bourgeois Parisian society, this is not surprising. We see that Sartre's keen sense for the aesthetic value of new media presages the postmodern deconstruction of "low" versus "high" art. In fact, his insistence on the task of the literary writer to be politically involved reveals the enmeshment of political commitment and philosophy in his thought: a poignant battle cry against metanarratives even before the term was popularized.

Flynn also provides a masterful discussion of the significance of the *Transcendence of the ego*, a work that predates *Being and nothingness* and which constitutes Sartre's critique of Edmund Husserl, the pioneer of the phenomenological method. He notes that even analytic philosophers cannot afford to ignore it: "Anglo-American philosophers, some of whom expressed suspicion of the 'French fog,' are fulsome in their praise of this original and vigorously written work" (66). To contextualize Sartre's claims, Flynn first provides an overview of Immanuel Kant's critical philosophy, which posits a transcendental ego in addition to the empirical ego, or the "me" of reflection. Kant offers a new paradigm of knowledge as filtered through the *a priori* concepts,

themselves constituting the “transcendental unity of apperception”—i.e., the “I think” that cannot be thought of, but which grounds conscious thought itself. Husserl takes up this Kantian insight, although he does not confine knowledge to the sense experience of the world as consciousness perceives them. Instead, he allows for the possibility of intuitions, via the transcendental ego, of “the things themselves” (66-68). It is this Husserlian idea that Sartre rejects, primarily because it “compromises the ‘purity’ of consciousness by positing a ‘subject’ within it which eludes consciousness itself” (70).

Sartre’s view of consciousness as empty of psychic content—as pure “nihilation” of being—leads to the idea that the ego or the self is an object in the world, much like the ego of others. This not only offers a cogent solution to the problem of solipsism, but also explains irrational psychic phenomena without resort to a dubious “unconscious.” Sartre’s early writings have thus attracted the attention of analytic philosophers, who have published introductory books on Sartre with a view to mining his insights on such traditional issues as the mind-body dualism, skepticism, self-deception, and freedom and determinism (see especially Sofia Miguens, Gerhard Preyer, and Clara Bravo Morando’s *Pre-reflective consciousness: Sartre and contemporary philosophy of mind*; Jean-Pierre Dupuy’s *Self-deception and paradoxes of rationality*; Kathleen V. Wilder’s *The bodily nature of consciousness: Sartre and contemporary philosophy of mind*; Gregory McCulloch’s *Using Sartre: An analytical introduction to early Sartrean themes*; Arthur C. Danto’s *Sartre*; and Herbert Fingarette’s, *Self-deception*).

Another noteworthy aspect of Flynn’s book has to do with how it illumines Sartre’s key differences from Martin Heidegger:

Whereas Heidegger famously spoke of *Dasein*’s individuating being-unto-death and urged us to embrace our moral temporality resolutely, Sartre claims...that death is beyond *Dasein* (Human Reality). “My death” belongs to the class of what he calls *unrealizables* along with other aspects of my objectification (“alienation”) in the eyes of Others.... (219)

Heidegger was the philosopher who most influenced Sartre after Husserl. *Being and time* is often read as a treatise on human authenticity, one that emphasizes the anticipation of impending death as a motivation to break away from the faceless crowd. Sartre, whom Flynn describes as “Epicurean” in his view of death as an impossible non-experience (219), notably disagrees with Heidegger on this point. For Sartre, my death—insofar as I myself cannot witness it—belongs to the realm of others’ possibilities instead of my own. Therefore, the exercise of freedom—the spontaneous transcendence toward one’s projects—is a more primordial description of the human condition than being-towards-death. A prolific writer and stylist, Sartre memorably presents his arguments for this view through his short story, “The wall,” in which a man spends a sleepless night in prison awaiting his impending execution, and his play, “No exit,” in which three people, after they have died, find themselves stuck together in hell. In light of the concreteness of Sartre’s examples, it is not difficult to see why his name, much more than that of Heidegger, has been associated with existentialism.

Last but not least of the strengths of Flynn’s book, it discusses how Sartre tackled his lifelong project of reconciling the premise of human freedom and the prescriptive

nature of moral values. Flynn notes that, for all its popularity, the essay “Is existentialism a humanism?” is the one most regretted by Sartre, if only for its gross simplification of the existentialist project (236). The piece was originally delivered as a lecture in 1946, during existentialism’s heyday, and exhibits the impromptu and dramatic characteristics of a speech addressed to an adoring audience. As such, it fails to engage the significant problems entailed by constructing a coherent ethics, much less an existentialist one. *Being and nothingness* ends with a clarion call for such an ethics, although Sartre himself was never able to publish a moral treatise; his *Notebooks for an ethics* is a collection of posthumously published but unorganized notes. It was Simone de Beauvoir who took up the challenge of laying down the foundations of an existential morality, in her book *The ethics of ambiguity*. On the other hand, as Flynn’s book shows, it may be argued that Sartre’s foray into moral philosophy may be traced through (1) his existentialist biographies and (2) his writings about Marxism.

Due to their daunting length and complexity, Sartre’s biographies of notable writers, in particular Jean Genet and Gustave Flaubert, appear to be the least read of his works. This is unfortunate, since they represent, as it were, the bridge between the “early” and “latter” Sartre. His early fiction features the recurring archetype of the “solitary man”—most famously represented by Antoine Roquentin in *Nausea*—a product of his apolitical pre-war imagination. This archetype is to be supplanted by the character/caricature of Jean Genet, the thief-turned-writer and existentialist individual whose “false biography” Sartre publishes during Genet’s lifetime. The enormity of what Genet has overcome, and his stinging rebuke and mockery of bourgeois Parisian society in his seductive literary works, provide Sartre a platform for his existentialist ethics. In both the Genet and Flaubert biographies, Sartre shows the extent to which the individual is steeped in his or her social situation. These works, as Flynn shows, explicate and concretize his political and ethical commitments:

What *Saint Genet* taught us was a lesson at least as old as Aristotle: the difficulty (if not impossibility) of being a moral person in an immoral society. In Sartre’s terms this became the seeming corruption of the practico-inert and its poisoning of the “creative freedom” of the individual agent. Still, the existentialist light shines through, however dimmed it may be by institutional greed and individual oppression. That becomes clear in the dialectical ethics and...illuminates the “dialogical” ethics as well. (402)

It is, therefore, a misreading of existentialism to characterize it as a philosophy of despair that posits a person’s absolute freedom. This stereotype covers over the ambivalent yet necessary dialectic between existentialism and political engagement. For, indeed, Sartre and his circle were (in)famously politically engaged, having lived through the events of the Cold War and global postcolonial transitions. The postwar change in relations between colonizers (mainly France and the United Kingdom) and their subject nations in the Middle East, Africa, and South America constitute the roots of present day’s conflicts in those regions. Sartre and Beauvoir fought for the rights of different marginalized groups: industrial workers, Algerians, Jews, women. Accordingly, Flynn treats the reader to a rousing account of Sartre’s tortured relationship with Marxism and the French Communist Party. He describes the various unpopular political stances

that Sartre took, which eventually alienated him not only from the communists but also from the communists' critics, his erstwhile friends Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Albert Camus. Flynn provides a capable analysis of *Search for a method* and *Critique of dialectical reason*, Sartre's least popular works, in which he attempts the herculean task of synthesizing existentialism with Marxism, transforming both paradigms. Flynn summarizes the key aspects of "political existentialism" (which goes "beyond Communism" and "beyond Marxism"), as follows "(1) . . . moral indignation, (2) spontaneity, (3) comradeship [*sic*], (4) heightened sense of disalienation, (5) distrust of party politics, (6) confidence in 'direct action,' and (7) visceral dislike of authority" (307).

In conclusion, a book about the life and ideas of an existentialist philosopher is a contradiction in terms. This is not only because Sartre himself has shown the futility of such a project, revealing his own biographical works to be false biographies. It is also because Sartre has written about his own life, and incorporated significant aspects of it, in his novels, short stories, and plays. He has done so in a way that demonstrates the necessarily contradictory claim of existentialism about a human life: that it is not completed until death, and that it is defined by the work of the imagination. Sartre seems to have an astounding afterlife in spite—or because—of the reactionary postmodern and poststructuralist revolutions of younger French intellectuals. His life and times, and his ideas, continue to be written about, ironic proof that the time-bound sensibility of existentialism is ultimately a perennial one.

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