

# Sartre and Foucault

## *A Cross-Generational Exchange*

THOMAS R. FLYNN

After an early dalliance with existentialism, Foucault is assumed to have moved away from the thought of Sartre and Merleau-Ponty. As he explained in an interview with Madeline Chapsal: “We had experienced Sartre’s generation as certainly courageous and generous with a passion for life, politics, existence.... But we had discovered something else, another passion: passion for the concept and for what I shall call ‘system.’”<sup>1</sup> Of course, the career of that passion for system as well as the structuralist and poststructuralist phases through which it passed is a matter of record. But it is commonly believed that Foucault left Sartrean existentialism far behind during most of his subsequent career. His theoretical difficulties with Hegelianism, Marxism, and philosophies of consciousness over the years seemed to converge on Sartrean thought, especially on Sartre’s philosophy of history. In fact, it is said that Foucault’s editor at Gallimard insisted on the removal of many anti-Sartrean remarks from the manuscript of *The Order of Things* before its publication.<sup>2</sup>

So it is with a certain amount of skepticism that one is prepared to greet the essays of Eshleman, Boileau, and Seitz that seek a kind of *rapprochement* between these two thinkers, arguably the leading philosophers of their respective generations in France. They are popularly depicted as occupying opposite poles of the philosophical globe. And yet, given the nature of the philosophical conversation in general, it seems proper for people, once challenged by counter-arguments, to set aside received opinions and second-hand views in order to examine the texts once again as these three authors propose. For there is plenty of overlap in the topics that both thinkers treated, as well as in their political lives. Each wrote on Flaubert’s *The Temptation of St. Anthony*, for example, and both penned essays on the work of Paul Rebeyrolle that appeared in the catalogue for an exhibition of his paintings; each contributed an essay for an Italian volume

on the institutionalization of prisoners and the insane, and both actively participated in protest movements on behalf of the Vietnamese Boat People and the like. In other words, despite sharp theoretical differences, they shared many aspects of a common political and moral culture. So there is reason to look for similarities in their philosophies where heretofore people have noticed only differences.

Perhaps the leading indicators of theoretical overlap are found in Foucault's respective Afterwords, "The Subject and Power" and "On the Genealogy of Ethics" to the first and second editions of Dreyfus and Rabinow's highly successful volume on Foucault, which Eshleman, Boileau, and Seitz cite at crucial junctures in their arguments.<sup>3</sup> These Afterwords and the three essays that mention them comprise a promising effort to reassess the contributions of Sartrean existentialism to Foucauldian poststructuralism (for want of a better umbrella term) as well as signifying renewed interest in existentialist thought in general. The limitations of what has been termed "poststructuralism" have become increasingly evident since the deaths of Foucault, Deleuze and Lyotard. So it is at least worth the effort to reconsider whether an all too quickly unfashionable existentialism still might offer valuable insights for overcoming some of these limitations and whether Foucault might be in a position to return the favor.

But the "collaboration" that Eshleman proposes, the "dialogue" to which Boileau refers and the "linkage" which Seitz seeks to discover or perhaps to forge will not be easily achieved. So after summarizing the theses of each essay by way of introduction, I shall pose several difficulties that threaten to distort any positive communication between these two philosophical camps. My hope is that the reading of the following essays will be enhanced by considering the implicit answer that each might offer to the issues raised.

### **Freedom Constrained: Opening a Dialogue Between Sartre and Foucault (Eshleman)**

Sartre scholars have long insisted that the famous claim "Man is free because he is not a self but a presence-to-self" is an opening for potential dialogue with poststructuralists and other critics of a substantialist self (BN 440). For it removes any "deep self" or Ego from the discussion without banishing the historical agent to whom responsibility can be ascribed in a moral sense. This is a characteristically Sartrean contribution to the conversation. But such considera-

tion draws attention away from the central issue in Sartre's remark: the matter of freedom, and this is every bit as important to an exchange between existentialists and poststructuralists as is the question of the subject or the self.

Matthew Eshleman returns our attention to the matter of Sartrean freedom and the limitations that condition it. It is well known that Sartrean freedom is situational, a point that both Boileau and Seitz will reiterate. As Sartre's account of that freedom becomes more "concrete," the constraints which each situation places on abstract freedom (which is the "definition" of man and to which s/he is famously condemned) must be addressed. Liberation from socio-economic constraints motivate Sartre's turn to socialism in general and toward Marxism in particular in the second half of his career. But drawing on Foucault's analyses, especially in *Discipline and Punish*, Eshleman introduces what he calls the "ideal" constraints on the individual that Sartre tends to ignore. As Eshleman notes at the outset, "liberation from material constraint does not necessarily entail liberation from ideal 'constraint.'" By "ideal" constraints, he means those social structures and practices that constitute the kind of individuals we are: the delinquent, the ex-con, the pervert, and so forth. He calls these the "soul-effects" and attributes them to "the normalizing power to produce personal identities, desires, habituated patterns of behavior, and conditions for how individuals speak about and interpret the world." In Foucault's arresting inversion of the Platonic epigram, echoed by Augustine, the body is prisoner of the soul.

Granted this poststructuralist insight, the Sartrean challenge is to find a place for the kind of concrete freedom that grounds moral responsibility in a world conditioned by ubiquitous power relations. This is the task Eshleman sets himself and, in a sense, it is the basic problem for any exchange between Sartrean existentialism and Foucauldian poststructuralism. Prudently, he restricts himself to one essential facet of the issue: "What does it mean to say that souls imprison bodies?"

In formulating his response, he distinguishes two views of freedom and subjectivity in Sartre's existentialist classic. According to the first, "well-recognized but implausible" view, freedom is continuous creation *ex nihilo*, free of constraint from being-in-itself. The second, "unrecognized but plausible view," developed later in *Being and Nothingness*, starting from the role that others play in conditioning my becoming a person (e.g., shame consciousness), and, elaborating Sartre's concomitant notions of self, limit, and project, argues that freedom and power are intertwined because individuals can

“intentionally” resist power, even if the latter is admitted to be ubiquitous. Eshleman effects this reconciliation of freedom and ideal constraint by insisting on the “intrinsic” malleability of the Sartrean agent as distinct from its “extrinsic” form operative in social-constructionist theories. Some social constraints, he argues, precede one’s project, but do so as “unrealizables-to-be-realized” that one approaches asymptotically or as “unimaginables” whose restrictive power are not diminished by their invisibility to those they limit (e.g., racist bias) (BN 529). While admitting that Sartre does not work out the manner in which social forces condition how one apprehends and enacts the social world—and clearly the notion of “interiorization” introduced in BN but exploited in the *Critique* will play an important role in resolving the problem on Sartrean terms—Eshleman argues that social conditioning operates on three interrelated levels: those of being, of meaning, and of action. By respecting and interrelating these levels, he theorizes, one may incorporate the Foucauldian insights into an existentialist account of freedom, meaning and action. This, at least, is his suggestive hypothesis. It calls for abandoning what he calls the “metaphysics of constraint” in addition to the already widespread rejection of the metaphysical subject.

By his own admission, Eshleman’s careful analysis may serve more to name the problem than to resolve it. And the promising concept of “interiorization” in Sartrean parlance may prove inextricably conjoined to a dialectical reasoning that Foucault strenuously resisted. Still, the author has helped resolve the issue by the clarity of his distinctions and the fine-tuning of the signal to where the difficulty lies. As for the animus against dialectics, recall Foucault’s foreboding that “our anti-Hegelianism is possibly one of his tricks directed against us, at the end of which he stands, motionless, waiting for us.”<sup>4</sup>

### **Foucauldian Power and Sartrean Social Ontology: The Question of Group Authenticity (Boileau)**

Sartre only gradually came to appreciate the social dimension of concrete freedom and with it, as Eshleman argues, the kind of “ideal” constraints on freedom that imprison the body with the chains of ideology and what Durkheim called “Collective consciousness”—an expression that neither Sartre nor Foucault favors, though for different reasons. But the question remains whether the Sartrean individual can attain authenticity within the group or, indeed, whether group membership is necessary for concrete freedom and authenticity.

As I remarked earlier, all three authors cite Foucault's Afterwords at important junctures in their arguments. These are clearly bridge texts for any exchange between Foucault and Sartre. And all three underscore the inherently social nature of the Sartrean subject. What I find encouraging in Boileau's essay are his frequent references to "subjectivity" in Foucault, though "subjectivation" might have been the better term. What makes this fact promising, in my view, though Boileau did not mention this, is the importance that subjectivation or "becoming a subject" plays not only in Foucault's later thought but in his retrospective reading of his earlier works. For Foucault had a tendency to review his previous writings in light of his latest interest and to find that this interest had been present in his work, albeit implicitly, all along. Anyone interested in generating a dialogue between Foucault and existentialist thought might consider following this tack, which would open any number of Foucault's texts to "existentialist" review as well.<sup>5</sup> Of course, this assumes that Foucault was correct in his self-interpretation and, secondly, that "subjectivation" (a Foucauldian term which exists neither in French nor English) can sustain an existentialist baptism. Each of these assumptions is open to controversy.

When speaking of the "authentic" group, it might help to distinguish two senses of "authenticity" that Sartre employs. One refers to the practical admission of one's nonself-coincidence or, as Sartre writes on at least one occasion, the ability "to live without an ego."<sup>6</sup> His other use of the term denotes our social commitment and describes "authentic freedom" as choosing the freedom of others at the same time that we choose our own (the "argument" of his lecture "Existentialism is a Humanism"). The former use is more individualistic, the latter more social. Both overlap (or at least could do so) in the group. In that case, it would seem that "authenticity" would imply both choice of the freedom of the other-same (the group member) and the practical admission that this "unity" is sustained only so long as one acts to preserve it; in other words, that there is no group substance or entity capable of existing independent of its members.

Boileau's central thesis states that Sartre's account of groups as the foundation for positive social relations is incomplete without allowing for Foucauldian "considerations." Specifically, I think he is correct to see the social relations that Sartre relies on ("there are only men and relations between them") as enriched by appeal to Foucauldian relations of power, especially when one allows, as Boileau does not in this essay, that such power is positive and constructive as well as dominat-

ing and controlling. Sartre need have no problem with power being involved in intersubjectivity, if it is described as “action on the action of others” (Foucault), for the “inner life” of the Sartrean group could just as easily be described as “praxis on praxis.” In fact, Sartre lists the emergence of “power” as a characteristic of group praxis considered as the synthetic enrichment of individual praxes.<sup>7</sup>

But as I noted at the outset, what makes the Sartrean social ontology function is consciousness and dialectic, what Sartre calls “dialectical nominalism.” To be sure, “praxis” has replaced “consciousness” as the operative term in the *Critique*. But Sartre has scarcely rejected the concepts of *Being and Nothingness* in the latter work and both vocabularies appear in *The Family Idiot*. Once again, the challenge is to successfully “map” Foucault’s basic ontology on that of Sartre, as Boileau sets out to do. In addition to the recalcitrance of consciousness and dialectic, there is the matter of Sartre’s preference for the dynamic and temporal in contrast to Foucault’s penchant for spatialized reasoning and epistemic breaks. And whereas Sartre’s early ontology was phenomenological and his later one dialectically nominalist, Foucault seems unconcerned with ontology in any form. So unless one proceeds to reconstruct what Foucault’s presumed ontology should be (as has been attempted),<sup>8</sup> such ontological mapping may not fit well. On the other hand, Foucault’s more “positivist” nominalism may leave a more supple object for the mapping.

Finally, Boileau refers more than once to the later Foucault’s emphasis on an aesthetics of existence and to the existentialist view of ethics as more a *style* of life than a code of behavior. This is a quite favorable locale for the mutual dialogue that Boileau proposes, especially under the aegis of existential authenticity. But now he raises an important issue that reaches beyond the proposed dialogue, namely, the relation that either thinker might have to what has come to be known as “virtue ethics”—to anticipate somewhat the next essay: the problem of relating “aretaic” ethics and ubiquitous power, virtue and *virtù*. For Boileau suggests by way of conclusion, that aretaic ethics is perhaps “the one domain where the effects of power cannot cloud our judgment,” a claim with which Eshleman would probably take issue.

### **The historically-Conceptualized Situation: Sartre and Foucault (Seitz)**

Seitz is unabashed in speaking of Foucault’s “camouflaged existentialism,” and he seems intent on removing the cover. Of course,

Foucault is notoriously difficult to label, having counseled that we “leave it to our bureaucrats and our police to see that our papers are in order” (AK 17). But such groupings are convenient and often informative, even for nominalists like Foucault and Sartre.

Seitz follows the tack that I just described in discussing Boileau’s essay: the connection between the existentialist ethical style and what Foucault, following Pierre Hadot, calls “philosophy as care of the self” or “a way of life.” Seitz joins Eshleman in focusing more on the early, “vintage existentialist” Sartre rather than on the author of the *Critique*. He seems to have in mind Foucault’s dismissive characterization of Sartre as a philosopher of the nineteenth century trying to think the twentieth when he mentions as major liabilities the later Sartre’s emphasis on dialectics and his relative neglect of language and representation, “that is, of discourse.”

So it is on *Being and Nothingness* that Seitz focuses, and especially on the notion of situated freedom—a topic that we have noted interests our two other authors as well. In fact, Seitz could be quoting Eshleman when he writes: “It is precisely the fundamentally situated nature of freedom that marks the concrete dimension of Sartre’s conception of it.” And Seitz even alludes to *Discipline and Punish* when addressing the caricature that Foucault is something like a situational determinist: “Part of Foucault’s brilliance is his capacity to examine the way that ‘power’ quite literally insinuates itself into us, as if our very bodies were grids or meridians available for occupation, bodies waiting to be seized by souls.” But like Eshleman, he too underscores the centrality of freedom in Foucault’s work and (without getting into issues of libertarianism or soft determinism—which were not Foucault’s concern, in any case), suggests that Sartre “may help us enrich the concept of freedom in Foucault.”

The vehicle for this enrichment is Sartre’s notion of resistance, which figures in his comprehension of situation and in Foucault’s discussion of power as well as in both philosophers’ understanding of freedom. For both thinkers, Seitz argues, “freedom is nothing other than sets of relations that constitute the subject’s situation.” Presumably, resistance is an ingredient in every such set of relations from the “coefficient of adversity” that marks Sartrean facticity to the resistance that necessarily accompanies every action on the action of others in the writing of Foucault. We could characterize this as “freedom/resistance” in the abstract.

But Seitz, in a remarkable inversion, raises the issue of the concrete historical situation of Foucault vis-à-vis Sartre as the elder philosopher who had to be supplanted—the “anxiety of influence.”

Perhaps to deflect or counteract that influence, what Seitz calls Foucault's "innovative existentialism" looks to Nietzsche rather than to Sartre for inspiration. Yet the delicious irony, which Seitz seems to savor, is that it might be the Nietzschean aspect of Sartre's thought that attracted Foucault in the first place, the aspect that formed the core of Sartrean existentialism "before the twinned diabolics of the phenomenological method and then Kojève took over."

I believe that Seitz is correct to insist that "history may represent [Sartre and Foucault] as inseparables" in several respects. In addition to those mentioned earlier, one must not overlook the "sympathetic antipathy" that marked their theoretical differences as Foucault's career was taking flight and Sartre's beginning its descent in the mid 1960s. It is as if Foucault's "situation" defined itself in an important respect by his transcendence of existentialist facticity (to state it in Sartrean terms). Admittedly, this was as much a creation of the popular imagination as a function of philosophical exigency. Indicative of the public's perception of their interrelation are the numerous comparisons that appeared in print with the passing of Foucault. In a memorial edition of *Libération* on the occasion of Foucault's death, for example, Robert Maggiori opened his essay with the question: "Why does one spontaneously associate Sartre and Foucault?"<sup>9</sup> He goes on to identify them as "committed intellectuals" who were actively engaged in projects that were indistinguishably political and moral, generously dedicated to the critique of injustice and official violence wherever it might occur. As he remarks, their respective deaths were not simply the passing of towering intellectuals like those of Barthes or Jacobson but the end of two epochs, and, he concludes, the beginning of another in which we learn "to read each in relation to the other, not in order to effect impossible syntheses or artificial reconciliations but to enrich ourselves from each."<sup>10</sup> The essays that follow are written in that spirit.

## Notes

1. Michel Foucault, *Dits et écrits: 1954-1988*, ed. Daniel Defert and François Ewald with Jacques LeGrange, 4 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1996), 1:513, hereafter DE with volume and page.
2. Be that as it may, Didier Eribon remarks that negative references to Sartre are everywhere to be found (*omniprésente*) in *The Order of Things* (Didier Eribon, *Michel Foucault et ses contemporains* [Paris: Fayard, 1994], 176. If so, they are implicit, reserved for the *cognoscenti*.
3. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).
4. Michel Foucault, *The Discourse on Language*, trans. Rupert Sawyer, Appendix to *The Archaeology of Knowledge* trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1971 and 1972), 235; hereafter DL and AK respectively.
5. I have offered such a reading of the Foucauldian corpus in a recent book (Thomas R. Flynn, *Sartre, Foucault and Historical Reason*, vol.2 *A Poststructuralist Mapping of History* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004], especially chs. 7 and 8).
6. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Notebooks for an Ethics*, trans. David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 414.
7. Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Critique of Dialectical Reason*, vol. 1, trans. Alan Sheridan-Smith (London: NLB, 1976), 510.
8. See Béatrice Han, *L'Ontologie manquée de Michel Foucault*, trans. by Edward Pile as *Foucault's Critical Project*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002).
9. Robert Maggiori, "Sartre et Foucault," *Liberation*, Série No 967, (July 1, 1984), 23.
10. *Ibid.*, 24.